Walter Pater
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Transparencies of Desire:
An Introduction

WALTER PATER’S increasingly prominent place in a number of different histories—not only of Victorian literature, but of literary criticism, of modernism, of gender, of art, of sexuality—suggest that it is no longer possible to capture “the place of Pater,” as T. S. Eliot so confidently proclaimed it in the 1930s. Pater’s own achievement is too multi-faceted, and our own disciplinary vantages accordingly too varied, to allow of any assured location—even the assurance of well-defined ambiguity. Yet the impulse to find some unifying preoccupation in current responses to his achievement, some one factor that above all others grasps the importance of Pater at the present time, is hard to resist. And that is partly because the quest to locate Pater’s achievement is so much in keeping with his own example.

Few concerns are more central to Pater’s writings than the keen, energetic attentiveness he brings to capturing the shapes and metamorphoses of influence—which include the often elusive and eddying currents of reputation. And influence itself, in its surprisingly varied incarnations, turns out to be an especially prominent, many-stranded presence throughout this collection, where it is of special value in helping to explain the present appeal of Pater to such a diverse audience. Of course questions of influence may be inescapable for any critic as deeply engaged by cultural history as Pater. And certainly the topic has figured prominently in scholarship devoted to establishing Pater’s own intellectual and literary precursors. But few critics so insistently reflect on the very concept of influence, and so frequently evoke its operations in so many different forms and frameworks. In the process, Pater urges us to understand influence as a force at once more fundamental and more comprehensive than even contemporary scholarship fully realizes.

As Pater famously contends in the “Preface” to The Renaissance, the objects of aesthetic criticism (and in principle almost nothing in human experience eludes that Paterian vigilance) are to be treated as “receptacles of so
many powers or forces” (Ren/H xix)—indeed are themselves “powers or forces” (Ren/H xx). Hence their meaning can only be grasped through their impact on those who experience them. “This influence he feels, and wishes to explain”—herein lies the calling of “the aesthetic critic” (Ren/H xx). In this light, the most potent dualism of Paterian aestheticism is not that of abstract and concrete (to which most critical taxonomies give pride of place) but the contrast of impotence and power, inertness and influence, the moribund and the “quickened sense of life.” Although the “Conclusion” of The Renaissance famously evokes this vital impact as the solace of a haunting solitude, in the “Preface” the critic’s personal response is situated in relation to a host of social structures. The critic not only works in relation to an audience—“for himself and others”—but his responses are shaped by an ongoing “education,” and his analyses of influence will be attentive to an array of historical factors: “the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period,” “the various forms of intellectual activity which together make up the culture of an age” (Ren/H xxi, xx, xxiii). Moreover, as the critic—and more generally, any receptive beholder—responds to aesthetic “powers or forces,” that response in turn takes its place in a relay of influence, within which each new testament to the vital power of the artwork becomes itself an aesthetic stimulus, which confirms, extends, and diffuses the powers of the original object. Aesthetic meaning and significance are thus always unfolding through varied forms of influence, influence registered not only in individual lives but across generations and centuries, in the shaping of schools, traditions, cultures. As Pater’s writings evoke this diffusive expansion of influence, they urge us to reflect anew on the concepts of creation and originality, not to devalue those notions, but to see them as unexpectedly complex transactions between the artist and “the culture of an age,” between the artist and a manifold past, and between the artist and his or her audiences—a manifold future, as it were. Still further, as these essays collectively point out, Pater’s writings transfigure our understanding of history by prodding us to reflect on the relations among various forms of influence, particularly between what might seem the obscure, even trivial facets of an artist’s private life and those forces shaping the more palpable, enduring existence of the artworks themselves.

These large issues are clearly central to one very particular and momentous influence, that of Pater on Oscar Wilde, which has been explored of late not only in scores of scholarly essays and volumes but in a host of more popular genres, in a variety of media. In this connection, however, most accounts tend to treat Pater primarily as a dramatic foil—the shy, guarded don lurking in the shadows of, indeed shrinking from, the scandalous visibility of his audacious disciple. What this scenario obscures is precisely Pater’s own many-sided audacity, his widespread recognition as a dangerous—which is
to say, seductive—influence, which (with varying emphases) has figured prominently in Pater’s reception since the first publication of The Renaissance in 1873. The many contemporaries who feared the book’s “poisonous” influence, as George Eliot put it, seem to have been offended in the first instance by Pater’s bold affronts to the traditional moral burdens of art and aesthetic experience. For at least a few attentive readers, however, that danger seems to have been compounded by an unmistakable homoeroticism in Pater’s evocative prose. Victorian sexual decorums make it hard to know how clearly or widely this quality was recognized in early responses (whether as allurement or danger), but subsequent modernist repudiations of Pater are clearly shaped and energized by homophobic innuendo, as Lesley Higgins’s essay in this volume points out.

The newly sympathetic attention to Pater’s achievement that began in earnest with the ebbing of the New Criticism called attention to further boldness in Pater’s formal innovations, both in fiction and in historiography (one of which might be seen to be the blurring of that very distinction): the “imaginary portrait,” reconstructions and revisions of classical myth, the composite narrative technique of Marius the Epicurean. These in turn seemed to be authorized by a daringly skeptical epistemology, the embrace (most famously set forth in the “Conclusion”) of a radical subjectivity that undermined the more stable and comforting humanist ground of Arnoldian judgment and selfhood. Typically, however, Pater’s formal innovations were explored as part of his incessant preoccupation with influence in the broadest sense. Critics saw those innovations directed toward new ways of understanding and representing the individual within history and culture—a critical problem that itself came back into focus with the waning of New Critical insistence on the autonomy of the artwork.

In scholarship over the past decade, the greatest impact has derived from attention to sexuality in Pater’s writings. Energized primarily by the speculative histories of Michel Foucault, critics have explored on a number of (overlapping) fronts Pater’s relations to the late-Victorian construction of homosexuality: his revisionary readings of Plato and the pederastic structures of Greek education; the romantic Hellenism that derives from Winckelmann; his representations of male friendship in a host of contexts; the rhetorical structures of his writings, with their implied address of multiple, differently informed audiences; his network of institutional, social, and political relations in Oxford; his possible affiliations with a number of sexually dissident subcultures in Victorian London. Above all, and most pervasively, the close reading of Pater’s prose has been newly attentive to what one might call a poetics of obliquity, under which transgressive desire is insinuated through varieties of circumspection and displacement. It is this emphasis on the play of transgressive eroticism in Pater’s writings—sometimes polemi-
cal, always dangerous—that has most forcefully dispelled the long-standing image of Pater (and indeed of British aestheticism generally) as dedicated to the enjoyment of art in a social and political vacuum. At the same time, however, the emphases of gay studies and queer theory have enriched long-standing preoccupations of Pater scholarship by underscoring the extraordinary importance and complexity of desire not only in Pater’s writings, but in the articulation of culture itself. (We see this diffusion in the fact that essays centrally concerned with sexuality appear in each of the five sections of this volume.)

This commonality of interest is brought home in the subtitle of this collection: transparencies of desire. The phrase derives from a very distinctive motif in Pater’s writings, to which a remarkable number of the contributors refer: the figure of an elusive “diaphanous” or “crystalline” nature. First evoked in Pater’s earliest surviving essay, “Diaphaneité,” the figure is subsequently elaborated in a number of essays, perhaps most resonantly in “Leonardo da Vinci,” where Pater discovers it in a series of images that he takes to embody Leonardo’s “type of womanly beauty”:

They are the clairvoyants, through whom, as through delicate instruments, one becomes aware of the subtler forces of nature, and the modes of their action, all that is magnetic in it, all those finer conditions wherein material things rise to that subtlety of operation which constitutes them spiritual, where only the finer nerve and the keener touch can follow. It is as if in certain significant examples we actually saw those forces at work on human flesh. Nervous, electric, faint always with some inexplicable faintness, these people seem to be subject to exceptional conditions, to feel powers at work in the common air unfelt by others, to become, as it were, the receptacle of them, and pass them on to us in a chain of secret influences. (Ren/H 91)

To gauge by the frequency with which this passage is cited in writing on Pater, it is truly mesmerizing—or, to use a more Paterian term, fascinating. Yet this evocative passage points to at least two central paradoxes in the concept of “transparencies of desire.” Desire, to begin with, in Pater’s writings would seem to be anything but transparent. Its mere presence may be palpable—it may be easy enough to recognize a particular subject as desiring—but the precise character and object of that desire typically remains shrouded or indeterminate. For the diaphanous character, desire is a vague and wistful “longing after what is unattainable.” As Angela Leighton elicits in regard to the “somnambulists” Pater finds in William Morris’s poetry, these beings are “almost” transparencies of desire, yet they remain curiously elusive—just as the influence of Leonardo’s “clairvoyants” (like every facet of his genius) is a dark, arcane, “secret” power. Indeed, as Carolyn Williams has noted, Pater’s account of “the transparent hero” stresses transparency in conjunction with invisibility: the diaphanous character has no place “within the world’s lexicon of types” and in this sense cannot even be recognized.³
The singularity of the diaphanous character thus brings with it—so this tension suggests—the unmistakable aura of danger that so often shadows Paterian figures. Transparency seems allied, that is, to a need for defensiveness. This dynamic is readily explained in terms of sexuality—in Pater's awareness of his desires as different and therefore dangerous. Yet in a curious sense transparency itself is self-effacing. The neologism “diaphaneité” conjures up, as Michael Davis points out, a curiously transitive transparency, a “state of shining through” which has about it something of a one-way mirror. It would seem to conjure up a state of both expressiveness and receptivity, yet the expressive element seems always at best translucent—perhaps because complete transparency, perfect self-expression, is always fraught with danger. Or is it perhaps that the “self” lurking here is necessarily submerged in, even constituted by, the sheer plenitude of influence which it registers? Certainly Leonardo’s “clairvoyants” seem less agents than objects—it is the viewer who “sees through” their subjection to “exceptional conditions” (Ren/H 91). Indeed, as Leonardo’s “clairvoyants” seem mere “instruments,” we may wonder if they are subjects at all. But a similar tension attends the critical stance that Pater proposes in the “Preface,” where the critic likewise seems an exquisitely refined receptor for the “powers or forces” incarnated in the objects of his survey, and where his achievement is measured by the degree of his “susceptibility” to those powers (Ren/H xx). Herein lies the second paradox of Pater’s “transparencies of desire,” which in this light point to a radical questioning of agency informing Pater’s aestheticism. The seemingly burdensome subjection of the clairvoyants—whose refinement is so difficult to distinguish from enervation or exhaustion—is also the ground of critical insight. They are subjects precisely in their subjection to influence. In that subjection, moreover, they are exemplary objects for, as well as mirror images of, the aesthetic critic: they are “receptacles” of powers that they in turn relay to the beholder.

The organizing trope of the collection thus points us to the richly varied and complex anatomies of influence and desire in Pater's writings. In their insistence on the elemental “powers or forces” that animate aesthetic experience, they remind us that the structures of influence conveyed through intellectual precedent, tradition, or school may be shaped and sustained by more visceral forms of influence, energies that elude or confound rational deliberation, self-control, even consciousness—most notably, those of erotic desire. Indeed, as several of the essays here point out, influence in this light may come to seem indistinguishable from seduction, within which its effect on the subject under influence becomes less a guide to agency than a surrender to another’s power. Pater thus rehearses nearly all the central preoccupations informing the current revival of Wilde: not only the allure of transgressive sexuality, but related conundrums of subjectivity that help to constitute
postmodernism. If Paterian aestheticism is popularly associated with the idea of aesthetic experience—the influence of works of art—as a program of self-realization, it equally entertains the prospect that there is no self apart from that constituted through subjection to powers not one’s own.

Angela Leighton’s “Aesthetic Conditions: Returning to Pater” begins the collection by taking issue with the received wisdom that Paterian aestheticism envisions art in isolation from a larger world. Far from being abstracted from its social contexts, or “those extrinsic conditions outside the picture frame,” she rejoins, it is rather “deeply confused with them.” Indeed, this blurring of conventional distinctions of work and context is one aspect of a subversive power that resides largely in Pater’s very elusiveness. Leighton’s concern with “conditions” might be echoed in the related play of “atmosphere” in Pater’s writings, where the term evokes not only a sustaining power but a medium of diffusion, refraction, blending—of “mixed lights,” in one of his favorite coinages, that frequently merge figure and context.

Laurel Brake examines one very particular set of “conditions”—of that subjection that is also a subjectivication, in Foucault’s sense—by placing Pater’s later writing, particularly the Imaginary Portraits, within a particular discourse of sexual regulation in the late 1880s, following the passage of the notorious “Labouchere amendment” to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. In both its subject and its critical method, which brackets “individual” development to view Pater’s career from the vantage of epistemic change, Brake’s essay suggests that broadly Foucauldian paradigms of analysis have neglected affinities with Pater’s habit of submerging characters in large historical currents or fields of force—from the Hellenic tradition of “Winckelmann” to the potent dialectical structures of Plato and Platonism. A related form of regulation powerfully shaped the posthumous cultural presence of Pater, Lesley Higgins points out in “No Time for Pater,” which explores the concerted effort among Anglo-American modernists to evade or erase the impact of Pater’s work. As one might guess, “the constant, even nagging need to pronounce and render Pater’s writings obsolete” offers unwitting tribute to the force of the disavowed influence, which was particularly pronounced in the work of T. S. Eliot. But Pater’s affiliation with Wilde offered an especially damning mode of insinuation to exploit in what sometimes seems a modernist program of cultural parricide; the encounters Higgins analyzes suggest an uncanny prescience in Pater’s Imaginary Portraits, which so often dwell on the forms of animus, even violence, that attend cultural transmission and change.

Pater’s very much more muted reception in France, which Steven Bann elegantly surveys, suggests that homophobia may have been an especially effective vehicle for, rather than the ground of, modernist defensiveness in
Britain and America. But certainly the sexual politics of Pater’s work were central to its most pronounced French impact, within the circle of Charles DuBos and his friend André Gide. More provocatively, and in an avowedly speculative vein, Bann suggests that Pater may well have made an impact on Proust, not only through his later writings (to which Proust refers in his translations), but through the mediating friendship of Douglas Ainslie, who was well acquainted with Pater at Oxford, and whose anecdotes may well have conveyed an especially memorable “figure of the contemporary writer.” The most famous reaction in the German-speaking world, by contrast, was a fervent, unequivocal enthusiasm. As Robert Vilain points out, Hugo Hoffmannsthal had encountered Pater by 1894, and in his early essay on “the great English critic,” as he would later call him, the twenty-year-old Hoffmannsthal finds in Pater an especially compelling model of the relations among life, the artist, and the critic. Indeed, as Vilain notes, Hoffmannsthal’s investment in this model is so intense “that he is in effect attempting to become Pater.”

Hoffmannsthal’s response, like that of subsequent German devotees who came to Pater largely through his influence, strikingly reenacts the relay of influence that Pater himself repeatedly maps in his writings, perhaps most potently in his account of “the Hellenic tradition” in “Winckelmann.” The young Austrian’s fervent identification thus points us to the cluster of essays on Pater’s engagements with art history, which are centrally concerned with varieties of influence and discipleship. Jeffrey Wallen’s essay foregrounds these structures by exploring the specific vocabularies of “influence” in Pater’s writings. In concentrating on Pater’s borrowings from the discourse of physiology, Wallen brings into play the connection between influence and the body—a relation that is especially perplexing in regard to Paterian figures of transparency. At the same time, Wallen points to what will be a recurrent preoccupation of the remaining essays in the volume: the potential danger of influence as it entails a surrender of autonomy and freedom—a prospect that figures centrally in (among others) Wilde and Tolstoy. In “Disturbing Hellenism,” Shawn Malley explores Pater’s engagement with Hellenism from the vantage of classical archeology, which posed fundamental challenges to narratives of Hellenism through its “material evidence of historical disjunction, belatedness, and erasure.” Pater’s “archeological aestheticism” draws on Charles Newton’s discoveries at Cnidus to challenge the Winckelmannian image of Greek blitheness and repose by locating Greek sculpture within a fuller, broadly anthropological awareness of Greek material life. As early Greek religion and culture converge in this domestic space, the presiding figure of Demeter is transfigured, to become at once mother, goddess, and cultural matriarch. Stefano Evangelista offers a complementary vantage on Pater’s revision of the “Apollonian” Hellenism of
Winckelmann and Arnold, aligning Pater’s writings on Greek myth with the romanticism embodied in both Max Müller’s philology and the lyrics of Shelley, whose “Sensitive Plant” evokes a model of receptivity anticipating Pater’s ideal of the diaphanous temperament.

Paul Tucker’s “‘Reanimate Greek’” reframes reflection on the authority of ancient Greece by comparing Pater’s and Ruskin’s responses to Botticelli, a figure widely understood in terms of a dual allegiance to Greek and Christian models, and whose revaluation in the early 1870s grew out of “restless redefinition...of the opposed categories of Greek and Christian art and culture.” As both critics grapple with the question of Botticelli’s identity, they point to the questions of attribution that were becoming so prominent, and so vexed, in nineteenth-century art history. Attribution is the focal concern of Jonah Siegel’s essay, “Schooling Leonardo,” which sees in Pater’s responses to this issue “a remarkable challenge to the implied concepts of authorship and art” that motivate ongoing art-historical debate. Pater’s seemingly cavalier treatment of the “technical criticism” that disputes traditional attribution in fact directs our attention toward a new understanding of artistic influence. In Pater’s accounts, the “school” is not merely a penumbral falling-away from the master’s brilliance, but a crucial extension of the master’s achievement. Indeed, in the essay on Leonardo, Pater presents the artist’s disciples not only as, in Siegel’s phrase, “perfect conduits of the force of genius,” but as themselves works of art shaped by the master. As so often in Pater, *The Renaissance* places us on the high road to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Another subtle conflation of person and painting informs Rachel Teukolsky’s essay on the political dimensions of Pater’s art criticism. Teukolsky reads Pater’s resistance to ongoing reattribution as a “deliberate refusal to participate in a scientific discourse of art criticism,” a stance which might seem to identify the experience of art generally with private, subjective experience of the sort Pater evokes in “The School of Giorgione.” Yet this association of aesthetic experience with intimate conversation may be seen, Teukolsky argues (following Linda Dowling), as itself a concerted, albeit ambiguous political gesture. On the one hand, the 1877 opening of the Grosvenor Gallery, envisioned as a standing challenge to the authority and viewing experience offered by the Royal Academy, seemed to embody a space for Paterian observation as a gesture of resistance to established authority. At the same time, however, the art exhibited there remained an appeal to elite sensibilities, and thus underscored the paradoxes of “esthetic democracy.”

Two essays are centrally concerned with *Marius the Epicurean*, which has long been seen as a crucial intersection of Pater’s interests in narrative form and in the psychology of belief. Maureen Moran places the novel’s religious
concerns within the larger Victorian anxiety over conversion, which from the 1850s onward shapes a novelistic subgenre that Moran calls “the historical conversion romance,” in which authors explored not only religious orthodoxy, but norms of gender and erotic decorum as well. Given its association (even in sympathetic accounts) with feminized subjects vulnerable to both psychological and bodily subjection, conversion also was widely associated with seduction. Yet however threatening this prospect seemed to a Protestant reading public, it lay at the very heart of Pater’s pedagogy, Matthew Kaiser argues. In *Marius* we see Pater “denaturalizing” the individuating processes depicted in the traditional *Bildungsroman*, and putting forth instead a model of “self-discovery” that is grounded in the Platonic model of education as dialectic, which is founded on and sustained by a many-faceted, mutual seduction of teacher and pupil.

If any genre of Pater’s has a claim to formal distinctiveness, it is the imaginary portrait. Martine Charbonnier-Lambert studies the genre as a development of Paterian *ekphrasis*, the written description of visual art that figures centrally in *The Renaissance*, but is turned in the later work into a more comprehensive principle of composition, as a formal structure that is also an historical ground. In “Emerald Uthwart,” for example, ekphrasis is deployed not only to situate the title character within his world, but to place that world in relation to the reader. In effect, the familiar Paterian merging of human being and artwork is thereby translated into narrative. Elisa Bizzotto explores the imaginary portraits as, more broadly, a fusion of literary genres, with a complex intellectual genealogy encompassing three major strands: Victorian historical narration, particularly short fiction addressing mythological or legendary motifs; the critical biography, ranging from Plutarch through Vasari, Aubrey, Johnson, Hazlitt, and Saint-Beuve; and confessional and autobiographical forms. Phyllis James pursues the development of the genre into the twentieth century, focusing on one particular extension of Pater’s influence, in the short fiction of Olivia Shakespear, whose attentiveness to Pater’s model is importantly mediated by Pater’s impact on Yeats.

Jacques Khalip moves into the foreground a crucial pun informing Pater’s career—the extent to which his corpus returns to figurations of the male body. Like Kaiser, Khalip thereby emphasizes the dynamics of seduction at play in Pater’s writings, although he takes these to be more insistently physical than intellectual, more akin to contemporary gay sexual dynamics than to the exchanges of Platonic dialectic. In this context, however, the body is also associated with an exorbitant asceticism, an incessant discipline that is fueled by anxiety of not achieving a perfection that is in fact unattainable, a perfection identified with a youth presumed to realize his perfection in the manner of Winckelmannian Greece—through unselfconscious instinct. So it is that Khalip finds in Pater’s account of Leonardo’s clairvoyants an em-
bodiment of “the secret, overwhelming aspiration of the male to prove himself extravagantly beyond the contours of his own gendered desires, performances, and embodiments,” but which at the same time “renders the appeal of difference and erotic fantasy enriched by the dream of the feminine inside the body of the boy.”

Kit Andrews is also drawn to Pater’s figures of transparency, which he likens to the collector in the writings of Walter Benjamin—another critic acutely concerned with the intersections of aesthetic pleasure and history. Although Pater’s focus on personality makes Leonardo’s clairvoyants seem more passive than Benjamin’s collector—and thus captures Pater’s greater distance from political action—both stances nonetheless incarnate an extraordinary receptivity, a “presence of mind,” in Benjamin’s phrase, that gives them a privileged relation to history and historical transformation. To be sure, “Diaphaneité” establishes Pater’s more guarded, circumspect relation to revolutionary transformation, suggesting that “the true heirs of Walter Pater’s revolutionism” are “the literary masters of the internal apocalypse: Joyce, Woolf, and Proust.” Yet Benjamin’s intense responsiveness to Proust suggests “a dialectical reading of Pater which can recover Pater’s politics from within the very turn away from politics,” while Benjamin’s theses on the philosophy of history in turn resonate in Pater’s imagined histories, which are fascinated by the victims of history, figures who, like the diaphanous type, confound any simple schemes of progress.

Michael Davis in “Walter Pater’s Latent Intelligence and the Conception of Queer ‘Theory’” places Pater in important relation to Michel Foucault’s work on sexuality—aligning Pater’s writings with the creation of a new form of sexual identity, but arguing that the initiative for this creation belonged less to “an impersonal regulatory apparatus” than to particular individuals, whose work produced not a single, institutional discourse but a variety of distinct, often elusive “minority idioms.” Pater’s greatest achievement, in Davis’s account, and his central claim to being an original thinker, lie in “his re-conceptualization of same-sex desire and in his begetting of a modern queer theory,” a project that Davis sees growing out of Pater’s engagement with the idea of homosexual enlightenment in Plato, an interest which occupies Pater from his earliest writings. Megan Becker-Leckrone’s “Pater’s Critical Spirit” offers an especially fitting conclusion to the volume, inasmuch as it suggests how pervasively Pater’s writings summon up an ongoing field of history and influence in which his own criticism must be placed for evaluation. Pater’s critical responses, Becker-Leckrone argues, actively solicit, even prefigure the critical debates to which this volume so richly testifies, as they envision a space of posthumous consideration like that evoked in the “uncertain twilight” he associates with Abelard.
This collection of twenty essays by scholars from five different countries amply confirms Pater’s ongoing power to capture and challenge readers, while the markedly interdisciplinary character of the collection bears witness to the breadth of his achievement and his audience. To be sure, no amount of illumination will ever dispel the “uncertain twilight” that envelops Pater’s prose, that intractable aura of mystery that surrounds all the most potent sources of influence. What might seem an invitation to suspended judgment is in this regard one further gesture of seduction. As so often in reading Pater, we experience his influence as an enticement, like that with which he leaves us at the close of the essay on Leonardo, “speculating how one who had always been so desirous of beauty, but desired it always in such precise and definite forms, as hands or flowers or hair, looked forward now into the vague land, and experienced the last curiosity” (Ren/H 101).