The Entangling Dance:
Pater after *Marius*, 1885–1891

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The revel, the entangling dance, allure
And voices mellower than the Muse's own
Heap up his buoyant bosom on their ware—
A little while, and then...Ah Youth! Youth! Youth!
When thou art gone, Life may go too; the sigh
That rises is for thee, and not for Life.

W. S. Landor, *Hellenics* (1847)

THIS IS AN ESSAY that addresses the textual problem of “late” Pater, after the “explanation” of *Marius* had appeared—that is, the debate among scholars which turns on interpretation of Pater’s revisions pertaining to religion and morality in editions of *The Renaissance* and *Appreciations*, and his new publications of the years 1885 through 1891. I want to situate this body of revision and new writing not in a model of individual intellectual, moral and spiritual development, but in institutional, social and cultural frameworks of a particular episteme, and within a set of incremental regulatory acts of legislation, institutions, and periodical discourse, between the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act (CLAA) by Parliament in 1885, and the discovery and prosecution of a male brothel in Cleveland Street in London in 1889–1890.

I have two hypotheses, both debatable: first that Pater’s later writing, like the earlier, is as much a product of the cultural and legal conditions in which he was writing, as it is of any explanation which attaches to him as an “individual” subject, such as a gravitation toward greater religious conviction in late life; and secondly that, relatively unswervingly, throughout his writing and including this late period, one of Pater’s projects (and/or even habits) is to produce discourse inscribed with gender, a masculinist discourse which identifies itself with a homosocial form of masculinity, and one which ex-
plores character, plot, setting, history, ethnicity and nation, literature and art from that perspective.

This approach has a serendipitous parallel in Michael Doylan’s piece in *Victorian Literature and Culture* (1999) on Wilde’s *De Profundis*, called “Homosexual Self-Fashioning on the Other Side of Scandal.” This might be viewed as Pater’s position after 1874. I would also place this strand of Pater’s project in a continuum with Alan Hollinghurst’s in *The Swimming Pool Library* (1988) which seeks to establish a tradition (“grandfathers” such as Beckford, Wilde, Forster and Firbank), a plot (without marriage), and a history of settings, national and juridical, for gay lives and writing. Most if not all of Pater’s principal historical speaking subjects (or characters) might be related to or part of this putative history and tradition, from Plato onwards.

I want to show firstly that the years in question in Britain (1885–1891) are thick with civic and cultural formations which interrogate gender—heterosexual and homosexual, women and men, adults and children—in relation to the person but also to literature, and fiction in particular. I shall thus parallel publishing history with that of gender to show the interpenetration of apparently “authorial” discourse with other public discourses and regulation of the day. I then turn briefly to Pater’s revisions and in more detail to new work of this period: taking *Imaginary Portraits* as an example of “the entangling dance” model, I argue that overlapping (and sometimes dissonant) strands of Pater’s reiterated preoccupations co-exist, in a dynamic “tangle” of history and echo, assertion, contradiction, and modification.

I

The discursive events which preceded the proposal and passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act by Parliament in August 1885 are well known, and widely researched, in particular by Judith Walkowitz in her two books on *Prostitution* and *City of Dreadful Delight* and Lucy Bland’s *Banishing the Beast*. The points I shall make here relate specifically to the legacy of the Act and the discourses for writing which followed, including Pater’s. The discursive agitation which prompted the action of Parliament was initially about regulation of heterosexual acts involving “children”: that is, around alleged “sales” and subsequent abduction for sexual purposes of young girls of 13 or over, notionally children but legally adults, which it was alleged also involved their transportation “abroad.” The legal framework, which permitted these alleged acts, was the age of consent, at that time 13, which Parliament was slow to raise. Prompted by an impatient MP, W. T. Stead, evangelical editor of the evening daily *Pall Mall Gazette* and friend of campaigners for Social Purity such as Josephine Butler, Charles Booth, and Labouchere, ran a sensational, highly publicized series in July 1885 melodramatically entitled “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” which resulted in both the passing of the desired legislation and his own
imprisonment. An unforeseen result of the same cultural network and ethos was the last minute attachment to the Act of Clause XI, called the Labouchere Amendment, so named for the MP who proposed it, prompted again by Stead’s private assurance that male as well as female prostitution was to be found in London. This Clause outlawed all sexual acts between men, in private and public, consenting or not, thus extending the law beyond buggery. Some of the existing agitators regrouped themselves into the National Vigilance Association (NVA) in order to monitor the implementation of the new legislation. The publication of Marius, Pater’s work of “explanation” of the “Conclusion,” and potentially vulnerable in this respect, had just escaped this intensification of the climate of “vigilance,” having appeared four months before in March of 1885, with review copies circulated in February. So work subsequent to Marius was published in different conditions, in the aftermath of “The Maiden Tribute” and the Labouchere Amendment.

Meanwhile, in December 1884 and the summer of 1885, novelists including George Moore, Gissing, and a number of pseudonymous correspondents, were calling attention to the constraints on the discourse of the popular novel, which excluded at points of inception, publication, and dissemination what was alleged to be adult sexual material or serious discussion of dissonant ethical, moral, and religious problems of the day. By 1890 it was alleged by Hardy, in this ongoing debate, that it was impossible to publish an adult novel in England, and Walter Besant agreed, with approval; better to publish that sort of writing in France! Moore’s pamphlet of 1885 “Literature at Nurse” had gendered these cultural and economic problems afresh by identifying these issues with the common trope of Mrs. Grundy, with which they were already associated at the time: the (burdensome existence of) women readers now configured as both matrons and their young female charges. This overdetermined construction of “women” was shared, it seems, by publishers and circulating libraries and, according to Gissing, by complicit writers themselves; it resulted in regulation and censorship of female reading. The question of what was deemed suitable for this expanding portion of the readership, and “their” children with whom their reading was often elided, was thus reiterated late in the nineteenth-century century. French and English naturalism and the woman question were pressing on the earlier solution of Bowdler and on Thackeray’s later (1860s) practice in the Cornhill, whereby religion, politics, and philosophy were excluded from the family magazine; these strategies echoed and re-enforced practices of the circulating libraries and publishers, about whom complaints were now surfacing.

Out of this anguished cry of economically short-changed and censored novelists emerged an intensification of self-consciously masculine authorial identity. While this can be associated negatively with a conservative gender
politics (e.g. Tuchman’s “writing women out”), it also and simultaneously can be read positively, as part of creating space for the writing of a male, adult modernity and of the dissonant new woman. Pater’s writing comes to occupy this male space after 1885, along with that of friends and contemporaries such as Arthur Symons and Wilde, authors such as George Moore and Hardy, and publishers such as John Lane and Leonard Smithers. I am suggesting that for Pater the period after 1885 does offer significantly doubly different conditions for production and consumption of his work than before. The hegemonic format of new novels (three volumes), their content (fit for “women”), and the organisation of the publishing industries (serialization followed by expensive first edition, largely distributed through libraries, followed distantly by sales of cheap reprints) were all the object of vociferous interrogation and destabilized. Such scepticism stimulated the market for the one-off short story or short series of linked narratives before finally, if gradually, decoupling the circulating library/three-volume nexus from 1894.

Pater’s work is part of this process of change and destabilization, giving as it does conflicting signals with respect to the gender of its targeted consumers. His genres and aspects of his subjects—literature, especially fiction, and visual art—were deemed categories appropriate to nineteenth-century women readers, while the classical, violent, and intellectually strenuous portions of his work might exclude them, and address a particular kind of educated male reader. His tastes in classical subjects, theology and philosophy, and for the exotic were precisely those categories of knowledge of which many women were kept ignorant and remained uneducated. The formalized partition of the market, proposed by Moore et al, for a class of literature which addressed adult readers, intimated to be mainly male or intellectually catholic, may have strengthened Pater’s resolve, which I suggest was unremittingly there, to persist with his gendered writing. I want to contend that the publication of Imaginary Portraits, Pater’s book of bachelors or male youths, bears out this surmise.

But also pressing on Pater is the threat of the enhanced regulation of sexuality itself and its literary representation, via the monitoring activities of the NVA and their supporters between 1885 and 1890. In August 1885, in the immediate aftermath of the “Maiden Tribute,” the sometime liberal but now conservative Fortnightly Review under the editorship of T. H. Escott, published “The New Naturalism,” an attack on Zola, by the conservative critic and historian W. S. Lilly. In May 1888 a motion on the spread of pernicious literature was introduced in Parliament by an MP who repeatedly cited Zola, whose work had been translated and published by Ernest and Henry Vizetelly respectively, but Parliament did not act. However, by August of that year the NVA charged the publisher with breaking obscenity laws, and in Oc-
October Vizetelly was tried in the Central Criminal Court and found guilty; he paid a fine of £100 and was put on probation for a year. In 1889 the NVA published a pamphlet attacking “Pernicious Literature” which reported on and reprinted the May parliamentary debate and collateral material, including reviews of Zola from the press. With its denunciation of Zolaism as a disease, its disparaging reference to the publication of Burton’s *Arabian Nights,* and its practical call for an “active” Public Prosecutor, harsher juries, and newspapers which suppress the reporting of divorce cases, it is a chilling and rabid invective. While its target is primarily “cheap literature,” it concludes with a warning to the upper classes: “The conduct of some of the upper classes in this country would disgrace Heathendom; they are jeopardising the order to which they belong; and if many such exposures take place like those of last year [in divorce case reports], the country may be bought to the verge of social revolution.”

Just over a year after the first trial, in July 1889, the NVA charged Vizetelly again, this time for the publication of Flaubert and Maupassant as well as Zola (his cuts of the Zola text not being deemed sufficient); Vizetelly was again found guilty, and this time jailed for three months in Holloway. Vizetelly’s arrest results in the removal of a whole class of books, “the best classical literature” from the shelves of booksellers and public libraries [i.e. circulating libraries], including “the ‘Decameron’ and the ‘Heptameron,’” “‘Manon Lescaut’ and the ‘Dame aux Camelias’” and translations of Rabelais.

This indignant report, from a piece in the *Bookseller,* appeared in the new radical London evening daily, the *Star,* which identifies the NVA with censorship and observes “every lover of literature, however much he may dislike Zola’s ‘Soil’ and kindred books, must feel a sense of degradation at the usurpation of a literary censorship by a society of which probably not one single member has any literary knowledge whatever.” It is notable that even the *Star* feels it necessary to disassociate itself from Zola’s novel.

On the 30th of July a petition appeared in the *Star,* signed by writers objecting to the sentence and requesting Vizetelly’s release. Signatories included some of Pater’s friends such as Gosse, Symons, Oscar Browning, William Sharp, and Moore as well as John Addington Symonds, a fellow writer of gay discourse, and Hardy. Hardy, was one of the most vociferous contributors to the symposium on “Candour in English Fiction” that appeared in the *New Review* six months later in January 1890, in which the issues raised by George Moore in “Literature at Nurse” were revived and re-tackled. So the link between state regulation of individual heterosexual behaviour and its representation in literature was regularly debated and highly visible in this short period.

Another factor in play here was the acclamation by Stead of the power of journalism, which was described by Stead as an “estate” that rivals and dis-
places the power of government itself. Written from prison, his “Government by Journalism” of 1886 emphasizes the power of the press to investigate and disclose—on the authority and in the name of the people’s right to know—insalubrious material which governments prefer to leave alone and unpublicized. This defence of what was deemed sensationalism at the time was invoked by Stead throughout this period, including his attacks in 1890 on Parnell during the Divorce case. Bearing in mind the exposure of Pater and William M. Hardinge a decade before in the relative obscurity of the University community, the implications of this power of disclosure for Pater were serious and clear. Although Pater died before the trials of Wilde in 1895, the enhanced and incremental danger from the press of the late 1880s, through which he lived and wrote, is palpable.

II

The power, and limits, of journalism were both in evidence to him and all Londoners and readers of newspapers in events around the discovery of a male brothel in Cleveland Street, a series of trials and events which were reported over a year between the first discovery and arrests in June 1889, the prosecution and sentencing of a journalist for libel in November 1889, debate in the House in February 1890, and the release of Parke, the journalist in July of that year. I have written about this elsewhere; what is pertinent here is that even after Clause XI had been in place four years, the implementation of the Labouchere Amendment was uneven. In the course of the Cleveland Street trials, a middleman-manager of the brothel and an underling-telegraph boy were jailed, while the owner of the brothel and an aristocrat-client, associated with the Prince of Wales’s household staff, fled to the continent, with the connivance of the Attorney General. And the journalist was arrested, fined and jailed for libel.

Stead and Labouchere, the originators of the clause, were indignant on this occasion that the Act was failing to be implemented fairly. In the winter and spring of 1891, in his weekly periodical Truth, Labouchere called repeatedly for the exposure of the government’s role in decisions about the escapes and prosecutions. The “radical” Star, London’s largest selling evening paper, after an incriminating silence, finally supported the journalist who, as it happened, was employed as its deputy editor, as well as editor of the North London Press, which collapsed ignominiously soon after Parke was arrested. Between June 1889 and March 1890 then, the “noise” about Cleveland Street, for those like Pater alert to its nature, was considerable and disruptive. Part of the anxiety for all parties—government, participants, and readers such as Pater—was due to suspense about the efficacy of damage limitation: how much about the homosexual nature of the case and community would eventually emerge.
The silence of the press about the homosexual dimension of the case is noteworthy. The reporting of Cleveland Street is a clear antidote to Stead’s claim of “government by journalism,” since the existence of same sex practices proved unutterable in public discourse. The “story” only broke and proliferated in any normal way once the journalist was arrested, and government and thus party connivance in the escapes was detected. Even then, the particular nature of the crime was screened under the sobriquet “West End Vice,” allowing readers who entered the discourse after these short-cut phrases had been established, to mistake the homosexual brothels for heterosexual ones.

But journalists and others who attended the trials would have heard Jack Saul, a male prostitute, give first-hand and fascinating evidence about London homosexual life (which the judge magisterially dismissed). Saul, whose name was mentioned in some of the court reports published in the press, was also the anonymous author of an autobiography, published a decade before in 1881, *Sins of the Cities of the Plain; or, The Recollections of a Mary-Ann* in which he claimed that, “The extent to which pederasty is carried on in London between gentlemen and young fellows is little dreamed of by the outside public.” And *Teleny: or the Reverse of the Medal*, the homosexual novel published anonymously in 1893 by Leonard Smithers, but allegedly serially composed by a number of men and circulating covertly from 1890, registers the fear of one of its authors at about this time: “‘Today you are a man of a spotless reputation; tomorrow, a single word uttered against you in the street by a hired ruffian, a paragraph in a ranting paper by one of the bravi of the press, and your fair name is blasted forevermore.’”

Certainly by 1890, the implications of Clause XI, known by now as “the blackmailer’s charter” were clear to the community. Nevertheless, in June 1890, just before the Cleveland Street journalist was released from prison in July after another petition, Wilde published “The Picture of Dorian Gray” in a single issue of *Lippincott’s Monthly*, an American magazine. Still in the midst of the Cleveland Street news, in February 1891, *Dorian Gray* appeared in book form in Britain, expanded by Wilde but allegedly vetted by Pater. A review by Pater, Wilde’s due for his favourable review of *Appreciations* the preceding year, was probably reluctant, understandably under the circumstances; it surfaced tardily nine months later in a new publication, the *Bookman*, in November 1891. But that it appeared at all, with its qualified approval of Wilde’s dangerous text, is to Pater’s credit.

### III

It was during the summer of 1885, after the launch of *Marius* in March, that Walter, Hester and Clara Pater moved from Bradmore Road in North Oxford, where they had lived for over 15 years, to London—to a city in the midst of legislation around the Criminal Law Amendment Act and in the
wake of the “Maiden Tribute.” There is no evidence of why the Paters left Oxford. Pater’s stay in Rome in 1882 may have stimulated a desire to live in a large and cosmopolitan city, indeed in a landscape of modernity. It may be surmised that as two of the three siblings were actively engaged in University teaching by 1885, inroads on privacy in Oxford were considerable in term, and the town perhaps empty in the vacs. On the other hand, and put more positively, the Paters went to Kensington, London, the borough associated by *Punch* with Aesthetes and Pre-Raphaelites, to join friends, for example, the Humphry Wards and the Robinsons. Moreover Pater had other friends in London, young men such as Arthur Symons, and contemporaries such as Gosse. The social world of the literary community might also have beckoned Pater, now the author of a second book eloquently poised between the safety of “explanation” and the frisson of homosocial danger.

Certainly the move to London gave them all, and perhaps particularly the more socially-mobile male member of this family threesome, more opportunity to enjoy the galleries, buildings, society, and theatres of London, as well as its literary and religious life. These particular London years prove to be the most prolific period of Pater’s lifetime. Lastly, there may well have also been an element of “Bunburying” for Pater in the move, who by virtue of this double life was thus able to live free in term-time in his College rooms, without his sisters, and away from Oxford at weekends and in the vacs. He could come and go more as he pleased with less danger of both familial and collegial scrutiny. Evidence of this may be found in Pater’s London visits to the Priory of Augustine and his acquaintance with Richard Jackson, as indicated by Jackson mediated by Thomas Wright, however problematically.17

IV

I want to say something, briefly, about some of Pater’s revisions to his work in this period, to acknowledge and take them on board, but also to read them differently than criticism which treats them as indicative of a wholesale, holistic shift in Pater’s thought, by setting them in juridical and literary discourses of the day. Gene Bell-Villada offers a clear articulation of the position of a number of Pater’s readers of the 1888 edition of *The Renaissance*: instancing the excision of references to “relativized and aestheticized” religion in the “Conclusion” on its first reappearance after its omission in 1877, Bell-Villada characterizes it as “an informal recantation if not self-censorship.”18 Conscious as Pater was of the potential for the “Conclusion” to cause offence, particularly with respect to religion, and having replied to his critics with *Marius*, by May 1887 when he did the revises for the new edition of *The Renaissance*, he may well have been aware of his own personal vulnerability, after the passage of the CLAA.

In the event Pater may be thought to have acted both with integrity and prudence, having removed references to religion which might be calculated
to most attract the attention of the likes of the NVA and other conservative critics in the press and the university, but without allowing these forces to result in total suppression of his relativist views. The edited text of the third edition of *The Renaissance*, which includes “Winckelmann” as well as some of the other radical essays is not commensurate with “recantation” or wholesale transformation of his earlier views. I would argue that *The Renaissance* remains a radical text. I think, however, that we might read the consistent inclusion of “Winckelmann” as a calculated matter of necessity; to withdraw it would draw dangerous attention to its content, in a period increasingly less liable to overlook it. This reading does not rule out the possibility that Pater privately had ceased to wish to denounce religion in the ringing tones of the 1873 text. But there is ample reason to believe that this is not necessarily the case, as legal and cultural conditions produce their own constructions of the writer; moreover, what remains in the 1888 edition suggests that if Pater has embraced aspects of religion formerly disavowed, he also has not laid aside other radical aspects of his thought.

There is also Pater’s removal of “Aesthetic Poetry” (a version of the earlier part of the Morris essay) two years later, from the second edition of *Appreciations*, in May 1890, an act which “Michael Field”/ Katherine Bradley termed “Deplorable” and “prudish” in her diary *Works and Days*. Bradley, however, who habitually published under a pseudonym that masked her identity as well as her sex, who was not in employment, who was wealthy and, as a lesbian was not recognized by, and was thus not in contravention of the law, did not feel as vulnerable as Pater. Nor was her writing threatened as Pater’s might be, by the persecution and prosecutions of Vizetelly from 1885 onward, and in particular by the outcome of the trials of August 1888 and July 1889 that resulted in imprisonment on the second occasion.

The recent prison sentence of Parke, the journalist, in November 1889 and the legacy of Cleveland Street would also have been vivid in Pater’s mind as he contemplated the second edition of *Appreciations* in the winter of 1890, as well as the watchful presence of the NVA whose pamphlet “Pernicious Literature” had appeared by June 1889. Like religion in *The Renaissance* “Aesthetic Poetry” was another touchstone for conservative critics in the climate of 1890 in the immediate wake of Cleveland Street, and Pater acted to protect himself from unwelcome attention and invigilation. To test this case, a scrutiny of further revisions would be required (the second and third editions of *Marius* for example), but I think that this juxtaposition of the regulatory discourses of the period with samples of Pater’s revisions serves to indicate the gist of my argument.

V

I want now to turn to the four stories which comprise *Imaginary Portraits*, publication of which preceded the volume of that title in May 1887 by eight-
een months, beginning in October 1885, when the stories start in *Macmil-
lan’s Magazine* as a leisurely series, appearing at four to seven month
intervals. The historically chronological, mediated order of the book does
not reflect their periodical order of publication, and attests to Pater’s careful
shaping of his books, already evident in the structure of his collection of
non-fictional prose such as *Studies*, and now in his collection of short fic-
tional pieces. The title invokes Walter Savage Landor’s *Imaginary Conversa-
tions of Literary Men and Statesmen*, which emerged in a series between 1824
and 1829, but significantly next appeared in Britain as a whole in 1883, nin-
ten years after Landor’s death in 1864, and only two years before the publi-
cation of Pater’s first portrait in *his* series. In 1853 Landor had published
another series germane to Pater’s interests: *Imaginary Conversations of
Greeks and Romans*, and in 1847 and 1859 editions of his poems, *Hellenics*,
from which the title of this paper is taken. Landor, also valued by Swinburne,
is part of a masculine tradition of writing I suggest Pater is bent on
developing. Pater is also anticipated in his adoption of Landor to homosocial
purposes by Edward FitzGerald, who published *Euphranor, A Dialogue on
Youth* in 1851. It is germane to Pater’s editorial decisions in this period that
in the 11 July 1889 issue of the *Star* in which the fear of booksellers and li-
braries after the imprisonment of Vizetelly is reported, there are adjacent
pieces on Landor, which acknowledge a link between Landor and fear of
censorship. These recommend and review a selection of Landor’s poems in
the Canterbury Poets series, while alleging disapprovingly that the volume
to the antecedents of his book through its title, Pater was aligning himself, quite ex-
plitly with yet another controversial figure. But by shifting the genre from
(dramatic) dialogue to the (discursive) “portrait,” Pater moves between the
ready association of his own work with visual art (intensified perhaps by his
parallel move in 1877 in renaming *Studies*, from “history” to “art and po-
etry”) and the new journalism genre, the periodical or newspaper “sketch”
in words. Pater retains, I would argue, the ludic strain of Landor, taking the
opportunity to inscribe his homosocial and homoerotic materials as deftly as
possible, in a manner which anticipates the games Aubrey Beardsley played
with John Lane and Smithers, with his drawings for their publications, the
*Yellow Book* and the *Savoy*. Beardsley’s successful portrayal of an aroused
John Bull for the prospectus of the *Savoy* was only discovered by some of
Smither’s conservative contributors after thousands had been circulated (Nelson 1999, 69). I think here of Pater’s homoeroticized, tongue in cheek version of “Goblin Market” from “Denys l’Auxerrois” who, unlike the girls in “Goblin Market,” thrives for some time in his dalliance, which is incrementally displayed:

At the great seaport of Marseilles he had trafficked with sailors from all parts of the world, from Arabia and India, and bought their wares, exposed now for sale, to the wonder of all, at the Easter fair—richer wines and incense than had been known in Auxerre, seeds of marvellous new flowers, creatures wild and tame, new pottery painted in raw gaudy tints, the skins of animals, meats fried with unheard-of condiments. (IP 1887, 73)

I do not propose to give “exhaustive” attention to Imaginary Portraits. What I shall do is offer sightings of an embedded and pervasive strain of masculine, homosocial discourse common to these bachelor stories, which are “thick” with complex and multiple potential readings, enriched by the diverse settings of the portraits in a range of periods and ethnicities. Beckson identifies fiction of this kind in this period with work by writers of a younger generation, Haggard’s King Solomon’s Mines (1885), Jerome’s Three Men in a Boat (1885), Doyle’s “A Study in Scarlet” (1887), Kipling’s The Light that Failed (1890), Du Maurier’s Trilby (1894), and Stoker’s Dracula (1897), but I think Pater’s fiction benefits by being comparatively situated in this discourse, as well as in relation to R. L. Stevenson’s Jekyll and Hyde (1886) with its male double, Gothic horror, and license for the carnivalesque, all of which are found in Pater’s “portraits.”

Characteristics which the stories share include the following: a celebration of or nostalgia for the “youth,” the beautiful/emaciated male body, and the fantasy space of youth untrammelled, open to experience: “The lad, with his full red lips and open blue eyes, coming as with a great cup in his hands to life’s feast” (IP 1887, 159). While Pater’s protagonists are notably diverse in ethnicity, period and rank, uncloaked they are recognizable as kin both to each other and to Pater’s contemporaries. Together, they develop already articulated Paterian themes, such as the proximity of youth, beauty and death, and male patterns of friendship and community such as those between mentor and mentored. Here (Duke) Carl (of Rosenmold) recoils from death in his grasp for life, but from the beginning of Sebastian (van Storck)’s narrative life, he is greyed by death, as is his saint and iconographic namesake, the subject of so many homoerotic paintings of the impaled male nude body: “When he returned home lately from his studies . . . at the proposal of his tutor, to recover, as the tutor suggested, a certain loss of robustness, something more than that cheerful indifference of early youth had passed away” (IP 1887, 92). This deathly beauty nevertheless disturbs his tutor: “This intellectual rectitude, or candour, which to my mind has a kind of beauty in it, has
reacted upon myself, I confess, with a searching quality” (IP 1887, 94). None of Pater’s four protagonists marries, and plots that preclude marriage are explored. All end in death, and not one of these flâneur bachelors survives. Proto-sexual relations with women are scarce and always displaced resolutely, and sometimes violently such as Sebastian’s cruel letter to his abandonned woman, or the death of Carl and his “gypsy” who are trampled to death by an unseeing army. Male friendships figure often, sometimes in classical/biblical and homosocial configurations of mentor and student, and there are numerous kinds of male communities: Jean-Baptiste is the rejected “disciple” of Antony Watteau; Denys, a returned Dionysus, has “Hermes,” the monk; comments by Sebastian’s tutor on his pupil are authoritatively added to the narrator’s at the beginning of the narrative; the core community of Carl, the Northern Apollo, who is alone unprosaic, consists of Max the organist, and Fritz the treble-singer (IP 1887, 157); monasteries fill Denys l’Auxerrois; Watteau has his scuola. All of the young men are restless, peripatetic, resistant characters, unknowable both to the reader and their companions, young men with secrets, who bear a close resemblance in this respect to Wilde’s male protagonists that follow such as Dorian Gray and many of Wilde’s dramatic male protagonists. Carl’s “weary, deflowered face that his favourite mirrors reflected” (IP 1887, 157), may have even fathered the main plot of Wilde’s novel of 1890–1891.

Anticipating Bunburying, Pater’s protagonists are escapees, from the familiar (Sebastian, Carl, Antony) or the unknown (Denys), although three stories start in familiar bourgeois settings, to draw in readers of Macmillan’s Magazine perhaps. The Watteau story alone remains in that setting, successfully screening through the domesticated and partial vision of a female narrator the immoral world of the city from which Jean-Baptiste has been forcibly returned. The worlds of the other stories are that of the male flâneur, and they also have elaborately imbricated Gothic elements, horror in the carnivalesque, violence, or the cadaverous, invoked repeatedly in the shock of confronting remains of the dead. Carl, after staging his death, returns as the undead, as does Denys; both anticipate Stoker’s Dracula and echo available vampire narratives in circulation.

There is insistent reference in these tales to the discourses of decadence and degeneration, figured in “Sebastian van Storck” as a ghostly and gratuitous addendum to the plot attached to Sebastian, as the death from which Sebastian might have died, had he not died heroically in saving a child. It is a double ending to this tale, the denouement of which initially resembles that of Marius in its attempt both to offer a variation on the marriage plot and to heroize a relationship. In “Sebastian van Storck” where Sebastian’s capacity to love a woman is replaced by an analogue of himself, like Narcissus—“his own thought”—the agency of death is, crucially, medicalized, and described
by a doctor, as a “disease then coming into the world; disease begotten by the
fogs of that country—waters, he observed, not in their place, ‘above the fir-
mament’—on people grown somewhat over-delicate in their nature by the
effects of modern luxury” (IP 1887, 133). It is notable that Sebastian and
Carl both suffer from “fits,” the device which Tennyson added to the charac-
ter of Ferdinand in “The Princess” to detract from an aggressive masculin-
ity, and to make him more open to the emancipated Princess of his “medley”; in Victorian terms Ferdinand is feminized. Pater’s nomenclature
of “disease” and its association with disruption, over-delicacy, liquids out of
place, and the effete all suggest the identity of this indulgent yet ascetic fig-
ure with gendered decadence, a flawed, self-destructive, onanistic but sym-
pathetic effeminacy. As usual in Pater, this portrait—of a secularized,
diseased Sebastian figure—is neither wholly rejected nor owned. But he is
present, imagined, articulated, and at the centre of a narrative. It is an inter-
vention for consideration, whether recommended or not.

I end with Carl of Rosenmold whose national project of hellenizing Ger-
many might be paralleled with what I am alleging to be Pater’s project for his
writing. After attempting to reach the “south,” Carl significantly turns back
on the border, where “in the South-german towns, in a high-toned, artistic
finess—in the dainty, flowered ironwork for instance—the overflow of
Italian genius was traceable” (IP 1887, 172). Carl decides rather “that, in a
new intellectual hope, he was already on his way home. Straight through life,
straight through nature and man, with one’s own self-knowledge as a light
thereon, not by way of the geographical Italy or Greece, lay the road to the
new Hellas, to be realised now as the outcome of home-born German gen-
ius” (IP 1887, 172). While this project of Carl’s is increasingly heroized
and democratized, it is finally doomed by virtue of the narrative’s anxiety
around marriage. It is Carl’s “wantonness of affection” which is crucially de-
ployed to scupper the marriage plot, unimaginable for Pater. It is not, as in
Marius, male bonding but its heterosexual and class analogue: he decides to
marry a socially unsuitable woman, a gypsy/beggar who is generically part of
the romance and fairy-tale dimensions of this story which is one of those, in a
heterosexual framework, that does not end happily. But she is also one of the
ways Pater politically democratizes Carl’s project, and her class, while use-
fully disruptive narratively, is also crucially politically revolutionary. Neve-
theless, the homosexual plot cannot survive and is defeated in the energy
required to resist compulsory heterosexuality and its plots. Carl dies, at the
border, that characteristically Paterian location. But Carl’s decision—afer
indecision—not to leave, to re-turn and to cultivate the Hellenic project on
his own turf in his own language and on his own terms does represent, I am
arguing, Pater’s stance after Marius, and in the midst of the gender wars, as
he was.