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Reimagining Masculinity in Victorian Criticism

Swinburne and Pater

Thaïs E. Morgan

"He is never more present than when no image of him is there. He is a suggestion of a new manner."

Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

In A History of Modern Criticism René Wellek calls Algernon Charles Swinburne "The first in England to apply purely imaginative standards to the whole range of literature" (381). He also suggests that Walter Pater became Swinburne's "closest ally and rival" in the British avant-garde which emerged in the 1860s. More recently, Linda Dowling has connected Swinburne and Pater as "the two great Aestheticist writers" who laid the groundwork for the 1890s (Language 176). Examining the "production of revisionary masculine discourses" among the male poets and critics associated with Victorian Aestheticism, Richard Dellamora also links Swinburne and Pater (5). Swinburne's exploration of a range of sexual "perversities" in his poetry lent support, Dellamora argues, to the homoerotic strain in Aestheticism. In particular, he maintains that Swinburne's Poems and Ballads, Series 1 (1866)—especially such poems as "Anactoria" and "Hermaphroditus"—were crucial in leading Pater "to reconsider sexual politics in his work" (69).

However, Dellamora only briefly mentions Swinburne's important role in the line of literary and art criticism that sustains "the tradition of moral-aesthetic reflection on desire between males" in the Victorian period (7). The interaction between Swinburne and Pater as leading Aesthetic critics during the 1860s merits further consideration. Equally important, I would suggest, is understanding how and why these two writers staked out and occupied distinctive terrains for their work in the context of the all-male sexual politics of Victorian Aestheticism. For, as allies, both Swinburne and Pater celebrated androgynous beauty and evoked homoeroticism in an attempt to reimagine masculinity at the margins of conventional middle-class notions of manliness. But, simultaneously, as rivals, Swin-
burne and Pater reimagined masculinity from different positions, with significantly different results.

Several critics have established the pervasiveness of a discourse about homoeroticism in Victorian criticism treating the art and literature of the ancient Greeks. For instance, Richard Jenkyns finds images and metaphors that “whisper some message that [their author] dares not speak aloud” concerning the beauty of the young male body in Swinburne, Pater, Symonds, and Wilde (149). More specific is Dowling’s inquiry into recurrent words and concepts that constitute what she terms the “homosexual code” that is activated when Victorian critics talk about things Hellenic. Dowling makes the important point that this “hidden language or code” may differ in its connotative charge depending on the context, say, whether it appears in a public address by John Ruskin about the importance of Greek classics in British education, or in an art historical piece by Pater about the centrality of male friendship in ancient Greece (“Ruskin’s” 1). In other words, the “homosexual code” in Victorian criticism has a double status: it is at once widely dispersed in the culture (Dowling’s examples come from “the dominant discourse of scholarship” [5]) and precisely cultivated by a small “proscribed” group within that culture (1).

Due to its mode of existence in between dominant and minority discourses, such a “homosexual code”—or, more precisely, such a system of interlocked rhetorical figures and connotative subcodes—has a very precarious status and typically generates ambiguous representations (e.g., the androgyne). 2 In order to understand the provisionality of and the risk involved in reimagining masculinity in Swinburne’s and Pater’s criticism, instead of thinking in terms of a stable and definitely sexually oriented “homosexual code,” I propose that we approach their essays as examples of an aesthetic minoritizing discourse. Briefly defined, a minoritizing discourse is one in which the solidity—and the essential alikeness—of a group that perceives itself to be in a minority position is presupposed and invoked at the same time as it is being constructed in the discourse itself. In the case of Victorian Aestheticism, a group of male writers, some of whom already have authority within the dominant culture (for instance, Tennyson), share varying degrees of interest in homoeroticism, which they express in their work. As Eve Sedgwick explains in regard to identity, under a minoritizing view, “it is [considered] . . . the most natural thing in the world that people of the same gender . . . whose social needs and knowledges may have so much in common, should band together also on the axis of sexual desire” (“Across Gender” 58). Thus, as male Aesthetes interested in extending the boundaries of masculinity, Swinburne and Pater foster a minoritizing discourse about art and artists in which male beauty and male-male desire are validated and preferred over the heterosexual norm as the cultural ideal. However, as we shall see, aesthetic minoritizing discourse is inflicted differently in Swinburne’s and in Pater’s critical essays, resulting in the construction of distinct kinds of alternative masculinity.

Equally important to understanding the enterprise and situation of aesthetic minoritizing discourse as practiced by Swinburne and Pater in their criticism is
what David DeLaura has described as the emergence of “a new kind of reader, susceptible to [an] . . . aesthetic/sexual/stylistic synthesis” based on a shared “homoerotic sensibility” (8). Connecting the trajectory of Pater’s reading to the ambiguous topics and address of his writing, DeLaura concludes that “two discernible sets of implied readers” are “appealed to more or less continuously in the key texts” (9). While “Pater overtly addresses cultivated . . . readers interested in literature, art, and philosophy,” he also speaks to “a well disposed minority audience ‘inside’ his larger general readership” (8). This minority audience consisted of men who had varying degrees of interest in the relations of male-male sexual desire possible within the framework of masculinity—from homosocial friendship tinged with homoerotic attraction to male-male sexual contact or “sodomy.” Victorian Aestheticism is thus animated by a politics of sexuality and of gender, in which criticism on art and artists speaks a “double-voiced discourse.” Officially expounding on aesthetic questions to the majority of readers who are heterosexually identified gentlemen, these two writers also talk intimately with a minority group of readers who are interested in expanding the conventional limits of masculinity and its heterosexual practices by envisioning ties between the male body and beauty, homoeroticism and culture—in short, by imagining other ways of being a man in Victorian England.

Throughout his criticism and poetry of the 1860s, Swinburne develops a double-addressed rhetoric about art and the artist that stems from the dominant discourse of critical judgment but refocuses it on gender and sexuality, thereby initiating mid-Victorian aesthetic minoritizing discourse. For example, in his review of Charles Baudelaire’s Fleurs du mal (1862), Swinburne uses familiar aesthetic standards while suspending the moral constraints that traditionally accompany them to justify as art what other Victorian (and many French) critics had declared to be “obscene” and “immoral” topics. Describing poetry in terms of fine visual art, Swinburne praises one group of lyrics for “sharp individual drawing of character and form,” and another for its “colour” (3-419–20). His central point of reference in the essay is “drawing”: Baudelaire accomplishes through words what “great French artists” such as J. A. D. Ingres have accomplished through pencil and oil (422).

Addressing the general reader, Swinburne establishes in the language of art criticism that Baudelaire’s artistry or technique is unimpeachable. But it is the extension of this claim into the stance of art for art’s sake that the majority of contemporary readers refused: “His perfect workmanship makes every subject admirable and respectable” (419). Swinburne throws into relief what he knows will be the point of conflict between the moral majority of middle-class Victorians and the aesthetic program of the emergent British avant-garde by connecting the scandalizing perversities represented in the poetry (satanism, prostitution, lesbianism, necrophilia) to the life of the poet himself. In Fleurs du mal Baudelaire “has chosen to dwell mainly upon sad and strange things—the weariness of pain and the bitterness of pleasure—the perverse happiness and wayward sorrows of exceptional people” (419, my emphasis). The person of the poet himself, his bodily as well as
his artistic practices, becomes the focus of attention: “The writer delights in problems, and has a natural leaning to obscure and sorrowful things” (419).

Paradoxically, according to Swinburne, the unspoken perversities of the man Baudelaire have produced an exquisitely beautiful and philosophically “weighty” style of writing. The artifacts that constitute Fleurs du mal bear “the special mark” of the artist’s “keen and peculiar power” (419). But what is this “special mark”? Exactly where does this “power” come from, and whom does it affect? Such ambiguous oxymorons as these, strewn throughout Swinburne’s essay, invite a different kind of reading besides the aesthetic one signalled by the application of analogies from drawing to poetry. This alternative reading would be performed by a small group of men interested in the way Swinburne connects the perversities of the poems to the perversities of the male author. Specifically, Baudelaire not only as a poet but as a man is imagined here as engaging in a range of alternative (non-heterosexual, extra-marital) practices. At the same time, he is imagined as something other than manly in the middle-class Victorian sense. His book has both “vigororous beauty” and “charm”; the poet avoids “rough or hasty handling” of certain proscribed topics; his style has a “beautiful gentle” quality about it (421, 420, 422). In sum, the character Swinburne constructs for Baudelaire is one of masculine androgyny; it incorporates qualities culturally associated with femininity while subordinating them to a fundamentally masculine figure. The phrase “vigororous beauty” captures this masculine androgyny: capable of creating a style so beautiful that it could almost be said to be feminine, Baudelaire nonetheless remains a virile genius, “exceptional” both as an artist and as a man.

Aesthetic minoritizing discourse in mid-Victorian criticism expands possibilities for gender identifications and sexual practices for men within a secure framework of masculinity. The contemporary male reader prepared to entertain such ideas would have been highly responsive to Swinburne’s Aesthetic prose. Indeed, in the essay on Baudelaire, Swinburne provides several clues for such a minority readership to follow. One of these occurs at the end of the third paragraph: “From Théophile Gautier, to whom the book is dedicated, he has caught the habit of a faultless and studious simplicity” (419). As A. J. L. Busst has remarked in a widely cited study of the figure of the androgyne in the nineteenth-century European imagination, the cross-dressed heroine of Gautier’s novel, Mademoiselle de Maupin, is “[o]ne of the earliest and most important examples—and certainly the most influential—of the image of the androgyne” (41). Busst emphasizes the fictive status of the androgyne as a symbol of aesthetic perfection as well as of sexual fulfillment. “‘Rêve de poète et d’artiste’, it is the product of pure art . . . and consequently far superior to anything that . . . reality has to offer” (42). By gesturing toward this French intertext, Swinburne links the aesthetic program of the mid-century avant-garde—initiated in France by Gautier, pursued by Baudelaire, and now championed in England by Swinburne (cf. Clements)—to androgyny as an alternative mode of masculinity. As a figure for art that transcends limiting considerations such as morality, the androgyne suits the campaign of Gautier and, in turn, Swinburne to “épater le bourgeois” and promote art for art’s sake. As a
figure in which masculine and feminine categories overlap, the androgyne is also suited to an aesthetic minoritizing discourse which specifically seeks to reconfigure masculinity. By imagining the persona of the French poet Baudelaire for English readers as a masculine androgyne, whose sexual perversities are transcended by his aesthetic genius, Swinburne enables “a relaxing of gender stereotypes for men, allowing them to stretch the boundaries of masculinity” (Weil 1).

One of the most savvy readers of Swinburne’s work in the 1860s was the young Pater, who, in the essay entitled “Diaphanéité” (1864), develops the construct of the artist as masculine androgyne, perverse if judged in moral terms but transcendentally beautiful if judged by the standards of art. Critics generally agree that “Diaphanéité” was originally fielded before an audience of a select few: members of the Old Mortality Society at Oxford, which included several of Pater’s friends and the man with whom he was in love at the time (Levey 101–104; Dellamora 48–61). Pater’s approach to the project of reimagining masculinity was therefore of necessity differently inflected and aimed than Swinburne’s. In effect, Pater was writing not to confront and harangue a large public audience as Swinburne had in his essay on Baudelaire, but to seduce and persuade a small intimate audience of the rightness of male beauty and male-male desire under the new category of “diaphanéité.”

Thus, whereas Swinburne begins his piece with a diatribe against establishment critics—“there [in France], as well as here,” who “seem to have pretty well forgotten that a poet’s business is” to create art and not “to redeem the age”—Pater starts with an apparently neutral, philosophical survey of major “type[s] of character” and then leads to the description of an entirely new type: the diaphanous man (217). The construct of the diaphanous man holds appeal across hetero- and homosexuality, and is wholly concerned with forging an alternative masculinity for its author and his all-male audience. (This continues to be true of the revised version of “Diaphanéité” as well.) Recalling three traditional types of manliness—the philosopher, the saint, and the artist—at the outset of the essay, Pater turns our attention to the markedly different style of manhood represented by diaphanéité. Located in between “contrasted types of character,” this kind of person appears “colourless,” a presence of “evanescent shades” (216). Although he habitually “crosses rather than follows the main current of the world’s life,” the diaphanous man remains “delicate” and possessed of an “unclassified purity” (216). Unlike the “strenuous masculine ideal” promoted in Thomas Carlyle’s Heroes and Hero Worship” (1841), then, Pater’s ideal for contemporary man lies just this side of femininity (Christ 20). Modest in his “desire for simplicity” and his manner of “indirect self-assertion,” the diaphanous man has a “moral expressiveness” that is more reminiscent of the Victorian ideal of womanhood than of manhood (217).

Nonetheless, Pater’s imaginative construct of diaphanéité remains very much a masculine state, and one explicitly attached to a young male body: “Often the presence of this nature is felt like a sweet aroma in early manhood” (221). Furthermore, the “thread of pure white light” emanating from the physical pres-
ence of the diaphanous type of man leads the reader back to classical Greek sculpture, specifically to the “sexless beauty” of statues of youths and gods (220). Any suspicion of homosexual desire behind Pater’s choice of analogy here—the “strange” receptivity of the diaphanous man compared with the “kind of impotence” and “ineffectual wholeness of nature” represented by the Greek statues (218–20)—is offset by his contextualization of these details in a philosophical disquisition on universal character types. Above all, Pater’s essay operates within a traditional philosophical rhetoric that equates “sexlessness” with morality (“a moral sexlessness,” 220) and beauty with the “ineffectual” (“sexless”) “wholeness” of the androgyne, whose person combines the best attributes of masculinity and certain feminine ones into a perfect, “pure white” being. Like the imaginary persona Swinburne creates for Baudelaire, Pater’s proposal for the new character type of the diaphanous man challenges his readers to place aesthetic values above moral ones.

But the rhetorical tactics in these essays by Swinburne and Pater are quite distinct. As mentioned earlier, there is the confrontational tone adopted by the former and the persuasive tone adopted by the latter. Second, and equally important, is each critic’s particular relation to the politics of Victorian Aestheticism. On the one hand, both “Charles Baudelaire” and “Diaphanité” participate in an aesthetic minorizing discourse whose project is to construct an alternative masculinity. Both writers aim to revalorize the category of effeminacy, which is culturally marked as negative, by aestheticizing it and thus remarking it in positive terms. On the other hand, the aesthetic programs of Swinburne and Pater do not necessarily aim for the same discursive effects on either majority or minority audiences. Rather, to take DeLaura’s surmise one step further, we might say that Swinburne and Pater project and solicit different kinds of readers within both majority and minority groups. These readerships sometimes overlap, but not always.

What interests constitute these audiences and in what ways Swinburne’s and Pater’s criticism attunes itself to them can be grasped by contrasting the rhetorical orientation of Swinburne’s defense of his Poems and Ballads, Series 1 in Notes on Poems and Reviews (1866) to that of Pater’s extended meditation on the “sexless beauty” of young manhood as embodied in classical Greek sculpture in “Winckelmann” (176). Taking a cue from Gautier’s Preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin, Swinburne’s Notes continues the contestation of the middle-class moralization of aesthetics that he began in his earlier essay on Baudelaire. His stance is thoroughly polemical. He returns the Victorian critics’ hostility to his poetry with irony—referring to “Anactoria”: “What is there now of horrible in this? the expressions of fierce fondness, the ardours of passionate despair? Are these so unnatural as to affright or disgust?” (22); with scorn—referring to “Hermaphroditus”: “Treated . . . as a serious ‘thing of beauty’ . . . it can give no offence but to the purblind and the prurient” (28); and even vituperation—referring to his critics in general: “I will not fish up any of the ephemeral scurrilities born only to sting if they can, and sink as they must” (18). Dellamora has discussed “the remarkable imaginative mobility . . . regarding homo- and bisexuality in Swinburne’s “Her-
maphroditus" (81–83), but I would underline the "parodic metaphor of marriage" and the subversive portrayal of the very concept of sexual difference in the text. Arguably, Swinburne’s dissemination of the markings of sexual difference here is too "indeterminate" to support a construal of the poem as a solely homophilic document. Rather, the "voyeur[istic]" perspective of the persona gazing at the statue of the hermaphrodite, as well as the determined "iconoclasm" of the sonnet sequence overall as an attack on dominant heterosexual mores, place his poem squarely against the majority audience at which Swinburne targets his polemic in the Notes: "the English reader," as controlled by "the press" and "the pulpit" (18, 32).

Swinburne’s criticism in Notes is primarily addressed to the majority of middle-class Victorian readers. However, Notes invites the attention of a second, minority group of readers as well. From this segment of the public, Swinburne seeks applause for his upholding of aesthetic standards against censorious moralists through irony and counter-argument. At the same time, he leaves the door open for those who want to read his work from a self-consciously homosocial perspective, one that entails homoeroticism and an appreciation of the male body as a "thing of beauty." In Notes, he often combines anti-moralist polemics with positive valorizations of the distinctive (male) beauty of the hermaphrodite. For instance, speaking of the special outrage "Hermaphroditus" caused, Swinburne comments: "I knew that belief in the body was the secret of sculpture [addressed to minority readers], and that a past age of ascetics could no more attempt or attain it than the present age of hypocrites [addressed to majority readers as insult and goad, with a knowing nod to the minority]" (27). In the same passage, he twits the self-righteous English public by reminding them that cultural history includes not only Praxiteles’s Venus but "at once Othello and Hyperion, Theseus and Hermaphroditus" (27)—in other words, not only models of female-feminine beauty but also models of quite different male-masculine beauty: the manly but also the effeminate.

Ultimately, Swinburne’s discourse on hermaphroditism—in "Hermaphroditus" and its defense in Notes—is a localized topic within his larger discourse on perversity, which can be found in Poems and Ballads, Notes, his letters during the 1860s, and his flagellation fantasies in prose. Perversity is the main platform of his aesthetic program, which, owing much to the French avant-garde, Gautier and Baudelaire, but also to Swinburne’s particular positioning as a poet and a critic in relation to the Victorian art and literary establishment, is thoroughly transgressive. To Swinburne, as to many contemporaneous writers and to many present-day critics, androgyny (in "Baudelaire") and hermaphroditism (in the poetry and criticism) are alike: both serve to make the point, contra dominant ideology, that art should be judged on its own terms and that whether it appears perverse or not from a moral standpoint must be considered irrelevant to the art qua art. Consequently, androgyny and hermaphroditism, as represented in the genius of artists and the beauty of artworks, are for Swinburne interchangeable sites/sights that
afford cultured men the opportunity of reimagining masculinity. For, what may seem perverse under one light may appear merely beautiful under another.

Situated as a secretly practicing homosexual, and therefore personally invested in homoeroticism as well as professionally interested in art displaying male beauty as a critic (see Levey and Inman), Pater would have been highly receptive to the aesthetic minoritizing discourse in Swinburne’s writings of 1866. Whereas Swinburne emphasizes the transgressiveness of androgyny and hermaphroditism as perverse types of beauty, however, Pater downplays the perversity latent in “strange” art and also in art criticism that celebrates male beauty in his next essay, “Winckelmann.” Moreover, instead of confrontation and transgression, which are Swinburne’s characteristic modes as an avantgardist writer in the 1860s, Pater develops a persuasive rhetorical strategy for aesthetic minoritizing discourse: “tact.” Elaborated in his famous essay on “Style” (1888), Pater’s deployment of tact addresses both mainstream (heterosexual) and marginal (some homoerotically interested, some homosexual) audiences by embedding celebrations of male beauty and male-male desire within philosophizing and historicizing statements about art. Unlike Swinburne’s excited polemics which assault the reader, Pater’s steady tact persuades the reader through “a beautiful gentle justice of style” (Swinburne’s phrase for Baudelaire) to consider the aesthetic qualities of male beauty and the justifiable pleasures to be derived from admiring it.

The representation of the hermaphrodite is a significant example of the several ways in which Swinburne and Pater differ in their approaches to aesthetic minoritizing discourse. In Notes, Swinburne rails against those Victorians who saw his “Hermaphroditus” as “obscene”: “A creature at once foul and dull enough to extract from a sight so lovely, from a thing so noble, the faintest . . . idea of impurity, must be . . . below comprehension” (28). The aesthetic point—art transcends sexuality—tends to become lost here amid the vituperation. In contrast, Pater is determined to be heard: “In dealing with youth, Greek art betrays a tendency even to merge distinctions of sex. The Hermaphrodite was a favourite subject . . . [a] perfect blending of male and female beauty” (qtd. in Dellamora 64; see also 109–16). Besides assuring the majority reader that the bisexuality of hermaphroditism is perfectly proper because it belongs to art history, Pater also assures the minority reader that this idealized hermaphroditism is definitively associated with the youthful male (not the female) body. In short, Pater makes it respectable for either kind of reader—for all readers—to look upon and discuss the superior beauty of classical (male) nude sculpture.

On other critical business bound, Swinburne makes a connection between aesthetics and alternative masculinity; Pater foregrounds it. In Notes, Swinburne insists that when “[t]reated in the grave and chaste manner as a serious ‘thing of beauty,’ ” the statue of the hermaphrodite remains beyond “such depths of mental sewerage” as those inhabited by his critics (28–29). His language depends on an implicit opposition between purity (epitomized by those who understand the beauty of the hermaphrodite) and filth (epitomized by the majority’s “subterra-
nean sloughs of mind" [29]). For his part, although fighting alongside Swinburne in the battle against moral philistines, Pater does not deign to even acknowledge the enemies of art but adopts an authoritative stance immediately. The way he slips a provocative passage from his earlier essay on "Diaphanéité" into "Winckelmann" offers a representative example of Pater's rhetorical tactic of tact:

The beauty of the Greek statues was a sexless beauty; the statues of the gods had the least traces of sex. Here there is a moral sexlessness, a kind of impotence, an ineffec-
tual wholeness of nature, yet with a divine beauty and significance of its own. ("Dia-
phanéité" 220; "Winckelmann" 176)

In Richard Stein's opinion, "Winckelmann" is "far more subversive and unor-
thodox" than the notorious "Conclusion" to the Renaissance (257). This essay has a highly subversive effect because of the double-voicing of Pater's discourse: encouraging the homoerotic direction of their desire for a minority of men, his rhetoric enlightens a majority of heterosexually identified readers about art his-
tory, while yet seducing them into adjacent thoughts of the pleasures of male beauty. Seemingly less problematic because devoid of the potential conflict of male and female sexualities in the hermaphrodite, the young male nude in classical Greek sculpture has a "sexless" beauty reminiscent of that of the diaphanous man. In this later text, the "unclassified purity" of actions attributed to the diaphanous man is transferred to the physicality of the represented male body: emblem of "moral sexlessness," it is suffused with "a divine beauty." Moreover, just as the diaphanous type of character "crosses rather than follows the main current of the world," so this category of classical Greek art has a "significance of its own": it embodies a masculinity different—morally and aesthetically, but also, and signifi-
cantly, erotically and sexually—from the manly Victorian norm.

As Kenneth Clark's The Nude reminds us, the representation of nude male bod-
ies is canonical in Western art. While discussing Winckelmann's interest in the beauty represented by the sculptural forms of young men, therefore, Pater re-
 mains within the limits of an art historical discourse familiar to all of his Victo-
rian readers. As part of high-serious rhetoric about art, philosophy, and history, Pater's description of the "sexless" beauty of the young male body might well be read as nothing more than a scholarly intervention in, for example, the 1860s de-
bates over Hellenism. Additionally, Pater tactfully emphasizes the very "moral" qu ality of the nudes' "sexlessness" by equating first hermaphroditism (as cited above) and then androgyny with the idealization of aesthetic form in general.

According to the psychoanalytic historian Peter Gay, however, a passage such as this one in Pater's "Winckelmann" must be interpreted as knowingly homo-
erotic, since it would have been so both for its author and for that minority of his audience who were of "the antique persuasion." Gay maintains that appreciation of the art of classical Greek culture "permitted [homosexually-oriented Victorian men] to dwell on what obsessed them, and to be understood mainly by those equipped to understand [sic]." [239]. This view lends further support to the notion of a double-voiced address in Pater's writing in particular and in mid-Victorian
aesthetic minoritizing discourse in general. The homoeroticism in “Winckelmann” can always be passed off as unintentional, as morally “sexless,” or as merely necessary to accuracy in description within the genre of art historical criticism. To take just one example, it is consonant with both a scholarly and a minoritizing discourse for Pater to observe that Winckelmann’s close relationships with young men provided the necessary foundation for his work. “[N]urtured and invigorated by friendships,” the great German art historian was able to understand classical Greek culture as no one else had before him (175). Like the statues themselves, Winckelmann’s male friendships were innocent and beautiful. Consequently, the reader need feel “no sense of shame” as “he fingers those pagan marbles” (177).

By contrast, to the minority reader, Winckelmann’s fascination with statues of and his relationships with young men would surely have had a “significance of its own.” At this point, if we review Swinburne’s “Baudelaire,” “Hermaphroditus,” and Notes, and Pater’s “Diaphanité” and “Winckelmann,” we can see that the aesthetic ideal proposed is consistently one associated with the male body’s beauty and with a modality of masculinity in which appreciation, even desire, for male beauty is regarded as legitimate. This sheds light, in turn, on an important difference between the handling of aesthetic minoritizing discourse in Swinburne and Pater. Swinburne explores a range of transgressive perversities, including androgyne and androgyne among sado-masochism, lesbianism, and necrophilia, as part of his avant-gardist agenda during the early and mid-1860s. But Pater is wholly committed to promoting male beauty, figured by hermaphroditism and androgyny, as an aesthetic ideal, thereby legitimizing it, from the mid-1860s onward. Thus, while Swinburne’s “Hermaphroditus” may be male (“his”) and/or female (“hers”), Pater is quite clear about how Winckelmann’s life work ought to be interpreted; androgyny, which stands for the highest aesthetic state—“divine beauty”—is located in a male body, not a female one: “supreme beauty is rather male than female” (160). Finally, Swinburne and Pater are not positioned identically toward either the majority or the minority group of Victorian readers. What they definitely share, though, is the project of reimagining masculinity.

Art criticism, oriented as it is to the visual and its interpretation, affords multiple opportunities for luxuriating in and for justifying desire for male beauty. The art lover’s appreciation of technically superb representations of beautiful young male figures becomes a point of communciation between Swinburne, Pater, and the minority audience. Composed after a visit to the Uffizi gallery in 1864, Swinburne’s “Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence” (1868) addresses the reader in a leisurely and intimate manner that is strikingly different from his sten- torious literary criticism. Swinburne half-apologizes for his “hasty memorial notes” on the Uffizi paintings—“For guide I have but my own sense of interest and admiration” (156)—but he is inaugurating a new style of criticism precisely by adopting this tone. Known as impressionistic criticism after Pater’s elaborations of it in the Renaissance, Swinburne’s “Notes” are “a first-rate piece of pioneering” in aesthetic minoritizing discourse (Lang xxxi).
Thais E. Morgan

Preparing the way for Pater's theory of artistic "temperament" in the Renaissance, Swinburne in "Designs" focuses our attention on the author as an aesthetic site/sight. Like his imaginary projection of Baudelaire, Swinburne's portraits of major artists of the Renaissance mystify the origin and intention of each major oeuvre by opening up a series of unanswered questions about the men themselves. Most noticeable is the recurrence of the rhetoric of androgyny, which first appeared in Swinburne's "Baudelaire," to describe these artists. While Leonardo da Vinci and his paintings are endowed with an "indefinable grace and grave mystery" (156), Michelangelo's pieces are said to reflect some "grave and subtle sorrow latent under...[his] life" (158). By raising doubts about these painters' practices and what their work could mean, Swinburne appeals to the minority reader, inviting him to entertain an iconoclastic interpretation of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and the other Old Masters discussed in "Designs." As in the "Baudelaire" piece, so here, an equivalence is posited between the love of art and "perverse happiness," "the sorrow and the strangeness of things" (158).

Androgyny is a crucial trope in aesthetic minoritizing discourse. Again and again, Swinburne finds himself attracted to minor paintings by Old Masters in the Uffizi because of the sexually ambiguous look of their subjects. For instance, after glancing at two conventional studies of the Holy Family by Filippo Lippi, Swinburne concentrates on some "small studies of separate figures; two of boys, very beautiful. One, schoolboy or chorister seemingly, is seated on a form and clothed in a long close gown; his face, grave and of exquisite male beauty, looking down as if in pain or thought" (166). Like Swinburne's Baudelaire or Michelangelo, these painted boys are distinguished by a special "mark." Emotionally, this mark is consistently identified as seriousness and sadness ("grave sorrow," "in pain or thought"); aesthetically, this mark appears to be a necessary accompaniment of "male beauty." That Swinburne may be expressing here not just his feelings for art but his feelings for boys is suggested by his comparison of one of the aesthetic figures to a real "schoolboy or chorister" such as he himself might often have seen at Oxford. Finally, the fact that the paintings Swinburne elects to describe in "Designs" are minor works is in itself significant: their homoerotic import may be titillating, even perverse, but it in no way threatens the artists' canonicity. In short, Swinburne implies that one can love "male beauty," as embodied by beautiful boys, and still be a man.

In "Designs," Swinburne's most intense pleasure as an aesthetic critic is located not in conventional religious topics such as the Madonna and the Holy Family, but in portraits of boys and young men. Showing little interest in Filippo's allegorical paintings, for example, Swinburne dwells on a single-figure study: "a beautiful head of a youth bent sideways, with curls blown back and eager joyful eyes...the lips parted with eloquent and vehement expression of pleasure" (172). This description has an unmistakable homoerotic appeal, yet the art critic can plead that he is merely being faithful to his task of taking "notes on the designs of the Old Masters at Florence." In this way, by employing a double-voiced discourse, Swinburne establishes his art critical credentials for a majority of readers, simul-
taneously as he signals a commonality of interest with a minority of readers who are homoerotically invested in art.

Imagining the young male body as androgynous, hence of an aesthetic value beyond sex and morality, is central to minoritizing discourse in Swinburne and Pater. However, Swinburne’s “Designs” indicates a slight nervousness about the masculinity of aesthetic androgyny that distinguishes its rhetoric from that of perverse androgyny in “Baudaire.” Swinburne seems concerned to underscore the manliness of art and the artist in the conclusions he draws about the Italian Renaissance. The most “exquisite” works at the Uffizi, he declares, are those in which “beauty... lifts male and female together on an equal level of loveliness” (185). Paintings of beautiful boys and young men by great artists of the past justify the idea that masculinity is as perfect—even as desirable—as femininity, but for Swinburne the female-feminine counter must always be there. Not so for Pater, as we shall see.

In Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873), Pater gathers several of his previous essays on major artists described in Swinburne’s “Designs”: Leonardo, Michelangelo, Giorgione. The complicated intertextuality that characterizes the constructions of alternative masculinity by Swinburne and Pater is epitomized by the frontispiece to Pater’s book. This frontispiece may be read as Pater’s response to Swinburne’s contributions to Victorian aesthetic minoritizing discourse in the 1860s. Pater chooses a “little drawing in red chalk which everyone will remember,” from the Louvre—a minor work, reminiscent of the paintings Swinburne prefers at the Uffizi (90). Like the classical male nudes whose “moral sexlessness” preoccupies Pater in “Diaphanité” and “Winckelmann,” this drawing displays “a face of doubtful sex, set in the shadow of its own hair... with something voluptuous and full in the eye-lids and the lips” (90–91). Pater systematically alters the details of Swinburne’s description of the Florentine youth’s head “bent sideways, with curls blown back and eager joyful eyes.” An attentive minority reader of art criticism would notice that the Swinburneian intertext is present here but modified in order to meet Pater’s requirements of tact. Because the face in the drawing is “of doubtful sex,” its “voluptuous[ness]” is balanced out and so does not contradict the aesthetic purity of its beauty.

Tact notwithstanding, Pater purposes to celebrate the special beauty of young men, as figured by androgyny, in the Renaissance. In “Designs,” Swinburne opened the way to evaluating male portraiture explicitly in terms of the homoerotic attractions it holds for the art critic. In the Renaissance, Pater follows suit, going Swinburne one better in the boldness of his verbal rendition of the beauty of one young man in particular: “[a]mong the more youthful heads” drawn by Leonardo is “the head of a young man, which may well be the likeness of Andrea Salaino, beloved of Leonardo for his curled and waving hair” (91). Here Pater names the love that dare not speak its name—or almost, for the beautiful body of the male youth, “which Love chooses for his own,” is transcended by the beautiful image of male androgyny here. Rhetorically, sexuality is superseded by aesthetics as impropriety is avoided by art. In this way, Pater succeeds in legitimizing male
beauty and male-male desire, placing both under the sign of Amor in the guise of Ars.

Dellamora has suggested that “womanly beauty” for Pater is summed up in the Mona Lisa, Medusa, and Salomé, all of which are “sign[s] of male-male desire in which self-awareness takes the form of a rhetorical wish to be woman” (130). Arguably, however, Pater aims not at imagining men-who-would-be-womanly in the Renaissance but men-who-would-be-another-kind-of-manly. Blurring boundaries of sex and gender, Pater proposes to see a “thread of suggestion” linking the frontispiece image, “of doubtful sex,” with another drawing by Leonardo that “might pass for the same face in childhood, with parched and feverish lips, but much sweetness in the loose, short-waisted childish dress, with necklace and bulla, and in the daintily bound hair” (91). Taking all of his work into consideration—paintings of both female and male figures—Pater further maintains that we may “construct a sort of series” that defines “Leonardo’s type of womanly beauty” (95). But this composite icon, like “diaphanité” and the “moral sexlessness” of classical Greek statues, is not a “womanly” “type” in the conventional Victorian sense. Rather, it is another kind of manliness, one that Pater implicitly exalts above the womanliness of women.

Although their maneuvers within aesthetic minoritizing discourse differ in inflection, therefore, it is surprising to discover that the tactful Pater is actually more active in pushing at the border dividing respectability and homoeroticism than the vehement Swinburne. Moreover, Pater seems at pains to draw our attention to the absolute masculinity of his aesthetic ideal. In the essay on Leonardo, Pater notes that the frontispiece drawing by the same artist is “still more full of sentiment, but of a different kind” than the better known series of Madonnas (91). Is Pater implicitly correcting what he sees as Swinburne’s overly conventional (heterosexually grounded) reading of beauty in the Old Masters? For, unlike Swinburne, Pater does not entertain male-male desire as just one among many transgressive perversities, and unlike Swinburne again, Pater does not “lift male and female together on an equal level of loveliness.” On the contrary, in Pater’s world, there is only one kind of true beauty, and it is male. Perhaps this preference explains his provision of only one image—that of young male beauty, in the frontispiece—to guide the reader through the Renaissance. It certainly jibes with Pater’s remark that this little drawing is “still more full of sentiment, but of a different kind” than his Madonnas. Lastly, Pater’s commitment to male beauty and to male-male desire may be heard in his direct address to the minority audience, the “everyone [who] will remember” minor gems such as this “face of doubtful sex”—they who “ha[ve] examined . . . carefully the drawings by the old masters” with an eye for the beauties of masculine form and desire (90).

For contemporary theorizations of sexuality and gender, a nexus of questions about Swinburne’s and Pater’s differential participation in what I have termed aesthetic minoritizing discourse remains. Eve Sedgwick has most influentially framed this set of questions under the concept of “the closet” (see especially Epistemology 5). To be potentially classifiable as a homosexual or “sodomite,” as Swinburne and
Pater were, due variously to their writings and to their observed behavior, was a double bind in the intensely homosocial but also intensely homophobic culture of Victorian England. Even the suspicion of homosexuality was enough to condemn a man not only in the public eye but also to his closest male friends. Witness the case of the openly homosexual artist, Simeon Solomon, friend of both Swinburne and Pater, who, after his arrest for suspected sodomy in a street urinal in 1873, was abruptly dropped by his sometime patron, Swinburne. In a letter to his friend George Powell (6 June 1873), Swinburne takes his distance from Solomon in particular and homosexuality in general: “I suppose there is no doubt the poor unhappy little fellow has... done things amenable to law such as... would make it impossible for any one to keep up his acquaintance and not be cut by the rest of the world as an accomplice?” (qtd. in Lang 2: 253).

Pater’s handling of his problematic friendship with Solomon—they were introduced by Swinburne—was distinctively other: he took the risk of continuing their friendship even after the sodomy scandal (and despite its close proximity to the Renaissance, which stirred up a scandal of its own). Yet Pater’s position vis-à-vis homosexuality, Solomon’s or his own, remains uncertain: Levey speculates that Pater kept “guarded the secret of his own emotional urges, possibly never revealing—even to someone like Simeon Solomon—the intensity of his yearning for the ideal male friend” (112). A “problematics of identification with/identification as” opens up here (Sedgwick, Epistemology 62). Did Swinburne identify with the minority group of homoerotically inclined male readers which he addressed in his aesthetic criticism and poetry, but recoil in horror at the idea of homosexuality itself? Did Pater likewise identify with this minority group in his aesthetic criticism, and also invite a special understanding with homosexually active readers, but stop short of identifying himself as a homosexual because of the strong likelihood of blackmail?11

Whatever is decided about Swinburne’s and Pater’s sexuality, it is important to understand that aesthetic minoritizing discourse may be deployed as but is not necessarily tantamount to a rhetoric of the closet. As Sedgwick comments, homosexual panic, which motivates rhetorics of the closet, is not based on direct or sure evidence of the given subject’s homosexuality. Rather, homosexual panic, or the suspicion and denunciation of homosexuality, is a parameter of normative (heterosexual) masculinity. It is “important not only for the persecutory regulation of a nascent minority... but also for the regulation of the male homosocial bonds that structure all culture” (Epistemology 184). Thus, aesthetic minoritizing discourse in Swinburne must be understood as oriented differently from its manifestations in Pater. The transgressive perversities including homoeroticism that are depicted in Swinburne’s work are not equivalent to the full-fledged legitimization of homoeroticism and homosexuality in Pater’s. Moreover, as can be seen from his letters, Swinburne is not at all committed to the project of legitimizing homosexuality, but rather to the project of aestheticizing all kinds of sexualities, which in turn forms part of his avant-gardist agenda. Pater stands, albeit very elusively, elsewhere on the entwined but distinct questions of homoeroticism and homo-
sexuality. Given the biographical evidence, it is likely that Pater appreciated the advantages—and also experienced the disadvantages—of using a rhetoric of the closet in his work.

A major concern for contemporary criticism is that what reads like "the rhetoric of secrecy is not inevitably the expressive veil of a specifically homoerotic desire" (Adams 454). Both Swinburne and Pater engage in building a minority audience for their aesthetic criticism within the majority audience of middle-class Victorian readers. Both Swinburne and Pater reimagine masculinity in terms of male beauty and along lines of homoeroticism as an aesthetic fact. But in sexual politics as well as in critical style, Pater remains both the "closest ally and rival" of Swinburne in Victorian Aestheticism.

**NOTES**

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1. On the parameters of mid-Victorian middle-class manliness, see, for example, Mangham and Walvin. On the difficulties of manliness posed for a Victorian poet, see Sussman. For a discussion of "not only the immense social authority of 'manliness' but [the] correspondingly acute contest in defining the norm" in Victorian culture, see Adams.

2. Theoretically speaking, a code consists in the recurrence of phonetic, syntactic, and/or semantic markers. The "homosexual code" that Dowling has detected in the recurrence of keywords in a range of Victorian texts is more precisely a "hypercode" or a gathering together of "various subcodes, some of which are strong and stable, while others are weak and transient" (Eco 125). The rhetorical overlap of criticism by Swinburne and by Pater, and also some of the points of connotative difference between them, may be understood in terms of their writing within the same hypercode but foregrounding different connotative subcodes in that system.

3. I am making a distinction here between what Dellamora calls "male-male desire," which implies sexual orientation, hence sexual identity, and masculinity, which entails a hegemonic cultural position dependent on gender assignment. In textual terms, this means that, for example, the lesbian couple in Swinburne's "Anactoria" does not necessarily signal the author's commitment to "male-male desire" as "a central imaginative fact" (Dellamora 218)—or his commitment to women's interests, either. See my "Male Lesbian Bodies."

4. The term "double-voiced discourse" comes from Bakhtin's theory of how language works in the genre of the novel. The "active participation of every utterance in living heteroglossia determines the linguistic profile and style of the utterance to no less a degree than its inclusion in any normative-centralizing system of a unitary language" (272).

5. Swinburne's review essay on Baudelaire appeared in the Spectator for 6 September 1862. On the centrality of Swinburne's criticism and poetry on Baudelaire to the work of Pater, Wilde, Symons, and T. S. Eliot, see Clements.

6. Jenkyns reads the imagery connecting light, whiteness, and Hellenic sculpture in Pater as a subtext about homosexuality: "as he slides around within his cluster of metaphors, a soft insinuating voice seems to whisper some message that it dares not speak aloud" (148). For a historical and theoretical discussion of the Platonic tradition of the androgynous, including its relation to the figure of the hermaphrodite, see Weil 17-30.
7. On the sexual-aesthetic politics connecting Gautier’s Preface to the androgynous heroine of his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, see Weil 113-42.

8. The pederastic structure of Winckelmann’s friendships with young men would have been obvious to minority readers such as Swinburne, who, like Pater, studied Plato with Benjamin Jowett at Oxford. See Jenkyns, and Dowling, “Ruskin’s Pied Beauty.”

9. There continues to be quite a lot of disagreement over the distinction between hermaphroditism and androgyny in criticism today. Compare, for example, Black (the classical Greek ideal of beauty is sexually indeterminate) and Weil (“That androgyny has often functioned as a conservative, if not a misogynistic, ideal is evident in the . . . tradition of dual-sexed beings that can be traced at least as far back as . . . Plato and Ovid” [2]).

10. Analyzing the chapter on “Lacedaemon” in *Plato and Platonism* (1893), Dowling notes the way in which Pater “banishes the . . . feminine term in the opposition” between Ionians and Dorians (“Ruskin’s” 4).

11. Fallen on hard times after the scandal ignited by his arrest for sodomy, Solomon did in fact during the 1870s sell off some of the letters about flagellation and other perversities which Swinburne had addressed to him from the mid-1860s to the very early 1870s. Consequently, Swinburne took the high moral ground in a letter to Edmund Gosse (15 October 1879): “As long as I can feel that I may count . . . on the steady friendship of honourable gentlemen, I will not for very shame’s sake so far forego my own claim to a sense of self-respect as to fret my heartstrings . . . over . . . [Solomon] who is now a thing unmentionable alike by men and women, as equally abhorrent to either—nay, to the very beasts—raising money by the sale of my letters to him in past years” (*Letters* 4: 107). The strong claims of homosociality (“the steady friendship of honourable gentlemen”) and the equally strong pull of homosexual panic (“a thing unmentionable” and “abhorrent”) are especially clear here. On Pater’s homosexual liaisons at Oxford and the specter of blackmail, see Inman.

**WORKS CITED**


