Walter Pater

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No Time for Pater:  
The Silenced Other  
of Masculinist Modernism

Lesley Higgins

Forms of intellectual and spiritual culture often exercise their subtlest...  
charm when life is already passing from them. . . . Then comes the specta-

cle of the reserve of the elder generation exquisitely refined by the an-
tagonism of the new. That current of new life chastens them while they  
contend against it.

—Pater, “Coleridge’s Writings” (1866)

THERE WERE MANY ACCOLADES from Oscar Wilde, including the 1890  
declaration, “Mr Pater’s essays became to me ‘the golden book of spirit and  
sense, the holy writ of beauty.’ They are still this.”  
There was his 1895 com-
ment from the witness stand that “the only critic of the century whose opin-
ion I set high, [is] Mr. Walter Pater.” But perhaps most memorably there  
was the zinging witticism preserved in W. B. Yeats’s memoirs: “I never travel  
anywhere [Wilde observed] without Pater’s essay on the Renaissance, . . . but  
the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written—it is the  
very flower of the Decadence.” ‘But,’ said somebody, ‘would you not have  
given us time, Mr. Wilde, to read it?’ ‘Oh no, plenty of time afterwards in ei-

er world.’

Unwittingly, Wilde’s unstinting praise for Pater, his efforts to canonize  
the writings in the discourse of decadence, helped to ensure that, in the after-
wards of masculinist high modernist culture, in the “after-words” of T. S.  
Eliot, T. E. Hulme, and Wyndham Lewis, there was never any time for posi-
tive assessments of beauty or beauty’s most radical champion. Wilde’s pro-
fessional enthusiasm and personal misfortunes also guaranteed that,  
posthumously, Pater and his writings could not be read separately from  
Wilde, or, more accurately, from The Scandal that dared to speak its name.  
Instead, the two men were often deliberately conflated, two disparate lives
and canons distilled into one repugnant figure from which the greatest possible distance must be secured.

The substance of modernity permeates Pater’s writings—a theory of relativism and contingent subjectivity; historical consciousness; an effort to revivify the present through cultural appropriation; a preoccupation with the question “what does the spirit need in the face of modern life” (Ren/H 184)—but he was not only disowned as a fellow “modern” but largely denied recognition as an important precursor. Exclusion of Pater was produced by strategic gestures of avoidance, derision, and erasure. For the “Men of 1914,” it was not simply a matter of distancing their innovative critical arguments from a nineteenth-century critic’s lavish praise for “aesthetic beauty” (Ren/H 102), thereby constructing a new object of study—what Eliot termed “the horrid or sordid or disgusting” conditions of modernity—more in keeping with contemporary life. Reorienting aesthetic ideology was also necessary to protect modernist discourse (and most especially its enunciators) from the doubly-tainted undertones of effeminacy and homosexuality so often associated with Pater and Wilde.

If, to quote Terry Eagleton, the “current left triptych of concerns” is “class, race, and gender,” the male modernists’ triptych of phobic concern and abhorrence was homosexuals, women, and Jews. The misogyny and anti-Semitism of modernist culture have been thoroughly analyzed by several critics, among them Gilbert and Gubar, and Gilman. My purpose is to redress a dominant critical silence concerning the modernists’ homophobia—and to demonstrate the extent to which Lewis and “brethren” were able to disguise homophobic responses under the cloak of aesthetic impartiality. Part I of this essay surveys the virulent antipathies which circulated in Wyndham Lewis’s writings, “under-currents” for his indictment of Pater. In Part II, a close reading of Pater’s place as acknowledged, negative interlocutor in Eliot’s criticism yet unacknowledged textual presence in Eliot’s poetry confirms Pater as one of modernism’s silenced Others.

I The “vicious circle”

Wyndham Lewis would always state publicly, stridently, what others would only suggest sotto voce:

There is a great deal of the intellectual snob about the invert: but since he converts what he borrows from the intellect to the purposes of sex, he is a great enemy of the intellect. As a feminine facsimile, further, he takes over the traditional idiosyncrasies of the feminine rôle....Even so late as the famous ’nineties the English courts made a martyr of that description of Oscar Wilde.

Had the “Men of 1914” drawn up the rules for admission to the Anglo-American literary canon, the first regulation would have stated, emphatically:
none of those “nancies” or “homos.” The latter, disparaging terms were Wyndham Lewis’s, but the sentiments where shared by Pound, Eliot, and Hulme. In their revisioning of aesthetic history, Beauty had been seized and irrevocably contaminated not once but twice in the late nineteenth century: first by Walter Pater, and subsequently by his appreciators, the Aesthetes of the 1890s—chief among them, to quote Lewis, “Oscar Wilde, the arch-aesthete of England.” The first, 1914 issue of BLAST shrilly exposes the “effeminate lout within” England as one of its greatest “SINS AND INFEC-
TIONS”; Lewis’s favourite euphemism, “DIABOLICS,” is defined as “rapt-
ures and roses | of the erotic bookshelves.” Blending discourses of
morality and diagnosis, the purveyors of the new pledged themselves and
their works as antidotes to such social and civil contamination, the deplorable
and “‘willed sickness of modern man.’”

In an era in which “traditional models of male bourgeois identity” were variously threatened and destabilized—by aesthetes, New Women, suffra-
gettes, the spectacle of shell-shocked, hysterical veterans, sexologists who hypothesized the existence of an “intermediate sex” or “womanly men” born “on the dividing line between the sexes,” and the public and discursive emergence of self-avowed lesbians and homosexuals—it is small wonder that astute yet reactionary men such as Ezra Pound or Wyndham Lewis would give voice to their multifaceted anxieties. But they did more. Rather than producing straightforward misogynistic or homophobic rants, they dis-
placéd their fears and loathings, transmutéd them into “rich and strange”
aesthetic and cultural critiques. To mock the Omega Workshop—its partici-
pants and cultural products alike—Lewis insisted that he had been invited to
join the London group because they “were compelled to call in as much
modern talent as they could find, to do the rough and masculine work with-
out which they knew their efforts would not rise above the level of a pleasant
tea-party, or command attention.” Pound, who preferred to condemn
“sodomy” à la Dante, was only following a trend, and extending its author-
ity, when he dismissed the Bloomsbury circle of intellectuals and artists as
“The bloomsbuggahs.” When the “Men of 1914” called for art that was
hard, their phallic criterion was partially a response to what Pound disingenuously termed the “softness of the ‘nineties.’” In “Redondillas, or
Something of that sort,” a poem later withdrawn from Canzoni, Pound’s
speaker satirically sings “of the diverse moods / of effete modern civiliza-
tion.” What would be the best “world prescription” to cure the ills of a cul-
ture too preoccupied with “delicate hues” and “perceptions scarce heeded”?

A little less Paul Verlaine,
A good sound stave of Spinoza,
A little less of our nerves
A little more will toward vision.
We have Lewis to thank for a gloss on Verlaine as emblematic “invert”: “The ‘Nineties’ movement in England . . . was the Seventies in Paris, reproduced upon our miniature island stage, in a romantic and self-conscious form. Verlaine was an Oscar Wilde—was advertising that particular vice—even went to jail, and recorded the fact in tragic verse.” Among the Personae of 1909 one finds a Pound speaker in high “Revolt” against “the lethargy of this our time,” which is characterized by a lack of “strong men, / Hearts hot, thoughts mighty.” If we “dream pale flowers” or live as “dabblers,” the speaker fearfully acknowledges, we (assuming a gendered audience) cease to be “men.” The final verse paragraph is both prayer and warning:

Great God, if these thy sons are grown such thin ephemera,  
I bid thee grapple chaos and beget  
Some new titanic spawn to pile the hills and stir  
This earth again.

Pound and Lewis, presumably, are among the new titans of culture; their works constitute a corrective for several decades of decadence and unmanliness. When Pater referred, more than four decades earlier, to “the antagonism of the new,” he could not have imagined the venom of their “chastening” words.

Although Lewis’s promulgation of official fascist discourse was comparatively short-lived, his praise for Hitler repudiated in the late 1930s, and publicly renounced, his efforts to expose and root out “every variety of Perversion” only intensified with each new decade, each new tract for his times. As Hewitt perceptively suggests about the “politics of anality” which Lewis blasted, “Lewis’s analysis of modernity—his critique of contemporary politics, and his original enthusiasm for Nazism—is structured taxonomically in terms of an analysis of homosexuality.”

Readers of Tarr (1918) encounter Alan Hobson, a Clive Bell-esque figure who is derided for belonging to a particularly heinous “set.” “The Cambridge set that you represent,” Tarr remarks, “is, as observed in the average specimen, a hybrid of the Quaker, the homosexual and the Chelsea artist. You represent, my good Hobson, the dregs of anglo-saxon civilisation. . . . the poor froth blown off the decadent Nineties.” The 1920–1921 painting of Tyros: a reading of Ovid features “a satire on womanly men. They fawn, in sensual delight, at the presence of the observer, their entire demeanour signals their instinctive responses to life.” But it is The Art of Being Ruled (1926) that fully explicates a genealogy of the “sex-invert,” outlines his “material physiognomy,” and lambastes him as a great enemy of manliness—a “turncoat, or ‘turn-sex’ male, feminizing invert.” Further, Lewis identifies the “vicious circle” of inverts operating throughout “the anglo-saxon countries and beyond. . . . living in the shadow of the Oscar Wilde case.”
Michel Foucault suggests that self-identified homosexuality emerged and “began to speak in its own behalf” in resistance to the burgeoning “appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, [and] pederasty.”

Lewis provides his readers with an alternative theory: in the aftermath of the “feminist revolution,” at a time when “post-war life” is dominated by “a bourgeois revolution,” a new and “gigantic phase of the sex war” is responsible for producing the “‘homo,’” the “legitimate child of the ‘suffragette.’” Notably, this malignant progeny is not given a father, thus intimating that the “sex-transformation” involves an antithetical virgin birth engendering a kind of anti-Christ. Yet the main discursive field in which Lewis situates his argument is political rather than biological. Like the suffragette before him, the “joy-boy” is an “equally political” phenomenon, Lewis insists: “Is it not the same old hag that in a ‘morality’ would be labelled Power, and for whom pleasure, in the simplest sense, means very little, who has pupped this batch of related fashions.”

The satirical remarks are laced with a Swiftian zest for dehumanizing the opposition; the misogynistic spin of “old hag” and “pupped” could be considered rhetorical bonuses. So convinced was Lewis of his argument’s merits that he quotes from The Art of Being Ruled in several works of the 1930s, most notably Doom of Youth, which implicates the “homo” in the “Child-Cult, artistic and otherwise” currently polluting European culture. Hitler, a 1931 paean to the Führer, asks us to endorse the Nazis’s goal of purging Western culture of its Babylon-like ways; eliminating transvestites and “Rose-Bottoms,” Lewis argues, would be a great way to begin.

Wilde once suggested that Pater “has no rival in his own sphere, and he has escaped disciples.” Contrarily, I am arguing that “Pater” was anathema to the “Men of 1914” partially because of his disciples. The writings were always doubly refracted: generally, through a culturally ingrained homophobia such as Lewis reiterates; specifically, through the lens of the Wilde spectacle. By 1931, Lewis had fully expressed his antipathy to the “verminous” “homos” who had infiltrated popular culture and high art alike, and made occasional, slighting references to Pater. Three years later, when comparing “the serious work of art” against the current crop of “men without art” nonetheless flourishing as writers and critics, Lewis was fully prepared to excoriate whatever reputation Pater might have had left.

Men Without Art is announced from the outset as a work of “satire,” that privileged weapon in the modernist’s discursive arsenal. The prosecution of Pater builds slowly, beginning with introductory charges of critical malfeasance: “heaven defend us from the beaux yeux of the beaux arts! Art is not here defended for its own sake: art-for-art’s-sake, of Walter Pater, is nothing to do with art—it is a spectator’s doctrine, not an artist’s: it teaches how
to enjoy, not how to perform. I am a performer. It is as a performer that I shall speak.”

Then, in a move that was sure to needle Eliot (who had already published his negative views of Pater’s work), Lewis insists that his peer (not a “humbug,” we are told, but now a “pseudo everything, and he has found his theorist to explain and justify him, namely Mr. I. A. Richards”) is following in Pater’s dubious critical footsteps: “But meanwhile we have got here, in this Eliot-Richards combination, a new aesthetic of art pur. . . . The Disbelief Theory we could label it for convenience. It is, I dare say, the most important literary theory, upon the English scene, since that of Walter Pater, and deserves all our attention.”

In the latter comments, guilt by association is deemed aesthetic only, rather than a matter of “pathic” sympathies. This is not the case when Proust, “the archetype of the internal traveller,” is cited only to be “disowned”: “Walter Pater and Marcel Proust are patently of kindred intelligence. . . . For ‘aestheticism,’ though in truth rampant and ubiquitous, is on all hands violently disowned: and although the manner of Pater is today constantly imitated, on the sly, and his teaching absorbed along with his style, he is scarcely respectable, in the intellectual sense.”

Contradictions abound in Lewis’s argument: aestheticism is “disowned” yet rampant; Pater is passé, his canon unworthy of respect, yet his prose is “constantly imitated.”

The brunt of the satirist’s critical and personal animus is reserved for those who function as the un-men of Men Without Art, writers who must be indicted for offenses against Lewis’s repressive sex-gender code. With seeming subtlety, the discussion begins with a diatribe against Virginia Woolf and her “feminine mind” then shifts to those whose minds are “deeply feminized,” namely Pater and all of the other “cissies” and “distinguished diabolists.” Mrs Dalloway is dismissed as “a sort of undergraduate imitation of” Joyce’s Ulysses; Woolf’s narrative experiments are derided as explorations in “the half-lighted places of the mind. . . . A little old-maidish, are the Prousts and the sub-Prousts.”

Just as Robert Buchanan tried to punish Pre-Raphaelite poets for failing to meet his literary and personal standards, so Lewis hopes to devastate the reputations of Pater, Wilde, Woolf, and any other contemporary writers “of the essentially feminine sensibility” who have made post-war culture a
latter-day, “peculiar Slough of Despond.” Wilde may have been the most outlandish figure, but Lewis identifies Pater as the intellectual “fountainhead,” the “girlish” patriarch of a deviant House of Decay:

The exquisite palsies or languors of decay are . . . present in this mid-Victorian moralist aesthete. The fisticuffs of Lord Queensberry are already mobilized in the wings: and to come down to the present time, the droppings and writhings of Mr. Prufrock, or, better, the androgynous permutations of Orlando, might already have been foreseen. Next, as a mate for Pater, we can take André Gide—for as Pater stands to Oscar Wilde, so Wilde stands to Gide. So we shall have three consecutive generations of moralists—of moralists-gone-wrong.

Again, the text lashes out at the creator of Prufrock by making his works sound guilty by association; this second link between Eliot and Pater is more damning. And like a willing witness at the Senator McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, Lewis names names and castigates as he thinks fit. The self-proclaimed goal of this work is purgative: by exposing those responsible for “the stale and sickly airs which have been hanging over Europe for a century,” the satirist hopes to return art to men, and vice versa.

II “Who is that third who always walks behind you?”

If one has heard a recording of Eliot intoning The Waste Land, one can imagine the aloof, stentorious voice declaring, “I do not believe that Pater . . . has influenced a single first-rate mind of a later generation.” But these final words of a 1930 essay are not as conclusive as they may seem. The dismissive remarks are directed at Pater’s Marius the Epicurean; the complete phrase is, “I do not believe that Pater, in this book, has influenced . . . .” Are we to assume then that there are other books which were influential, which “‘ring all through our modern literature’”? Is it fair to say that Pater’s “modern” moment is connected with Eliot’s? The answer is yes, to both questions, but Eliot would have it otherwise, and would like his readers to concur.

Pound referred to Eliot as the Possum, but another apt moniker would be the Politician. Eliot was the one most concerned with reputations, and rhetoric; his were the most careful and carefully orchestrated efforts to legislate and police the canon; he cultivated the right friends and acquaintances, and acquired strategic financial support for his publishing campaigns. As politically astute and subtle as Lewis was brash or Pound outspoken, Eliot’s homophobic response to Pater (the historical figure, his writings, and his reputation) was muted. Yet its discursive traces are indelible. Lewis’s caustic remark that Pater, Wilde, and Gide constitute “three consecutive generations of moralists—of moralists-gone-wrong” is actually a response to Eliot’s insinuating observation that, “Pater is always primarily the moralist . . . [A] writer may be none the less classified as a moralist, if his moralizing is
suspect or perverse. We have to-day a witness in the person of M. André Gide.”

Rather than denounce Pater outright, Eliot merely names another homosexual, and allows the guilt by association to resonate. In the 1933 Turnbull Lectures, Eliot’s censure is also oblique yet succinct: Remy de Gourmont, the audience is told, was a “brilliant literary critic, [but] he was no philosopher; and being no philosopher, he was filled with all sorts of philosophical prejudices—about sex, for instance—after all, he lived in the time of Walter Pater.”

In taking pains to make Pater’s writings seem “merely eccentric and, in any event, outside the main English tradition,” Eliot was also following in the discursive footsteps of mentors Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt. More castigated Pater the Romantic at length in his Shelburne Essays of 1913; Babbitt preferred slighting, comparative asides in works such as Masters of Modern French Criticism (1912). For all three, Pater was the vampiric figure who, in the early twentieth century, “ruled from the grave”; theirs would be the silver bullets of criticism that would silence him forever.

Although Eliot’s writings rarely mention a particular Pater text, as if denying him such tangible recognition, it is possible to ascertain how steadily the criticism is aimed at central works in the Pater canon, and how widely the poetry is engaged. (Most commentators refer generally to Eliot’s reading of Pater, and claim various intertextual gestures, but do not or cannot confirm the texts in question.) Of the ten volumes in the Library Edition of Pater’s works, Eliot admits familiarity with seven: Apparitions (which includes “Coleridge,” “Style,” and the “Postscript” on the classic-romantic antinomy), Imaginary Portraits, Marius the Epicurean (two volumes), Miscellaneous Studies (“Pascal”), Plato and Platonism, and The Renaissance. Before moving to Europe in the mid-1910s, Eliot owned four volumes, which were among the books sent to him in London in 1920. Eliot’s annotated copy of The Renaissance (first edition, 1873), a gift from his mother purchased second-hand (“for 10 cents”), indicates his familiarity with the work’s textual history and a keen response to Pater’s discursive prowess. In addition, Eliot refers to two biographies of Pater: the now-discredited Life of Walter Pater by Thomas Wright (1907), and A. C. Benson’s Walter Pater (1906). One must also remember that he was reading Pater’s art criticism knowledgeably. In 1907–1908, as a Harvard student, Eliot studied Fine Arts 3, “History of Ancient Art”; in 1909–1910, Fine Arts 20b: “Florentine Painting.” Lessons from both courses were applied during Eliot’s tour of Italy in the summer of 1911 and his visits to the galleries and museums of London from 1914 onwards, Baedeker in hand to guide him, “meditating on/Time’s ruins.”

Yet knowing Pater’s works intimately and accrediting them are two very different phenomena. From 1915 to 1919, as Eliot tried to establish himself as a critical presence in Anglo-American intellectual circles, his oc-
Casional reviews cited Pater—disparagingly, most often, but also I would suggest to substantiate his own cultural conversance. Considering the possibilities of generic hybridity in “The Borderline of Prose,” for example, Eliot informs readers of the *New Statesman* that the Prose-Poem is doomed to failure. Pater’s essay on “Style” is not quoted directly, but Eliot’s argument constantly rebuts Pater’s key suggestion that “those who have dwelt most emphatically on the distinction between prose and verse, prose and poetry, may sometimes have been tempted to limit the proper functions of prose too narrowly” (*Ap* 1). To emphasize his disagreement, Eliot uses Pater’s own words for his rebuke: “All the arts approach the condition of music.” Yes! but not by being less themselves.”

Specific mention of Pater is withheld until the final paragraphs: “I have purposely avoided Pater’s ‘Mona Lisa,’” Eliot intones, “—because I am not sure that it is good prose.” Doubt is cast again in a review of Bertrand Russell’s *Mysticism and Logic*: “It is quite as good prose as Pater’s, but it is not Mr. Russell’s best prose”; “[Mr. Balfour’s] hardness is of the surface, and conceals an affinity to Walter Pater. But Mr. Russell’s hardness is from within.”

A survey of “Recent British Periodical Literature in Ethics” undertaken for the *International Journal of Ethics* will not list Pater among the “eminent” or “distinguished critics” of Socrates and Plato, but Eliot praises P. S. Burrell’s work because “among [the] noteworthy theories [he] oppose[s]” is that offered in *Plato and Platonism*. As if to prove uncategorically that “whatever Mr. Yeats’s influence may have been” it is now passé, that his is a mind “foreign” to contemporary English letters, Eliot’s 1919 review of *The Cutting of an Agate* pauses to expose a passage that borrows liberally from the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*: “It is a style of Pater,” Eliot concludes, “with a trick of the eye and a changing of the nether lip that come from across the Irish Channel. . . . Mr Yeats sometimes appears, as a philosopher of aesthetics, incoherent. But all of his observations are quite consistent with his personality, with his remoteness.”

Pater’s first published essay was a study of “Coleridge’s Writings”; “The Perfect Critic,” the essay which begins Eliot’s first volume of criticism, *The Sacred Wood* (1920), commences by acknowledging Coleridge as “perhaps the greatest of English critics” and then proceeds to imply that Pater is surely among the lesser. One named mention of Pater is buried among comments establishing Arthur Symons’s critical genealogy: in the history of “aesthetic criticism” or “impressionistic criticism,” Symons is the “successor of Pater, and partly of Swinburne.” Thereafter, Eliot is free to engage with Pater’s ideas at a safe remove—as attributed to Symons. Otherwise he can take pot-shots at “the type” of critic who “reacts in excess of the stimulus, making something new out of the impressions, but suffer[s] from a defect of vitality or an obscure obstruction which prevents nature from taking its course.” (The delicate hints of something unnatural about Pater, an
“obscure” problem, seem almost Jamesian.) The second essay, “Imperfect Critics,” also names Pater mockingly (this time in negative contrast to Swinburne), yet Eliot’s assessment of George Wyndham’s romanticism is framed in decidedly Paterian terms: “What is permanent and good in Romanticism is curiosity . . . a curiosity which recognizes that any life, if accurately and profoundly penetrated, is interesting and always strange. Romanticism is a short cut to the strangeness without the reality, and it leads its disciples back upon themselves.”61 One of the two most famous essays in the collection, “Hamlet and His Problems” (the other being “Tradition and the Individual Talent”), concludes its first paragraph with an almost Wildean riposte at Pater’s expense: having castigated Goethe and Coleridge for substituting “their own Hamlet for Shakespeare’s,” Eliot then adds, “We should be thankful that Walter Pater did not fix his attention to this play.”62 The witticism had its desired effect; many critics have subsequently quoted it to slight Pater. Yet one should also consider the constant, even nagging need to pronounce and render Pater’s writings obsolete.

Walter de la Mare provided the occasion for further, extensive interment: to his 1930 collection of studies, The Eighteen-Eighties, Eliot contributed “Arnold and Pater,” the essay which revisits the interstices of aesthetic, religious, cultural, and ethical discourses in order to demonstrate that Pater’s best work (on “art for art’s sake”) is derivative, an “offspring of Arnold’s Culture”; that Marius the Epicurean is moral yet “incoherent; . . . its content ... a hodge-podge of the learning of the classical don . . . and a prolonged flirtation with the liturgy”; and that Pater’s “influence,” overall, was and is confined to “one moment in the history of thought and sensibility in the nineteenth century.”63 There is great temporal-spatial precision to Eliot’s placement of Pater and his writings: he is of another century; Marius only “marks indeed one of the phases” of religious culture in England; the “right practice of ‘art for art’s sake’ was the devotation of Flaubert and Henry James; Pater is not with these men,” these proto-modernists, “but rather with Carlyle and Ruskin and Arnold, if some distance below them.”64 Whereas Arnold’s writings are “skilful,” Pater’s are merely “competent.”65 The only “gift” which Eliot is willing to discern is Pater’s “taste for painting and the plastic arts”—and it is a taste at that, not a talent or forte or ability, in a subject “to which Ruskin had [already] introduced the nation.”66 The “famous dictum” from The Renaissance is quoted—“for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake”—but its chief term is turned against Pater to insist that his “moment” in the critical spotlight has passed. The essay seems to be yet another Eliotic exercise in critical insight and civility, but insinuated into the discussion are terms—subversive, degradation, virulent, peculiar, suspect, perverse, morbid, malady, perversion, absurd, incoherent—
which speak to another, moralistic agenda. The reader is told that the “view of art expressed in” *The Renaissance* actually “propagated some confusion between life and art which is not wholly irresponsible for some untidy lives,” a circumlocution all the more damning for the effort required to understand its meaning. And, although completely unnecessary, there is a reference to Oscar Wilde within the essay which goes a long way to contextualizing the intimations of *subversive*, *suspect*, and *perversion*.

Public notice of Pater’s writings, therefore, is inevitably a matter of denunciation for Eliot, a series of disclaimers and negative judgments—in Carol Christ’s terms, a strategic “smokescreen” to “produce[e] a climate of appreciation for his own work and obscure the genuine continuities between him and his immediate predecessors.” As the speaker of “Portrait of a Lady” likes to imagine, “I keep my countenance,/ I remain self-possessed.” Nonetheless, as the remainder of this essay demonstrates, there is a sustained, sometimes intense discursive engagement with key Paterian concepts and resonant, almost haunting phrases. Once enumerated, the extent of Paterian “under-currents” flowing in Eliot’s canon is quite astonishing. From the nature of experience to the relationship between thought and feeling in creative and critical endeavours, from correlatives to confounding metamorphoses, from the force of the artist’s personality within a text to a scientific metaphor for creative transubstantiation, a Pater text has introduced a term, connected epistemological and aesthetic issues, or provided “hints and guesses.” I am not referring to those passages in which Eliot uses his considerable gifts for parody to lampoon Pater and perhaps a secondary object of critical attention—when he remarks that “the poet aspires to the condition of the music-hall comedian” or, in a much more complex intertextual gesture, compares Spinoza and Copernicus by suggesting that “the presence that, a little later than Bruno, rose so strangely beside the waters of the Zuyder Zee, is symbolical of all that in the ways of the sixteenth century the humanist was not.” The most significant intertextual gestures in Eliot’s prose and poetry are sometimes only “footfalls” that “echo in the memory,” shadows “hidden in the shrubbery.”

Perhaps no essay seems so individually, completely Eliotic as “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” yet I have identified several specific ways in which the critic adapts Pater’s own terms and precepts to construct a tradition, and imagine a critical enterprise, from which the Oxford don is wholly excluded. Fundamentally, the essay’s imperatives—to think historically when assessing individual works and eras, to place the artist in a cultural context, including “many of those who worked before him, and in many others down to our own time” (*Ren/H* 102)—are catalyzed by and transmuted from *The Renaissance* and other Paterian texts that speak to the ongoing presence of the past. “The study of many an earlier adventurous theorist sat-
isfied his curiosity,” the narrator of “Sebastian Van Storck” observes; “It was a tradition—a constant tradition—that daring thought of his; an echo, or haunting recurrent voice of the human soul itself, . . . which certain minds would not fail to heed” (IP 107). Heeding and hailing are two very different things in Eliot’s writings; Pater’s special role as interlocutor is silenced, any possibility of his writings taking a place in the “simultaneous order” of the acknowledged “tradition” eliminated.73

Other intertextual elements could be teased out in detail, including a fascination with the tortuous psychic and physical states of would-be saints, or the way in which Eliot situates his early reviews and critical essays against the “appreciation” mode popularized by Pater. Eliot’s famous suggestion that poetry can communicate before it is understood because the “auditory imagination” responds to the “musical qualities of verse” is an adaptation of Pater—as Eliot acknowledged to a Johns Hopkins University audience in 1933. It is “often a useful exercise,” he observed, “to take a figure of speech to pieces: if it can be put together again it is all right. Walter Pater observes that ‘the meaning’ (of poetry)—I should say rather of some kinds of poetry—‘reaches us through ways not distinctly traceable by the understanding.’”74

In the essay on “Style,” Pater summarizes and reformulates Flaubert’s theory that a parallel exists between “a relative, somewhere in the world of thought, and its correlative, somewhere in the world of language—both alike . . . somewhere in the mind of the artist, desiderative, expectant, inventive” (Ap 27), a concept which he then applies to Greek culture, so that a “correlative” of the “Platonic quality” of thought may be found in “Greek marble, as you walk through the British Museum” (PP 283).

Pater did not “fix his attention” on Hamlet, but Eliot’s essay on the play depends greatly on the theory of an “objective correlative,” the very definition of which is redolent with Paterian possibilities.75 Ironically, in this and so many other situations Eliot was at his critical best when trying to best Pater.76 Perhaps this was one impetus for Eliot’s unrealized, three-volume “criticism of the English Renaissance” project (a “trilogy” forecast as The School of Donne, Elizabethan Drama, The Sons of Ben), which survives in occasional essays and the pages of the Clark and Turnball Lectures (1926, 1933). Clearly Pater’s book had convinced Eliot of the epoch’s cultural diversity. One could also say that Pater’s Renaissance persuaded Eliot that an entirely different account of its intellectual, artistic, religious, and artistic productions was needed, one that not only stressed the English contributions to “the most interesting period in the history of the mind” (Ren/H 48) but countermanded Pater’s version of religious history, in which a “crabbed Protestantism” and the “Protestant principle in art” ultimately “cuts” nations off “from the supreme tradition of beauty” and the “pagan grandeur in the Roman Catholic religion” (Ren/H 149). The Clark Lectures especially
chide the emotional religiosity of sixteenth and seventeenth-century English Catholic writers, their incipient romanticism (learned, in part, from the teachings of Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuits), and begins to construct an alternative canon of astringent, metaphysical, or differently mystical poets and authors (a canon that will include Dante and selected poets of the Trecento, Donne and his fellow metaphysical poets, Dryden, and such latter-day “manifestations” as Baudelaire, Laforgue, and Rimbaud). Yet even this gesture is Paterian: *The Renaissance* extends the temporal and national boundaries of the period to include other expressions of “a many-sided but yet united movement” (*Ren/H* 1), from Dante’s Italy and medieval France to the German studies of Winckelmann and Goethe in the eighteenth century.

I have identified the intertextual tangle of Eliot’s critical response to Pater fully aware of Eliot’s admonishing comment that the “important debt does not occur in relation to the number of places in one’s writings to which a critic can point a finger, and say, here and there he wrote something which he could not written unless he had [X] in mind.” Yet the sheer number of references, allusions, caustic remarks, and serious intellectual engagements demonstrates that Pater’s writings are anything but dead in Eliot’s capacious mind or writings. However much Eliot tries to distance himself and his works from all that was “suspect or perverse,” time and again a Paterian trope or idea resurfaces textually as “the symbol of the modern idea” (*Ren/H* 99). But these discursive revisitations are not confined to the criticism; in each of three major phases of Eliot’s lyric poetry, “strange affinities” (*Ren/H* 98) with Paterian texts are discernible and significant: in the aestheticized “observations” of personalities and environments epitomized by “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”; mapping the “hollow” realms of “Gerontion,” *The Waste Land*, and “The Hollow Men”; and the poetic recovery of a religious “lost word” in *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*. For the most part, critics’ awareness of these Paterian traces has been intermittent, or suspicious—sightings of aliens near Roswell, New Mexico, rather than “the sudden look of some dead master.” It is more productive, I would suggest, to consider the Paterian “under-currents” of Eliot’s poetic discourse when any one of seven problematics or motifs is approached: subjectivity; crises of masculinity and imagined femininity; vigils and peregrinations; the “intense moment”; terrors of spring; the “presence of the past” (*GDL* 22); and the “perpetual agonia” of doubt. I have room to mention but two: figurations of femininity, and intimations of the Absolute.

Gendered identity crises punctuate the first and second phases of Eliot’s poetry, masculinity and its burdens only a little less terrifying than the spectacles of femininity represented. Some commentators who have shied away from the Paterian elements of “Prufrock” or “Portrait of a Lady” seem to have done so for fear of conflating the dandy and the “nancy-boy.” As
Moers and Sinfield have demonstrated, however, the dandy was originally “a heterosexual philanderer,” an identity marked by misogyny rather than homophobia when Eliot appropriated it. The dandy was “good at entertaining and being entertained by women; he enjoyed activities that were coded ‘feminine’—trivia, chit-chat, flirting, gossip, scandal.” Specific dandies of the 1880s and 1890s might have enjoyed contesting or fracturing the “faultlines” of class, gender, and aesthetics, creating “a disturbance of categories that reache[d] beyond the oppressive terms” then in circulation, but discomfiture rather than pleasure marks the textual existence of male speakers who endure “among velleities and carefully caught regrets” in “Prufrock” and “Portrait of a Lady.” And it is critics, unwittingly perpetuating the homosexual panic of the “Men of 1914,” who reductively dismiss the “slightly 1890-ish, lily-pale atmosphere that hangs over” the pre-Waste Land poems rather than identify the extent to which the Eliot dandy is paralyzed by the demands of heterosexual masculinity or forestalled by female figures who reiterate the stereotypes which Eliot, like Pater before him, inscribes in his texts.

However strange it may sound, there is an energy and discursive bite to the anti-feminist poems missing from Ash-Wednesday and Four Quarters—their Ladies, “veiled in white and blue,” desexualized, alternatively silenced or enshrined, inspire the religiously searching male speaker without threatening (or awakening) his masculinity. But Part III of Ash-Wednesday recalls lyrically a moment of poignant desire aroused by a woman’s long hair: “Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown, / Lilac and brown hair.” The sensual representation of such a “distraction” owes everything to Prufrock’s voyeurism—“I have seen them riding seaward on the waves/ Combing the white hair of the waves blown back/ When the wind blows the water white and black.” Yet in these images Eliot also replicates the same conventions of the femme fatale which Pater discerns in Leonardo da Vinci’s paintings: the “delicate brown flesh and woman’s hair no one would go out into the wilderness to seek” (Ren/H 93). As well, a conjunction of hair, rocks, and femme fatalité helps to explicate the allusively complex yet stereotypically unsubtle figure of “The Lady of the Rocks,/ The lady of situations” found within Madame Sosostris’s “wicked pack of cards” in The Waste Land.

Eliot had planned one satirical reference to Pater in The Waste Land, but the lines, and the entire section of the manuscript, never made it past Ezra Pound’s lacerating editorial gaze. Yet the “Fresca” episode—which originally began “The Fire Sermon,” the physical centre of the poem and thematic core of the neo-Augustan urban satire—is extremely pertinent to an understanding of Eliot’s sexist typologies, and revealing as to the way in which misogyny and homophobia can be mutually supportive (in part as a
response to a double-sided threat to the speaker’s masculinity: he is trying to
distance himself from the oppressive operations of female-male desires and
the “demotic” possibilities of male-male desires, such as Symonds and Pater
purportedly enjoyed, and Mr Eugenides suggests in the published Part III).
Like Joyce’s Molly Bloom, Fresca is confined to the domestic (and sexually
available) sphere of the bedchamber, and the degrading chamberpot. But
this would-be siren, who “blinks, and yawns, and gapes,/ Aroused from
dreams of love and pleasant rapes,” does not wholly conform to the hetero-
sexual script. Eliot’s latter-day Belinda moves through Pope-esque couplets
to her “steaming bath”:

Fresca! in other time or place had been
A meek and lowly weeping Magdalene;
More sinned against than sinning, bruised and marred.
(The same eternal and consuming itch
Can make a martyr, or plain simple bitch); . . .
For varying forms, one definition’s right:
Unreal emotions, and real appetite.
Women grown intellectual grow dull,
And lose the mother wit of natural trull.
Fresca was baptised in a soapy sea

At the heart of the labyrinthine “Unreal city” one finds its most sinister mon-
ster (by “fate misbred”), a woman of “unreal emotions” whose “appetite,” all
too real, ranges from the “natural” (as written, say, by St Paul or Rossetti) to
the unnatural desires of Symonds, Pater, and Lee, Fresca’s tripartite “Ura-
nian muse.”

The presence that bathes thus so strangely within the soapy waters of
the manuscript also occasions its most blatantly repulsive lines: “Odours,
confected by the cunning French, / Disguise the good old hearty female
stench.”

Although very different in tone and lexicon from the description
which begins “A Game of Chess” —

In vials of ivory and coloured glass
Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes.
Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused
And drowned the sense in odours

—the substance of the anti-feminist observations remain constant. Ostensi-
ibly, the phrasing in the latter passage leaves in doubt whether the seated
woman is “troubled, confused” or the man who watches her. I would argue,
however, that he is undoubtedly the drowning man, helpless before a figure
whose “hair [is]/ Spread out in fiery points,” as was Prufrock before him
when “perfume from a dress/ . . . makes [him] so digress,” and the speaker of
“Portrait of a Lady” when the scent from “a bowl of lilacs” or “the smell of
hyacinths across the garden” reduces him to gutter-ish “dark” of gendered
inadequacies. And all of this Eliot remembers, returns to the cauldron of discursive possibilities, so that four years after *The Waste Land* is published he can inform a Cambridge audience that, in the “History of Sensibility,” St. Theresa is responsible for a particularly strong line of “sentiment[al]” and romantic writing: “In much English prose, even the finest, of the nineteenth century, I find more than a trace of intellectual psychologism, and just the faintest, undefinable perfume of femininity. I find it in Newman and Francis Bradley as well as in Ruskin and Pater. Or it is as if such prose had been written in a low fever; there is a slight temperature to it.” Presumably the “low fever” of femininity is entirely different from the “forms of illness [that] are extremely favourable, not only to religious illumination, but to artistic and literary composition” such as Pascal experienced. If one reads the Clark Lectures in the context of the pre-1927 poetry, the “perfume” is neither faint in its textual effects nor undefinable. Pater is available to Eliot’s scorn whether he is effeminized or accused of unnatural and unmanly “perversions.”

*The Waste Land* is animated by vignettes and fragments in which “the awful daring of a moment’s surrender” is never realized. *Four Quartets* theorizes “the moment” differently from the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance* in order to rescue it from a Paterian relativism and restore its transcendent possibilities at the interstices of aesthetic and religious discourse. But the speaker of “East Coker” cannot imagine otherwise without invoking the appointed anti-text:

As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.

Yes, the speaker has answered Pater’s claim that “[t]his at least of flame-like our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways” (*Ren/H* 187), but can only do so in images and assertions hopelessly “complicated” by their intertextuality. In “The School of Giorgione,” Pater praises dramatic poetry because “it presents us with a kind of profoundly significant and animated instance . . . some brief and wholly concrete moment . . . which seem[s] to absorb past and future in an intense consciousness of the present” (*Ren/H* 118). Translated into the philosophical discourse with which Marius is most familiar, we have the Cyrenaic theory of “the pleasure of the ‘Ideal Now’” (*ME* 2: 21-22). In Eliot’s religio-aesthetic discourse, the intersection of “Time present and time past/ . . . both perhaps present in time future” is “renewed, transfigured, in another pattern”: “Quick now, here, now, always—/ A condition of complete
simplicity / (Costing not less than everything),” a glimpse of redemption that is nonetheless indebted to Pater’s imaginative articulations.99

The “ideal now” of religious certainty and the blessings of “pentecostal fire” are not easily represented in concrete, memorable terms, but Eliot does not shy away from the challenge. Self-reflexively answering the dire, cruel, and still-born springtime of The Waste Land, “Little Gidding” begins with the compelling yet paradoxical images of a “midwinter spring”:

Midwinter spring is its own season
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
Suspended in time, between pole and tropic.
When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,
The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches, . . .
This is the spring time
But not in time’s covenant. Now the hedgerow
Is blanched for an hour with transitory blossom
Of snow, a bloom more sudden
Than that of summer, neither budding nor fading,
Not in the scheme of generation.
Where is the summer, the unimaginable
Zero summer?100

Despite the interrogative gesture which ends the passage, the lines are assured and reassuring; they impress because of their taut binaries, acute attention to natural detail, and the cumulative rhythmic power of the phrasing (produced through a deft combination of enjamments and medial caesurae). Decades before composing the passage, Eliot read Pater’s comment that, in “Michelangelo’s poems, frost and fire are almost the only images—the refining fire of the goldsmith; once or twice the phoenix; ice melting at the fire; fire struck from the rock which it afterwards consumes” (Ren/H 68). In Plato and Platonism, Pater identifies “a quest (vain quest it may prove to be) after a kind of knowledge perhaps not properly attainable. Hereafter, in every age, some will be found to start afresh quixotically, through what wastes of words! in search of that true Substance, the One, the Absolute, which to the majority of acute people is after all but zero” (PP 40). Four Quartets is less a defence of the absolute truth of Christianity than an “exploration” of the resources of poetry to name the Love “[b]ehind the hands that wove / The intolerable shirt of flame/ Which human power cannot remove”101 and human discourse can only approximate. There is a profound irony to the fact that, at every turn in Eliot’s quest to communicate, Pater’s voice is “heard, half-heard, in the stillness/ Between two waves” of new verse; not a welcome guest, certainly, “accepted and accepting,” but one cannot “resolv[e] the enigma” of Four Quartets or The Waste Land or “Prufrock” without admitting Pater to the dance of words.

A particular kind of Eliot purist does not enjoy finding Pater’s voice among “the tongues” of Four Quartets, but the evidence is overwhelming—as
the narrator of *Gaston de Latour* almost predicts, referring to the “very presence of the past” in books, “which had already found tongues to speak of a still living humanity—somewhere, in the world!—waiting for him in the distance” (*GDL* 22). Pater makes a similar comment, in a religious context, in the Introduction to C.L. Shadwell’s translation of the *Purgatorio*, citing “the belief in a constant, helpful, beneficent interaction between the souls of the living and the dead, in the immense grace still obtainable for the departed by prayer here” (*In* xxi). Eliot concludes the first part of “Little Gidding” by defining the grace that is prayer and faith:

And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.  
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment  
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.\(^{102}\)

An argument for the compelling presence of Pater in Eliot’s writings, and those of the other “Men of 1914,” could not be better summarized: never and always.