WHAT I SHALL SUGGEST in this essay about Pater’s reception in France is highly provisional, and in some respects rather negative, although even the negative points are no doubt worth making all the same. I suspect that Pater’s resonance was not nearly so great in France as in the German-speaking countries. But, at the same time, even the slightest traces of (or indeed signs of inhibition about) Pater’s influence in the main cultural foyer of the modern movement are worthy of record.

I myself had an instructive experience just over twenty years ago when I published a short article comparing Pater’s “Apollo in Picardy” with the latest work by one of the most individual of the French “new novelists,” Robert Pinget. Under the title ‘Extremities of discourse,” I argued for the application to Pinget of a “mythic criticism” in which Plutarch’s “Isis and Osiris” and Pater’s Dionysian fable could be traced as resurgent structures in the text.\(^1\) Pinget conceded the point of substance, with his usual politeness: “Quand au mythe d’Osiris bien sûr que je le connaissais, et si je n’ai plus le souvenir de m’en être directement inspiré en écrivant Fable j’y vois très volontiers la résurgence naturelle, provoqué par l’état de crise, d’un grand archétype.” But the name of Pater drew a blank with him: “Je n’ai pas lu Walter Pater et vais essayer de trouver ici des traductions de ses écrits.”\(^2\)

Whether Pinget did in fact manage to find any works of Pater in a French translation within range of his flat in the Latin quarter, I never subsequently discovered. But a cursory look at the history of French versions of Pater suggests that he may well have drawn a blank, at least for “Apollo in Picardy.” In the Bibliothèque Nationale catalogue, the list of translations seems to have an oddly disconnected and arbitrary character. *Imaginary Portraits* heads the list, published expeditiously by Mercure de France in 1899, in a translation by Georges Khnopff, with an introduction by Arthur Symons (it is subsequently republished in 1930). Then, over the very period when Robert de la Sizeranne’s enthusiasm was sparking off a whole series of Ruskin transla-
tions, nothing much seems to have happened, until finally, in 1917, Roger Cornaz’s translation of The Renaissance is published by Payot. It would appear obvious that The Renaissance was not, as it was for German-speaking intellectuals like Freud and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, a crucial common point of reference. The list of French translations continues, in the 1920s, with Marius the Epicurean, translated by E. Coppinger, published in 1922; S. Jankélevich’s translation of Plato and Platonism, in 1923; and a little work of local piety, “Vézelay” (one of Pater’s last texts, posthumously included in Miscellaneous Studies), which is translated and published shortly after by one Dr L. Vignes in Avallon, the Burgundian town adjacent to the great Romanesque Abbey.

Of this little group of texts published in the early 1920s, the one which unquestionably had the greatest impact was Marius. I was recently encouraged by a remark of Paul Barolsky to investigate the possibility that perhaps the most cosmopolitan of all post-war French writers, Marguérite Yourcenar, might have looked more than cursorily at Pater’s historical novel. The connection between Marius and Yourcenar’s own Mémoires d’Hadrien, first published in 1951, seems too close to be accidental. Actually the point that can be made here without fear of correction is that Yourcenar indeed knew enough of Marius to try and repudiate Pater’s influence, and she argued her case with considerable vigour. Her knowledge of English fin-de-siècle culture was considerable and well directed. She sought out the rare pamphlet, A Problem in Greek Ethics, in which John Addington Symonds attempted to define the Greek ethic of comradely love against accusations of “effeminacy” and “pederastic lust.” She cited that work in the bibliography to her Mémoires d’Hadrien, despite its exiguous reference to the Roman emperor. She also wrote an essay full of insight and sympathy on Oscar Wilde.

This preoccupation with the activist aspects of English aestheticism, and in particular its sexual politics, betrays in all likelihood the reason for her lack of interest in Pater, and Marius especially. Yourcenar would perhaps not have felt constrained to make any comments on his work if she not herself believed that the connection was being made, quite inappropriately, by some of her compatriots. Josyane Savigneau, her recent biographer, mentions that “several critics” commented at the time of publication of the Mémoires d’Hadrien on its likely connection to Pater. More significantly, perhaps, one of the publisher’s readers, André Fraigneau, had cited Pater, with Renan, as one of the two “écrivains ou livres dont l’auteur ou l’ouvrage peut être rapproché.” It is no doubt because of the lingering sense that her own work had been misjudged through being associated with Marius that Yourcenar later obliquely alluded to her resentment in a letter touching on her relationship with the noted French man of letters of the previous generation, Charles Du Bos. As she expressed it, Du Bos’s immense reverence for Marius was his
Achilles’ heel: “j’oserai dire que l’énorme importance qu’il attachait au Marius de Walter Pater montre à quel point il ignorait l’Antiquité telle quelle, même sous la forme déjà quasi ‘moderne’ du monde romain tardif.”

It is indeed within the circle of Charles Du Bos, and his close friend André Gide, that we can find the most substantial evidence of a strongly positive reception of Pater’s work in France in the generation following his own. This will provide the main meat of my essay. But before I turn to Du Bos, it is surely worth noting that the “unhistorical” nature of Marius, as Yourcenar not unfairly judged it by comparison with her own Mémoires d’Hadrien, had been precisely the feature that commended it to many of the preceding generation. This is not the place to go deeply into the interesting exchange between Freud and Ernest Jones on the subject of Pater’s Leonardo essay. But it is worth mentioning a relevant and curious postscript. Two years after the original correspondence on Pater's characterization of the Mona Lisa, Jones presumed on their common knowledge of Pater's work to recommend to him a book on Rome by Edward Hutton, which had gone into its third edition in 1912. According to Jones, “Hutton seem[ed] to have taken on some of the mantle of Walter Pater, though with a greater sadness.” The passage that he then quotes is, mysteriously, missing from Hutton’s book, as the editor of the letters points out. It reads: “As if there is any progress in the human soul other than re-birth from what has always existed!” But there is indeed ample evidence in Hutton’s text of a Paterian mode perhaps coarsened into sentimentality, rather than sadness, such as in the sentence: “Rome lies like some great flower in the sun, or at evening is lost in the twilight and built in our dreams.”

Yourcenar’s perception of the unhistorical character of Pater’s vision thus stigmatizes precisely the quality that many of Pater’s contemporaries found so compelling, and she is right in holding that Charles Du Bos would have been one of those who set a high price on it too. So far is Du Bos from judging Marius by the criteria of historical verisimilitude that he begins his article of February 1923 by acclaiming the work as a novel which not merely aspires too, but actually achieves the condition of music. No literary work will brook comparison with it, but only “tel adagio de Bach: celui du cinquième Concerto brandebourgeois ou du Concerto pour violon en mi majeur,” or indeed the “très lent et inoubliable mouvement fugé sur lequel s’ouvre la quatorzième Quatuor de Beethoven.” These are surprisingly specific references. But, for Du Bos, this itemization of classical masterpieces is the best way to evoke Marius’s “unité de ton indissoluble, un accroissement, un enrichissement infiniment graduels des thèmes, la constante pénétration du passé dans le présent.” Here is a dedicated Paterian writing. Here, moreover, is a French critic writing in the year after Proust’s death in terms which we might almost
think appropriate to the achievement of *A la Recherche du temps perdu*. Some further explanation is obviously needed for this striking phenomenon.

In effect, Charles Du Bos, though born into a family of the Parisian *haute bourgeoisie* in 1882, was in no way a typical Frenchman. His father had married a Miss Johnston, British daughter of the President of the Westminster Bank whose own mother had been a native of New Orleans. We are told in a biographical study that Du Bos’s early precocity and bookishness as an adolescent indeed so troubled his wealthy and cosmopolitan parents that they sought “always to keep him away from any form of intellectual or philosophical excitation.” Consequently, and in accordance with his grandfather’s wise advice, the decision was taken to send him to Balliol College, Oxford, for a year from October 1900. Charles, surprisingly, did not react by falling into a state of mental torpor, but wrote home praising the talents of his tutor, “un homme tout à fait exquis.” Very soon he was also dipping into the book calculated to inspire young men with “exquisite passion”: Pater’s *Renaissance*. His first reaction was one of disenchantment. “Up to the present,” he wrote on 25 October, “Walter Pater does not seem to me to be a *grand esprit*: he is a fine and agreeable conversationalist, but that is all.” This premature judgement was based, admittedly, on a reading only of the first chapter. As Du Bos’s biographer has opined, his later ambition to write a thesis on Botticelli must have originated in a subsequent, more considered and comprehensive estimate of the book.

So Du Bos has become, by the 1920s, the perfect spokesman for Pater’s work as the new translations begin to appear in France: he has both the local experience and the command of English to speak with authority. Again Yourcenar is oddly sceptical about his knowledge of English literature. She writes in 1964 that “his England was that of Keats and George Eliot rather than that of Shakespeare.” It has hard to see the force of this distinction, since Du Bos certainly displays a knowledge of Shakespeare in his writings. But it is certainly the case that the poetic culture of the nineteenth century—Keats and Swinburne, but also Browning and Meredith—figures very strongly in the collection, the fourth series of *Approximations*, where the essay on *Marius* appears. Among the European authors who share Pater’s prominence as providing the material for individual essays are Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy, Stefan George, Maurice Baring and Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

It is this European breadth of reference that makes Du Bos’s essay on *Marius* particularly engaging. Du Bos is quite familiar with the judgement of Percy Lubbock on the problematic status of the work as a novel, and adopts Lubbock’s paradigm according to which *Marius* exists as a sequence of pure subjective impressions, at the other end of the scale from the exclusively dramatic form of James’s *The Awkward Age*. He discusses Pater’s concept of Epicureanism with reference to Meredith’s portrait of the “epicurean”
Adrian Harley in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*. But he also has in mind, in relation to the seriousness of Marius’s temperament, Gide’s construction of character in *Les Nourritures terrestres*. His conclusion is that Marius is the revelation of the “secret meaning” stored up in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*: it shows what it means “to maintain this ecstasy” in life. It is only necessary to quote the last lines of the essay, in order to indicate how perfect a priest Pater has become, in Du Bos’s estimation, for the religion of art:

Pater’s spirit is like one of those cathedrals that one enters at the fall of day, at the hour when no one is there any more, which then invade you with the feeling of some kind of crowded assembly; and Pater himself always moved forward in his spirit as one proceeds in a cathedral, with slow, hesitant and silent steps. *Marius the Epicurean* remains the great office that he celebrated, in a voice beyond reproach, each of whose inflections penetrates to the very heart of our most intimate retreats, and which seems always to evoke the apparition, on the altar, of the Holy Sacrament that it dares not set there itself.\(^\text{14}\)

It perhaps comes as a surprise to note that Du Bos was not just a failed mystic sounding off in solitude, but a habitué of fashionable literary salons, to which audience indeed the text included in *Approximations* (dated 10 February 1923) was originally delivered. The fact that such a discourse would have been so wildly out of place, say, in contemporary Bloomsbury is an indication of the rising fortunes experienced by one of Pater’s texts in interwar France, compared with his loss of authority in his native country.

That this prestige was not confined to the milieu of Catholic intellectuals soon to congregate around the Abbey of Pontigny is demonstrated by the rather differently expressed, but also revealing interest in Pater shown by Du Bos’s close friend and correspondent, André Gide. In an article written in 1942, Gide named *Marius* among the “pseudo-novels of genius” which break the rules of the genre: the others named are *Tristram Shandy*, *Pantagruel*, *Dead Souls*, *Grüne Heinrich* and *A la Recherche du temps perdu*.\(^\text{15}\) But Gide has another level of engagement with Pater’s writings on early Greek poetry, and it is evident that *Greek Studies*, which was not translated into French, kept him company in the summer of 1922, to the extent of making him “completely tipsy” (“complètement grisé”). On 4 August of that year, he wrote to his friend François-Paul Alibert: “I am thinking of you while I read Pater.” He goes on to praise his “excellent translation of the ‘Hymn to Demeter,’ whose every sentence I recognise, but whose beauty had never seemed more radiant to me. All pagan devotion breathes in it. It is more beautiful than the statues of the Parthenon; more beautiful than the Bible and everything beautiful man has produced on earth.”\(^\text{16}\) Eight years later, in a letter to the same correspondent, Gide is still urging the beauties of *Greek Studies* upon him. He writes from Normandy on 26 July 1930: “You will find
attached to this a page from Walter Pater’s *Greek Studies* that I amused myself in translating for you.”

I have no doubt that there is much more to be said about the reception of Pater in France in the interwar period, despite the initial impression given by the paucity of translations. No doubt this would clarify the context for the publication in French of one of the first and most exhaustive postwar studies of Pater’s work by Germain d’Hangest in 1961. But, given the limitations of this essay, I would prefer to end by saying something about an issue which still perplexes me, and hovers elusively around the material that I have been discussing: this is the possible connection between Pater’s work and another of those “pseudo-novels of genius” identified by Gide: Proust’s *A la Recherche du temps perdu*.

To repeat what is well-known, and what has been fully rehearsed in Tadié’s recent biography of Proust, there was certainly an indirect personal connection in the form of one of Proust’s close friends during the late 1890s: the aristocratic Scottish expatriate, Douglas Ainslie. This young man, a connection of Lord Byron through the Gordons of Gight, must have fitted the category of handsome, but not strikingly intellectual officer types featured in Proust’s life by figures like Comte Robert de Flers, and transposed into the Robert de Saint-Loup of his novel. Ainslie obviously has little real appreciation of the achievement of the mature Proust, whose style he compared to a “feather-bed” by contrast with that of Laclos, which is “the rapier that rips it.” But he values his friend’s conversation “which is rather like that of a man in a pleasant dream,” and refers to having experienced the periodic “unveiling [of] the secrets of his soul . . . between three and four of the morning.” In the late 1890s, when the young Proust was embarking tentatively on his forays into English literature, this Scottish expatriate’s companionship must have been indispensable.

Douglas Ainslie had been an undergraduate at Oxford, and had known Pater “better than Wilde,” as he later put it, though he also regretted not having seen more of him. He refers to Pater’s sister Hester as a “dear friend.” He seems to have championed the cause of Pater over his Oxford predecessor John Ruskin, and relates a significant conversation with Proust in which the antagonism rose clearly to the surface. “When I told [Proust] that Pater had said to me one day: ‘I don’t believe that Ruskin could have discovered more things than me in Saint Mark’s,’ he shrugged his shoulders and said: ‘Que voulez-vous, nous ne nous entendrons jamais sur la littérature anglaise.’”

This seems an unpromising start. But let us look more closely at the issue of Proust’s awareness of Pater’s writings. He must have read the original French version of *Imaginary Portraits*, translated and published in 1899. He refers in a note to his Translator’s Preface for the *Stones of Venice*, much of
which initially appeared as an article in 1900, to the depictions of Auxerre and Valenciennes in “Denys l’Auxerrois” and “A Prince of Court Painters” respectively. He also refers in the same note to the essays on Amiens and Vézelay, which he would presumably have had to consult in Nineteenth Century (March and June 1894), or in the collected English edition of Miscellaneous Studies (1895). His point that these are worth studying as “French landscapes as seen through English eyes”—comparable to the famous prints after the Rivers of France series by Turner—is a significant pointer to the role played in A la Recherche by the shifting patterns of images and place-names.22

But it may well be that Pater impressed Proust, not so much by the evidence of his writings as by the figure of the contemporary writer that he exemplified. Here we may suppose that Douglas Ainslie would not have been reticent in telling piquant anecdotes about the great man, as he was later to do as one of the informants for A. C. Benson’s monograph.23 We owe to Ainslie two revealing stories in particular. First, there is the tale of the missing exam scripts, and the vain attempt to recall them to Pater’s memory, which results only in the exclamation, after tentative mention is made of one undergraduate blessed with the surname “Sanctuary.” “What a beautiful and suggestive name!” remarked Pater. Secondly, there is the story of Pater’s commiseration with the young lady who had fainted at the sight of black beetles. He exclaimed on this occasion: “I wish to tell you that I have great sympathy with you in your misadventure, the more so as I have myself experienced the like sensation of pullulating horror when contemplating the innumerable stars of the Milky Way.”24 As Ainslie reasonably comments: “Pater alone was capable of such a phrase.”

It is perhaps a tedious critical occupation, overmuch favoured by a cluster of his past biographers, to trawl through the acquaintanceship of Proust searching for names to identify with the subtly composite creations that form his fictional characters. Nevertheless Proust was undoubtedly preoccupied, throughout the whole of his career, with the public image of the great artist, and how discordant it might turn out to be with the inflated persona cherished in the Romantic epoch. Bergotte, his exemplary artist in prose, is already well accounted for by resemblances to a number of real-life prototypes, including Anatole France. But I wonder if any of them fits quite so closely as Pater some of the striking phrases with which Proust epitomizes Bergotte in A l’Ombre de jeunes filles en fleurs: “Perhaps the more the great writer developed in Bergotte at the expense of the little man with a beard, the more his own personal life was drowned in the flood of all the lives that he imagined, until he no longer felt himself obliged to perform certain practical duties, for which he had substituted the duty of imagining those other lives.”25 “Imagining other lives” could not implausibly be regarded as code
for Imaginary Portraits, and “the little man with a beard” as a possible disguise for the heavily moustachioed figure that Proust could have found in the frontispiece to the Library edition of Greek Studies, as well as gleaned from the confidential descriptions of the irreverent Ainslie. The sheer neglect of worldly compromise, as a result of which the writer’s duty might become so exclusive in its tyranny as to exclude all practicalities, could hardly be conveyed more forcefully than by the story of those lost exam scripts, consigned to oblivion (it appears) whilst Pater pored over the manuscript of The Renaissance laid out on the table before him. 

Moreover, if Pater was alone of his contemporaries judged capable of the astounding simile which compares black beetles with the Milky Way, Proust will discover no less far-flung comparisons to bring into harmony the different orders of the natural world, as when he dilates on the sculptured coiffure of the footman at Madame de Sainte-Euverte’s reception. Such a prodigious object of attention: “[B]orrowed, as it were, from the whole of animate nature, that head of hair, by the glossy undulation and beak-like points of its curls, or in the superimposition of the florid triple diadem of its tresses, can suggest at once a bunch of seaweed, a brood of fledgling doves, a bed of hyacinths and a coil of snakes.” At the conclusion of the long passage from which I quoted earlier, Proust finally characterizes Bergotte as “[a]bove all a . . . man who in his heart of hearts only really loved certain images and (like a miniature set in the floor of a casket) composing and painting them in words.” At first sight, this seems a far cry from the priestly celebrant of the religion of art described by Charles Du Bos, but the two images of the artist represented in these passages could be said to come into phase in Pater, as they would also do, preeminently, in the case of Proust himself.