Walter Pater
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Aesthetic Conditions:
Returning to Pater

The only solution lies in *art for its own sake*,
redemption through the aesthetic, as birds in spring
sing for their own delight, even if they also sing
from physical need; it comes to the same thing.¹

AT THE END of the twentieth century, the poet Derek Mahon conspicu-
ously returns to the figures of an earlier *fin de siècle* in his resonant poem,
“The Yellow Book.” Paterian aestheticism, the call of “*art for its own sake,*”
has a long after-life in twentieth-century literature, as many critics, notably
Denis Donoghue,² have pointed out. Mahon’s angry trashing of the contem-
porary—“Everywhere aspires to the condition of pop music,”³ he grum-
bles—is delivered in lines that are audibly nostalgic for the “languorous prose”⁴ of Pater and his fellow aesthetes. Their “redemption through the
aesthetic” remains, for the contemporary poet, a nagging, urgent possibility.

A less angry but similarly haunted poem is Elizabeth Bishop’s “The
Monument.” This too reflects on its own status as aesthetic object. “It is an
artifact,” she explains. “The monument’s an object.”⁵ Nothing more, appar-
ently, than a pile of wooden crates in an empty landscape, this object, in the
end, still aspires to be a work of art, as the last lines tell:

The bones of the artist-prince may be inside
or far away on even drier soil.
But roughly but adequately it can shelter
what is within (which after all
cannot have been intended to be seen).
It is the beginning of a painting,
a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,
and all of wood. Watch it closely.⁶

That last, formalist injunction follows the hint that there was something
“within,” even if like the “bones of the artist-prince” it is really “far away.”
This is a monument to something, as well as being to no-one and for nothing.
A tatty contraption of wood, the monument stands in the line of descent from
Shelley’s “Ozymandias” and Keats’s “Grecian Urn.” It commemorates something, the “bones” or ashes of the dead, while also taking a lonely stand against everything else outside:

The strong sunlight, the wind from the sea,
all the conditions of its existence,
may have flaked off the paint...?

A silly, surreal object, the useless monument is there for nothing but its own sake. Yet those “conditions,” weather conditions, have some bearing on it. They erode, yet also, paradoxically, justify it. They are, after all, “the conditions of its existence.”

Twentieth-century theory has tended, in general, to define the aesthetic against its opposite: against ideology, politics, commodity culture. Adorno, Bourdieu and, of course, Eagleton have all historicized the aesthetic as a concept born of the consumer culture of modernity—a culture usually dated back to the eighteenth century. As Gadamer puts it: “As soon as the work of art began to stand on its own, divorced from its original context of life, only then did art become simply ‘art’ in the ‘museum without walls’ of Malraux.”

For Eagleton the aesthetic is “a bourgeois concept in the most literal historical sense, hatched and nurtured in the Enlightenment,” although he goes on to insist on the “amphibious” or radically dialectical nature of such a concept. Nonetheless, it is true that Baumgarten’s redefinition of the aesthetic (see Diffey), as concerned with taste and therefore with beauty and art as opposed to its older meaning of mere perception, belongs to the mid-eighteenth century. The word, at least, belongs to a specific historical moment, and thus, in a way, grounds the concept in history and in the very thing the aesthetic seems to reject: ideological commodification. This dualism runs through philosophical aesthetics, from Kant to Gadamer. As Peter de Bolla writes, Kant’s “disinterested thesis,” “that aesthetic judgments are absolutely distinct from ethical, social, or political considerations... leads to the notion that the artwork is beyond or outside the realm of politics or ethics.” This absolute distinction is then ruthlessly exposed as a sham by the ideologists of the aesthetic, who hear in it the workings of a culture concerned to preserve its own preciousness against the facts of history. “There is no beauty without historical remembrance,” Adorno movingly declares. Beauty is bedded in history and the aesthetic in the ideological. Paradoxically, as a result, the separate category of the aesthetic is preserved, intact. The dualisms by which it is described, although intended to undermine its idealized status, also reassert it. Even Eagleton’s “ideology of the aesthetic” does not entirely run the aesthetic out into ideology, but keeps it, at least linguistically, in play. The abstract noun holds its own, while the thrill of desecrating its imaginary sacredness remains.
Derrida’s own deconstructing variation on a theme in his very Kantian book, *Truth in Painting*, points up a dualism which seems, like all other logocentric constructions, firmly in place. He writes that “the whole analytic of aesthetic judgment forever assumes that one can distinguish rigorously between the intrinsic and the extrinsic. Aesthetic judgment must properly bear upon intrinsic beauty, not on finery and surrounds.”14 Beauty should be pure, not impure, inside not outside the frame. The story of the aesthetic, from Kant to the present, is the story of that binary, and of a frame of alternatives and oppositions which appears to keep intrinsic beauty separate from extrinsic, but therefore constantly aligns the two. Derrida’s frame, he discloses in one small note, is in fact taken from Gautier: “‘Curiosities of all sorts, plaster casts, molds, sketches, copies, passe-partout containing engravings.’”15 This list of aestheticist curiosities is, characteristically, not a list of great paintings but of second-hand, inartistic objects: the remains and “extrinsic” tools of art. The French aesthete is already there, before Derrida, in the shop of unaesthetic commodities, where the frames, molds and casts nostalgically recall, but also define and hold, the truth of painting. These leftovers and replicas assert the limits of the aesthetic object which they also contain. They hold, and hold off, “the conditions of its existence.”

The philosophical tradition of aesthetics has always tried to define its object in terms of what it excludes: ethics, reality, politics—the “surrounds.” Even to talk of “the aesthetic” is, paradoxically, to give it body as a thing, even if a thing created by the wishfulfilments of a commodity culture which it repudiates. The “ideology of the aesthetic,” whatever the complicitous contradictions between them, still keeps the two things at odds, as abstract nouns, in a precarious balancing act. Whatever the aesthetic is, and that remains a subject of continuing philosophical debate, it is something: a concept, a word, if nothing else, which holds its own against ideology, history: those rough weathers outside.

After this thumbnail diversion, let me turn to the name that is strikingly absent from Eagleton’s book: that is, Pater’s. The omission is odd, because Pater more than anyone influences the way in which twentieth-century literature defines the aesthetic, from Woolf, Joyce and Yeats to Stevens, Bishop and Mahon. Somehow, the philosophical tradition of “the aesthetic” bypasses all this. Clearly there is something about Pater which resists the conceptual dualisms which underpin philosophical aesthetics. For a start, Pater rarely uses “aesthetic” as a noun. For him, it is mainly an adjective: aesthetic poetry, aesthetic critics. As a result, the word transfuses more readily into other things. Its limits are more permeable than “the aesthetic,” which can be set up to be knocked down, but somehow keeps its consistency like any other bogey. And this permeability, which affects all of Pater’s “langorous prose,” with its exquisite hesitations and precious qualifications,
also characterises a word which perhaps holds a key to his own sense of the aesthetic: the word “condition.”

That “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” (Ren 135) is probably the most familiar use of the term in Pater. There, it seems to sum up an aesthetic concerned with form, not content, sound, not meaning, beauty, not history. However, it is interesting that, very often, conditions in Pater are plural. One of the most intriguing is in his much pillaged, rewritten and then self-censored review of the “Poems by William Morris” (1868):

“Here, under this strange complex of conditions, as in some medicated air, exotic flowers of sentiment expand, among people of a remote and unaccustomed beauty, somnambulistic, frail, androgynous, the light almost shining through them.”

In this one sentence Pater extracts from Morris’s poetry a theory of the aesthetic which is the foundation of much of his later work. Firstly, he insists on a “beauty” so diaphanous that it manages to diffuse and invite penetration at the same time. These thin-skinned androgynes are “almost” transparencies of desire—as if, somewhere between air and angels, their edges contradictorily receive and rebuff the idea of touch. Secondly, Pater insists on a restriction, almost a safeguard: “under this strange complex of conditions.” The beautiful dream-people of Morris’s poetry, sleep-walking in a mist of ambiguous sexuality, only exist under certain conditions. Not on condition, but under conditions. The expression is slightly odd, as if those conditions were objects, actually there, though their plurality and complexity make them hard to define. Conditions loom over these hazy people, determining in some way their very haziness. As a result of that word, what might have remained a merely descriptive account, however far-fetched, of Morris’s poetry, becomes an account of some imaginary historical moment. That “complex of conditions” is mysteriously, suggestively, extrinsic to the poetry. It hints at external forces, however interwoven with intrinsic ones, on which beauty itself might be conditional.

In the essay on “Coleridge,” especially in its later version in Appreciations, Pater seems almost neurotically haunted by “conditions.” He nags at the word, returning to it at least nine times. The first seems baldly straightforward: “To the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions” (Ap 66). This, of course, is Pater the agnostic modern speaking out. The relative spirit of the modern world embraces conditions as an insurance against absolutism. A few sentences later he worries at those conditions again, as if he had not quite finished with their possibilities:

Man’s physical organism is played upon not only by the physical conditions about it, but by remote laws of inheritance. . . . When we have estimated these conditions he is still not yet simple and isolated; for the mind of the race, the character of the age, sway him this way or that through the medium of language and current
ideas.... It is the truth of these relations that experience gives us, not the truth of eternal outlines ascertained once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions. . . . (Ap 67–68)

The more conditions there are, the less explanatory do they seem. That first simple condition of the “physical organism,” a kind of deterministic baseline, is soon overrun by the vast and plural influences of race, the age, language and ideas. These, too, are all conditions on which the nature of the self depends. As a result, that self loses its eternal outline, its essential core, and lets in a rain of external social forces. It is indeed, in a sense, constructed of language and ideas. But “constructed” is not quite the right verb for Pater’s fluid, atomistic self, because to be structured, even “structured as a language,” merely erects an alternative structure. The point about Pater’s prose is that it attempts, in the very writing, to atomize structures, to propose a Lucretian fluidity which passes through the boundaries of the self, like those diaphanous creatures in Morris, “the light almost shining through them.” In this passage from the essay on “Coleridge” even the conditions start to move. They work through “relations” and “fine gradations,” through an intricately shifting movement of their own. They are part of a wholesale attack on anything with “eternal outlines,” whether self, truth or, of course, more covertly, God. By the end of the essay Pater is writing about “fugitive conditions” (AP 103). Far from being reliable forms or bases, they have joined the atomistic flow of matter. “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind,” writes Woolf, that most Paterian of modernists, whose writing, as Perry Meisel has argued, has the same diaphanous, permeable qualities as Pater’s. Life’s “luminous halo,” the self’s “semi-transparent envelope,” are images of dissolved outlines very like his angelic androgynes. The wave-obsessed physics of high modernism is deeply indebted to Pater’s aestheticism—an aestheticism which, I suggest, builds its theories of art for art’s sake, not in an empty museum space removed from historical process, but on the curious, shifting conditions of that process.

I am suggesting, then, that Pater is both a modernist before his time and an aesthete whose sense of the aesthetic cannot ever shake off history. This means that it remains entrammed with “conditions,” not as explanatory foundations of the aesthetic, but rather as “fugitive,” “complex,” constantly altering pressures on it. The most influential passage in Pater, for example, the Mona Lisa section in The Renaissance, is more about history than it is about a picture in an art gallery. Pater’s bizarre reading of da Vinci’s portrait, far from setting it apart in a museum space of untouchable preciousness, in fact takes the painting out of the gallery and loads it with unlikely contextual references: Helen, Leda, St. Anne, “the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias” (Ren 125). What passes through the picture is a movie of history, and of history presented as transient and relative. Pater is less con-
cerned with the art work for art’s sake than with the ways in which it might express a passing panorama of time, with all creeds, moralities and myths reduced to an egalitarian flux. “There is no beauty without historical remembrance,” writes Adorno. The Mona Lisa is not, for Pater, a monumental art work, pure and simple, but a work that is riddled, almost defaced, by other stories and histories. This is an aestheticism, not in conflict with those extrinsic conditions outside the picture frame, but rather deeply confused with them. The way that Pater reads the Mona Lisa almost unframes it altogether, leaving no dividing line between the work of art and the swimmingly impressionistic memories it inspires.

The aesthetic, then, is not for Pater an immutable ideal, museumed out of history. Rather the opposite. He puts the aesthetic back into history, dismantles the frame, and lets intrinsic and extrinsic leak into each other. The “eternal outlines” prove unstable, shifting, conditional. Pater himself explicitly defends what he calls “the historic method” of criticism in his late work, Plato and Platonism. And once again, though published twenty years after The Renaissance, he is still, here, harping on conditions. The historic method, he explains, looks “as far as possible in the group of conditions, intellectual, social, material, amid which [a work] was really produced” (PP 9). Pater, the quintessential aesthete, sounds for a moment like Marx, searching for “intellectual, social, material” explanations. The word “conditions” occurs three times in the same paragraph, as if he were still wrestling with an elusive concept: “in every age there is a peculiar ensemble of conditions which determines a common character in every product of that age” (PP 9–10). Such conditions, though they are a common determinant of the age, seem, however, not fixed but changing. They are, in fact, “the never-resting ‘secular process’” (PP 10). The principle of motion, of restlessness at the heart of things, is a principle which, for Pater, keeps theory itself secular.

This Heraclitean movement, as opposed to Plato’s foundational truths, lies at the heart of everything—even, Pater slips in, “the primary elements alike of matter and of the soul” (PP 15). That nature is a Heraclitean fire needs no redeeming by the Christian Resurrection, here. Unlike his one-time pupil Hopkins, Pater relishes the unredeemable time of history and sees it at work everywhere. As Lesley Higgins points out, in Plato and Platonism he quietly subverts Jowett’s translations of Plato by emphasizing, by contrast, the physicality of “the body.”20 But he also challenges Platonism itself by discussing, at some lyrical length, the work of Heraclitus. It is Heraclitus, not Plato, who offers Pater the principle of his own writing: the principle of “amorphism” (PP 21), by which everything loses its form and nature in the flux of time. Such disintegration is true even of the inmost soul or self. This is where Pater’s humanism, a word he uses to describe many of his favorite authors, remains much more loosely subversive than in its present re-
habilitation, as a defence of human and religious value against postmodernist nihilism. Richard Etlin’s *In Defense of Humanism*,\(^{21}\) for instance, constantly sets the humanist against constructivist or poststructuralist theories of the self. In fact, for Pater, as for his contemporaries Symonds and Burckhardt, the humanist is one who accepts the “‘secular process’” at the very heart of things. Burckhardt\(^ {22}\) and Symonds\(^ {23}\) both align the humanist with the sophist in their work, and therefore with the potential of language, or rhetoric, to fly free of moral or individual control. Pater’s own accounts of the self explicitly reject notions of autonomy or essential value.

“But the principle of lapse, of waste, was, in fact, in one’s self” (*PP* 15), he explains in *Plato and Platonism*, paraphrasing Heraclitus. Hopkins’s anxious defence of the “immortal diamond”\(^ {24}\) against the Heraclitean flux of nature only throws into relief the philosophical as well as poetic power of that flux, which he probably learned from Pater. Pater’s own Heracliteanism refuses to let the self harden into diamond. The “gemlike flame” (*Ren* 236) is more flame than gem, more flickering than immortal. Pater’s notion of the self is probably closer to the postmodernist position, the self as an accidental point, a “vanishing-point” (*PP* 16), of outside forces, than it is to the defensive humanism of Etlin. Outside conditions permeate the self, shining through it, so that the difference between self and not self is lost. “Nay, the passenger himself is without identity” (*PP* 16), Pater asserts, echoing Keats, but generalizing this identity-lessness into a universal condition. Such humanism is indeed a way of undoing the human, of secularizing and textualizing it, rather than preserving it for eternity.

Pater’s own style has a way of taking the subject away from itself, on a journey of shifting conditional clauses, which ends up not saving but losing the thing in question. The Heraclitean flux is not only a congenial theory; it is a style of writing. Pater’s exquisite, tentative, bodiless style is itself a way of disembodying the very notions he sets floating on his long, passenger-like sentences. The most obvious example is in those resuscitated bits of the “William Morris” review which Pater reworked for the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance* (see Donoghue\(^ {25}\)). He starts with the famous, existentialist assertion of the self’s intractable loneliness: “the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world” (*Ren* 235). The self, here, is a creature in a padded cell of dreams. It is as if Pater were desperately trying to protect the idea of “the individual,” locking it up in a special place of its own, where it seems unaffected by external influences or real worlds. However, as the passage continues, the identity of that solitary prisoner starts to break down—or rather, it seems, out: “Analysis goes a step farther still, and assures us that those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight” (*Ren* 235). Thus “the individual mind,” that apparently coherent
entity locked in its mental prison, starts to disperse. The solitary prisoner
takes flight from himself in a rain of anonymous impressions, as Pater’s im-
pressionist prose enacts the atomizing of self at the level of style. The individ-
ual becomes divided, and joins the “perpetual flight” of matter out of
coherence and identity. The image of the “solitary prisoner” turns, by some
trick of subsidiary clauses, into that of a passenger in flight from the prison of
self. This is a strangely dehumanizing humanism, which scatters the core self
in flying pieces while paradoxically liberating it from prison.

The passage then culminates in a brilliantly minimal image: “To such a
tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp
impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments
gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down” (Ren 236). This seems to be,
at last, a stopping place. The end of the sentence reaches some ultimate real-
ity: “what is real in our life.” However, there is an element of the absurd
about it. Pater is not even saying that the self is a will o’ the wisp on the stream
of time. He is saying that the self is a “relic,” albeit, paradoxically, still sensi-
tive, “with a sense in it,” of moments already “gone by” and therefore no
longer sensed. As if this were not loss enough, even that potentially hard and
fast relic (relics are usually durable) is on the way out, like the moments
which it tries to commemorate: “a relic more or less fleeting.” This too is a
prisoner in “perpetual flight.” The contradictions which mass into this sen-
tence, between the sentient and the insentient, the hard and the intangible,
the fixed and the fleeting, turn the whole thing into a tease, a prolonged
clutching at straws.

Thus, it seems, the passage out of the prison of self leads simply to disin-
tegration. In the end all that is left of the individual mind in its solitary dream
is a faint flicker of memory: the idea of “moments gone by.” The whole sen-
tence mimes its losses, being a passage, in both senses, out of essential iden-
tity, into a fall-out of momentary impressions. The centre cannot hold
against this dispersal, as each clause undoes the securities of the previous
one, and offers its own revision and loss of what went before. Meanwhile,
typically, Pater withholds till the very end the main subject of the proposition:
“what is real.” This ought to be the end of the flight: “what is real in our life
fines itself down.” The verb “fine” might mean refine, the holding on to
some finer preciousness or aesthetic irreducibleness. However, it might also
carry the other meaning, whereby the metal of “what is real” is literally fined
down into even smaller parts: into shavings. In this case, Pater is snatching
back even this last reassurance of what is “real” or precious. It too disperses
into a fine atomic dust. This may be one more assertion of the “restless
’secular-process’” which, even at the level of language, refuses to let mean-
ings stop. Pater’s favorite, and apparently rarefying word “fine,” is itself here
subjected to the possibility of a continuous verbal-physical decay. It is not so fine as not to be fined down further.

It was Max Beerbohm who famously complained that Pater “laid out every sentence as in a shroud.” If he does, and there is a sense in which precise meaning is always shrouded in his work, what is laid out, I suggest, is never quite dead. It stirs unnervingly. Like that “relic” there is “a sense in it.” And that sense, the shifting of possible meanings below the surface, is what makes Pater’s work so subversive, in fact, so difficult to pin down into theoretical positions. It is as if conditionalness is of the essence of his own style. His long, constantly adjusting sentences, with their veiled suggestions and delayed gratifications, express the restlessness of a world where nothing can be saved, spiritually or physically, from time.

However, it is true that there is also something deathly going on in much of his work. The obsession with relics is a sign of it. Pater cannot leave the word alone, and not only the word but the idea of relics: those things saved from the past, traditionally body bits of the saintly dead. As Linda Dowling has argued, his sense of language is deeply archaeological. He goes digging for meaning, excavating etymologies, as if the ground were some resourceful place which releases unexpected objects. His purpose, Dowling proposes, is “to uncover and hence recover the sensuous basis of Western experience.” Relics are, of course, essentially material things. They are sensuous in that they have a remembered “sense in them” of the body, even if what they symbolise are bodiless saints. Pater, as usual, manages to have it both ways, to handle the body but remain sexually innocent. Relics are also, for all their religious overtones, etymologically that which remains. His fondness for the word is a reminder that everything, for him, is remaindered from the past. Nothing can be grasped in its momentary present, but is already lapsed and wasted.

The relic is almost a central character in some of Pater’s short stories. In, for instance, “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” and “Denys l’Auxerrois,” it figures not only as a character from the past but also as a sign of art’s deep-mired dependence on that past. As in so much of his writing the drive of the plot gives way to a digging down into language and its buried meanings. Pater is better at stirring dull roots than telling a rollicking tale. Indeed, “Duke Carl” starts with the uprooting of a tree in a storm which then reveals the relics, literally, of two buried people. For the rest of the story the Duke’s ambitions to bring about a Renaissance of art by recovering the lost art treasures of the past is grotesquely entwined with an imagery of unearthed corpses. The most innocuous sentence seems unable to get free of them:

In art, as in all other things of the mind, again, much depends on the receiver; and the higher informing capacity, if it exist within, will mould an unpromising matter to itself, will realise itself by selection, and the preference of the better in what is
bad or indifferent, asserting its prerogative under the most unlikely conditions. \textit{(IP 129)}

This seems to be a straightforward comment about the subjective nature of perception and interpretation. The sentence, however, returns to and homes in on those very “conditions” which it tries to reject. At another level the bedded puns in this sentence pitch their own standards of sense: “will mould an unpromising matter to itself.” This moulding echoes the “mold” of Duke Carl’s name, which is also the mould of the earth in which dead “matter” is discovered—specifically the matter of the body. The name Rosenmold contains the unresolved antithesis of roses, the florid, baroque art which appeals to Duke Carl, and the mouldy earth which changes bodies to matter and, in the long run, to relics. The phrase “mould an unpromising matter to itself” earths Pater’s meaning in an unredeemed, physiological process of decay. The lapse and waste of the ““secular process”” are at work even at the roots of language. Thus, once again, the sentence starts to mean the opposite of what it says. Exalting the power of the individual receiver and interpreter of art, it also, punningly, subjects that individual to the grotesque, textual etymology of names. Duke Carl’s rosy, youthful appearance is only matter which the earth will mould, as it did the unearthed bodies at the start. The matter of art is also a matter of relics, ever disintegrating, to the time-bound, perceiving mind.

The relic, then, becomes one of those words on which Pater pivots fact and metaphor, body and spirit, past and present, permanence and decay. Through it, the present object, whether bone or buried treasure, is moulded by history and subjectivity—by a passage of time which ensures that nothing is simply for its own sake, intact and unchanged, whether self, art work or word. Everything is on the move and under “conditions,” however “unlikely.” The self, like the name Rosenmold, has a history, a conditioning past, among those roots both of trees and words which the story casually unearths.

“Denys l’Auxerrois” is, similarly, obsessed with what might be dug out of the ground: bits of stained glass, a Greek coffin, the relics of a saint, a Roman child’s skeleton, the body of Denys’s own mother. In the end Denys himself is torn limb from limb by a carnival mob, and his heart, all that remains intact, is buried in the cathedral aisle. As usual the storyline does not matter much. What matters is something going on underground. The story takes shape from the bits of “old glass” \textit{(IP 51)} which the narrator finds in the shops and pieces together into an imaginary portrait. But it is one relic in particular which brings Denys, the main character, into play. The Greek coffin which, we are told, had been re-used at a Roman funeral, contains, not a body but something else: “an object of a fresh and brilliant clearness among
the ashes of the dead—a flask of lively green glass, like a great emerald” (IP 56).

Emeralds have a long tradition in aestheticist writing, going back at least to Gautier’s volume of poems, Emeralds and Cameos (1852). Whatever the intertextual significance, in Pater’s story the discovery of this “green glass” in a coffin is what marks the return of Dionys from his obscure mythological origins. This recovered art work, like all the curious relics in the story, is a buried treasure come to light. Like the other Grecian urns or golden bowls of aestheticism, it figures an art for art’s sake recovered from history, an object removed from the conditions of its production, but still slyly reminiscent of those conditions: “the ashes of the dead.” It too is a historian. Its recovery from the ground ensures that it recalls and commemorates something: “The bones of the artist-prince.” Characteristically, too, this old flask has a transparency, a “brilliant clearness,” which lets in the light of the present day. It is not sealed within itself but reflects, reciprocally, the new context in which it is perceived.

The passage may have inspired Virginia Woolf’s curious story, “Solid Objects,” in which the main character, burying a hand in the sand, finds “a full drop of solid matter” with “a green tint.” Woolf explains: “it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass; it was almost a precious stone.”28 This object, like Pater’s, is ambiguously precious or worthless, significant or random, opaque or transparent. An imaginary emerald, like the green flask, it is also only a bit of old glass dug out of the ground. Almost anything will do, Woolf proposes: “Anything, so long as it was an object of some kind, more or less round, perhaps with a dying flame deep sunk in its mass, anything—china, glass, amber, rock, marble.”29 Pater’s “gemlike flame” goes on flickering in Woolf’s work, in objects which, like Pater’s, enjoy that transparency to the outer world which keeps them fragile, open-ended, both self-sufficient and conditional.

Pater’s unearthed green flask, then, represents an art work as puzzling in its way as Bishop’s monument. On the one hand it is an empty artefact, with no purpose except to catch the light; on the other hand it might contain something: bones or wine. On the one hand it stands alone, out of context; on the other it commemorates whatever was buried with it. It is both a work of art and, in all senses, a relic—a thing remaindered from the past, and thus marking the passage of time which disintegrates, not only bodies, but the body of Pater’s language as well, as it tries to save the dialectical, “gemlike flame” from simply, like everything else, going out. Such aestheticism, as Woolf clearly recognizes, is not about preserving “the aesthetic” as a thing apart, in opposition to the world, but about the conditions of its existence in the world. The trouble of those conditions can be felt everywhere, not only
in Pater, but in the long tradition of writing which he, in many ways, founds and haunts:

The strong sunlight, the wind from the sea,
all the conditions of its existence
may have flaked off the paint . . .

Still, the curious, useless monument stays up.