Walter Pater

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The Reception of Walter Pater in Germany and Austria

IT IS OFTEN ASSUMED that the reception of Pater in Europe was secondary to, or mediated via, the reception of the rather more flamboyant Oscar Wilde. Certainly the two were associated, but the fullest flowering of German essays and reviews of Wilde was in 1904–1905, which post-dates the first serious interest in Pater by more than a decade. Pater’s popularity in Germany and Austria can instead, I think, be accounted for with reference to a somewhat unlikely combination of three strands or trends: the first was the current of Aestheticism that ran through a certain kind of writing, partly as a reaction against a particularly virulent strain of Naturalism in German literature; the second was a penchant for things English in some of the social groups from which many of the important late nineteenth-century writers came; the third was a revival of interest in the Renaissance around the turn of the century, particularly in Austria. This essay will say a little about each of these strands as it progresses, but it is important to begin by noting that all three met in 1890 in a single individual, a teenager by the name of Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

Hofmannsthal was an Austrian poet, dramatist and essayist—best known outside the German-speaking world as the librettist of six of Richard Strauss’s operas, including Elektra and Der Rosenkavalier—and was an important catalyst in Pater’s German-language reception. Hofmannsthal knew Pater’s name by late 1892, and began reading Pater seriously just before he turned twenty, early in 1894, when he was lent copies of The Renaissance and Imaginary Portraits by a friend, the Princess Cantacuzène. Almost immediately he ordered a copy of Marius the Epicurean, asked around if Pater was still alive (he was, just), and whether his friend had actually met him. What he praised in a letter to Elsa Cantacuzène was the extraordinary refinement of Pater’s style. Hofmannsthal was astonished that anyone could write about art and criticism with such precision. In another letter, this time to the critic Hermann Bahr, he recommends Pater on the relationship of painting and music in the Giorgione essay, in which Pater defines his terms (in a manner
that Hofmannsthal finds deliberately and pleasingly elitist) “besser, als wir es je in einem Dictionnaire zustande brächten” [“better than we could ever manage in any dictionary”]. Hofmannsthal quoted at length, in his own translation, from the Leonardo essay in a piece he wrote on modern English painting in June 1894, and wrote an essay dedicated to Pater that appeared in November of the same year, about which more below.

Hofmannsthal’s interest did not wane. In a review of a contemporary German poet written early in 1896, he refers to Pater as “der große englische Kritiker” [“the great English critic”], and in 1898 he is still insistent that “unter die Bücher, die mir großen Eindruck gemacht haben, gehören vor allem noch die von Walter Pater” [“amongst the books that have made the greatest impression on me, those of Walter Pater are especially important”].

In 1900, in an otherwise rather depressed letter about Aestheticism to the diplomat Count Harry Kessler, Baudelaire and Pater are singled out as the only ones to have said anything still worth remembering; Pater seems to have been more memorable in this context than Baudelaire, to judge by another compliment paid to Imaginary Portraits in a letter to Kessler from 1903.

This rush of enthusiasm needs a little contextualization. Hofmannsthal may now be most familiar for his collaboration with Strauss, but in the early 1890s he was known as the author of poems and lyrical dramas of almost uncanny beauty and facility; he was a boy genius, a Viennese poetic prodigy, quite literally tipped to be the new Goethe. He devoured literature—Latin, Greek, French and English in the original, Russian and Spanish in translation. When he died in 1929, his obituaries described him plausibly as the most widely-read man in Europe. Whether these tributes are literally true or not, Hofmannsthal was without doubt exceptionally receptive, exceptionally discriminating, and exceptionally influential. In 1894, when he wrote his essay on Pater for the major Viennese newspaper, Die Zeit [“The Times”] he was only twenty but already a respected arbiter of taste—“daß ich über Pater für die ‘Zeit’ ausführlich schreibe, ist selbstverständlich” [“of course I’m going to write about Pater for Die Zeit”], he wrote to Bahr, certain of Pater’s importance, and certain of his suitability to convey this. At this point The Renaissance had not been translated, so Hofmannsthal’s role in its transmission to German-speaking audiences is especially significant.

Hofmannsthal took Pater very seriously as an art critic, and when asked to recommend some books on art history in 1896 he named only Pater and Burckhardt. The essay on Pater is one of the rare occasions that Hofmannsthal wrote about art criticism, as opposed to reviewing exhibitions or assessing artists directly. This essay contains, therefore, some important reflections on the relationship of the critic and the artist, and these colored Hofmannsthal’s thinking for the rest of his life. In the essay on his contempo-
rary Stefan George in which Pater is referred to as “the great English critic,” Hofmannsthal develops the idea that the function of criticism is as a necessary complement to the business of art: art is impenetrable, but criticism is the form in which we pleasurably encircle and receive or learn from art. His vocabulary in this essay is almost erotic, and it has several times been pointed out that he seems to echo “Pater’s statements on the importance of criticism as a form of sensuous response to aesthetic creation.”

When Pater writes in the Preface to The Renaissance that “what is important...is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects,” Hofmannsthal enacts this conception of criticism in his essay. Pater says the critic must ask “in whom did the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period find itself? Where was the receptacle of its refinement, its elevation, its taste?”—and Hofmannsthal took him literally, writing to his friend to say, “[ich] hoffe, mich an dem Pater in den wenigen Augenblicken, die mir jetzt das Lernen übrigläßt, zu erfreuen, um so mehr, als meine ganze innere Entwicklung . . . gerade jetzt auf die Renaissance, ja geradezu auf Leonardo stark und verlangend hindrängt” [“In the few moments that I have spare from my exam revision, I hope to be able to enjoy the Pater you sent me, the more so since the whole of my innermost development is compelling me towards the Renaissance, to Leonardo in particular and most urgently”].

Hofmannsthal’s essay devoted to Pater was originally published under a pseudonym—Archibald O’Hagan, B.A., from the Old Rookery, Herfordshire [sic]—and although this was not the usual pseudonym that Hofmannsthal used (he preferred “Loris”), it will not have taken long for the real identity of the author to emerge. The essay discusses The Renaissance, Imaginary Portraits and Marius the Epicurean and focuses on Pater’s admirable understanding of the special way in which artists participate in life. Hofmannsthal is also impressed by the way in which Pater locates a critical ability in a certain temperament rather than in the possession of any abstract conceptualization of what art is or is not. The perfect critic—Pater, but also by implication a status to which Hofmannsthal aspires himself—is “in love with” the artist, in the same way that the artist is “in love with” life; in other words Hofmannsthal expounds a quasi-erotic triangular relationship between life, the artist and the critic. He says that Pater’s critical gift is an empathetic ability to proceed from the one telling detail to the instinctive grasp of the whole, and by removing the faculty of reason from the process, he firmly locates criticism within the realm of the artistic endeavor itself.

Hofmannsthal is so convinced of his own role in the trend he sees Pater as having inaugurated that he is in effect attempting to become Pater: Hofmannsthal the critic is empathetically entering into Pater the object of criti-
cism, just as Hofmannsthal sees Pater the critic as having entered into the Renaissance artists or the Imaginary Portraits that are the objects of his criticism. The anglo-Irish pseudonym of Archibald O’Hagan, the telling little detail of the “B.A.” as if he has recently graduated from Oxford, and the genteel rural English address in Hertfordshire, are part of the empathetic critical procedure. This need to enter in is partly straightforward anglophilic enthusiasm, but it is also crucially an expression of how Hofmannsthal felt the aesthetic and intellectual currents of his own place and time were moving: Vienna at the turn of the century has often been analyzed as a passive rather than an active culture, receptive rather than innovative, conscious of being at the end of a tradition rather than creative of a new one. What Martina Lauster calls “the impressionistic current of the day, the morbid desire to receive sensuous messages through aesthetic codes rather than to be creative” is “at its core, a critical current and therefore finds its embodiment nowhere more significant than in the person of the prominent English critic [Pater].”

It is quite characteristic of the young Hofmannsthal to want to have his cake and eat it. The Pater essay both celebrates and condemns Aestheticism. Elsewhere—in diary notes above all—Hofmannsthal is keen to distinguish Pater from the more reprehensible, even dangerous manifestations of English Aestheticism (especially Wilde). In the essay, though, he also records some disquiet about Pater himself and “the potentially damaging influence of aestheticism on modern culture.” The ideal of criticism that he derives from reading The Renaissance is shown to be perfectly appropriate for its proper sphere, reflections on aesthetic individuals, either real or imagined. Yet towards the end of the essay, Hofmannsthal uses a radically boiled-down summary of Marius to demonstrate that as a philosophy of life it is inadequate.

This was not the end of Hofmannsthal’s response to Pater, which was always complex and ambivalent. He applied a technique he found in Pater—of identifying a single motif or characteristic and distilling from it an appreciation of the whole—in an important speech made in 1905 on Shakespeare’s kings and noblemen. A little later he was to read the essay “Diaphaneité” and use its ideas in a fictional dialogue about Goethe’s Torquato Tasso. Later still he used Greek Studies in his work on Pentheus and Ariadne. The full range of Hofmannsthal’s interest in Pater and the effects of this reading on his own work have been studied in detail by Ulrike Stamm.

Hofmannsthal was effectively the starting point for serious Pater reception in the German-speaking world, but he was not alone. The fashion for Englishness manifested itself in all sorts of ways, but its importance for literature was a particular interest in the form of the critical essay which Hofmannsthal was felt to have advanced, and to have done so because of his
interest in Pater. In the first decade of the twentieth century the essay was felt to be undergoing a revival in Germany. In 1912, Ernst Robert Curtius, a brilliant critic and essayist himself, singled out Pater alongside Hermann Grimm and Rudolf Kassner as essayists of what he called the “unmetaphysical” kind, uninterested in philosophical systems and preferring instead to devote their energies to understanding, capturing, empathizing with the subject of the essay—and this appreciation is contained in a letter to Georg Lukács.²² Lukács’s view of Kassner was that he did not so much create figures as re-create them—in Lukács’s words, “for Goethe there was no need for an Egmont or a Tasso actually to have existed, nor did Mary Stuart have to exist for Swinburne, but in the works of the Platonist Walter Pater Watteau takes on an intense existence before our eyes. The Platonist”—and he includes Pater and Kassner here—“must live through the lives of others in order to speak of himself.”²³ Both Curtius and Lukács are writing of the revival of the essay in German, and when Rudolf Borchardt writes that “der Wiederaufbau der deutschen Prosa durch Hofmannsthal ist ohne ihn [Pater] nicht denkbar” [“the complete reconstruction of German prose writing by Hofmannsthal is inconceivable without Pater”], he is not exaggerating.²⁴

Rudolf Borchardt himself was another admirer of Pater, inspired directly by his “hero,” Hofmannsthal. He was an odd figure, very much an outsider in the complex social world that surrounded the major literary figures of the time, an exponent of cultural renewal in Europe through the revivification of the Classical past, but an ardent admirer of Hofmannsthal, and an anglophile. On his first meeting with Hofmannsthal (in February 1902) he gave him a copy of his “Gespräch über Formen” [“Dialogue on Forms”] which he said owed much to the ideas revealed in Hofmannsthal’s essay on Pater. It is a conversation that takes place in a German town between two young men, Arnold—who has just translated Plato’s Lysis—and his pupil Harry, who has spent some time in Oxford. Arnold’s translation has aimed to seize the spirit rather than the letter of Plato’s original. He says he is opposed to the current state of German Classical scholarship, which he finds dry and academically isolated rather than suffused with tradition and the stuff of everyday conversation amongst the educated classes as it is in England. The model of the classical scholar is not Wilamowitz but Pater, and his Greek Studies are always open on Arnold’s desk beside his copy of Plato. Arnold calls the Lysis “ein Gedicht . . . obwohl es nicht in Versen geschrieben ist” [“a poem, even though it is not written in verse”], and Harry needs to be taken gently through an appreciation both of Hofmannsthal’s merits as a poet (one of the “vier oder fünf Dichter, die es heute gibt”²⁵ [“one of the four or five true poets that there are today”]) and of Pater’s as a critic before he can fully understand this paradoxical designation.
There is much overt anglophilia in this dialogue, some of it almost clichéd. When Harry admires Arnold's tea-making palaver at the beginning, Arnold responds to the effect that “Tee machen, Tennis spielen und Tanzen sind die drei einzigen Kulthandlungen, die uns in dieser götterlosen Zeit geblieben sind” [“making tea, playing tennis and dancing are the only three ritualistic activities that have persisted in this godless age”]. The ethos of nineteenth-century Oxford is crucial to the atmosphere between the interlocutors in this little German town: when Arnold reads out an extended passage from *Greek Studies*, Harry reminisces, saying,

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\text{ganz Oxford spricht mit, Brasenose, das alte Quadrangle mit dem Efeu, der so dick ist wie Pelz, das steinerne Barock der Kapelle, seine [Paters] eigenen grüngetafelten Zimmer. Und welch beispiellose Einigkeit von allem dem, was er da über eine griechische Statue gesagt hat, mit seinem eigenen Wesen und dem seines Volkes.... Und zwischen diesem allem und der nationalen Vergangenheit, der keltisch gefärbten und der renaissancehaft glänzenden, kein Bruch.}
\]

[the whole of Oxford is in these words, Brasenose, the old quad with its ivy thick as fur, the stone Baroque chapel, Pater’s own felt-lined room. And what matchless unity there is between everything he has said about a Greek statue and his own being, and the essence of his people. There is no discontinuity between all this and the past of his nation, the Celtic echoes and the Renaissance splendour.]

In other words, there is a whole cascade of empathetic correspondences:

Pater’s unique translation of Greek sculpture into English prose, which is possible because the classical legacy is incorporated into England’s national tradition, sets the example for Arnold’s / Borchardt’s translation of Plato by embracing the form of *Lysis*, that is to say, conversation, and for Borchardt’s “Gespräch über Formen” which embraces both form and content of *Lysis* on the one hand and the Platonic spirit of Oxford on the other.

This spirit is one in which tutor and student can take tea together as friends, which relationship is an image of the love the man Hippothales in the Platonic dialogue bears for the boy Lysis. Pater’s essential merit is underlined by Harry towards the end of this speech of praise: “Sie übertreiben sehr oft, Arnold, aber ich glaube, Sie hatten recht, als Sie sagten, daß dieser Mensch den Sinn des Lebens gehabt habe” [“you very often exaggerate, Arnold, but I think you were right when you said that this man possessed the sense, the very meaning of life”].

Like Hofmannsthal, Borchardt was to retain his respect for Pater, and in 1939 published a long essay in commemoration of Pater’s 100th birthday. It is a hagiography that becomes slightly cloying in parts, but it is nonetheless worth quoting the last few lines because they make a substantial claim:

Denn durch ihn [Pater] vor allem ist unserem formflüchtigen Volk die Form wieder zu einer Ordnung des Innern geworden ... und die Erinnerung daran, daß ein Heiligtum unserer klassischen Literatur, das Denkmal von Hofmannsthals Kreuzwege zu Walter Paters Ziele ... Philip Chandos’ Brief an Bacon—als Form ohne
The letter from Philip Chandos to Lord Bacon is a fictional one written by Hofmannsthal in 1902 and has ever since been regarded as one of the most important paradigms for the crisis in consciousness and language that became Modernism. It is a text whose importance is hard to overstate, and to attribute its existence to the influence of Pater is a bold but not wholly implausible claim.

Hofmannsthal and Borchardt were reading Pater in English. The next phase in Pater reception came with the translations and the several influences of the translators, the publishers and the reviewers. In this field, it was the Insel-Verlag that played an important part in disseminating Pater’s works and influence. As early as April 1901 the periodical simply known as Die Insel ("The Island"), published a translation of the Leonardo essay from The Renaissance by Franz Blei—a noted anglophile who later translated works by Ernest Dowson. The July 1902 issue contained an essay by Arthur Symons, entitled “Walter Pater,” in German but with no indication of the identity of the translator. This was reprinted after the closure of the periodical in the first of the same publisher’s series of annual almanacs, the Insel-Almanach auf das Jahr 1906 which appeared in 1905 in Leipzig. “The Child in the House” appeared with Insel in 1903, translated by Felix Hübel, who also translated the whole of Imaginary Portraits that was published by Insel in the same year. Marius the Epicurean appeared in two volumes in 1908, translated by Felix Paul Greve. Greve was an interesting figure, known as a translator principally for his fifteen or so volumes of works by Oscar Wilde and a version of the 1001 Nights. He was a friend, too, of the poet Stefan George, who acted as a kind of translation consultant for him in the early 1900s. Felix Paul Greve is apparently the same person as Frederick Philip Grove, who achieved some fame as an English-language author in Canada. As a translator he was responsible for bringing to the attention of the twentieth-century German public authors as diverse as Pater, Wilde, Dowson and Browning on the one hand, and Gide, Meredith and H. G. Wells on the other.
The Insel-Verlag was also responsible for associating Pater in Germany with *Jugendstil*, which is roughly the same as what is usually called *Art Nouveau* in the English-speaking world. The Hübel translation of “The Child in the House” has a binding, frontispiece and initials by Heinrich Vogeler, a noted book illustrator who also produced delicate but intense frontispieces for Hofmannsthal’s dramas. Whether it is quite appropriate for Pater to be associated with this artistic movement is another question, although the desire to integrate him into contemporary German artistic thinking is a constant in his reception at this period.

The most famous of the translations, however, *The Renaissance* appeared in German in 1902—*Die Renaissance: Studien in Kunst und Poesie*—had a different publisher, Eugen Diederichs in Leipzig. Diederichs was the publisher in the early 1900s of Rudolf Kassner’s translations of Plato, and in 1900 of his book *Die Mystik, die Künstler und das Leben [Mysticism, Artists and Life]*, subtitled “On English Poets and Painters in the 19th Century,” and as Kassner himself readily admitted, inspired by Hofmannsthal’s essays on the subject. The book explores the notion of criticism as art (citing Pater as one of the major exponents of this tradition), and includes essays on Pre-Raphaelitism, Rossetti, Swinburne and Burne-Jones. The last essay in the book, entitled “Der Stil” (“Style”), and thus echoing the essay by Pater at the beginning of *Appreciations*, is like Borchardt’s a dialogue, this time between Walter, a young German, and Ralph, an Oxford undergraduate. The name Walter is obviously a gesture towards Pater, and Ralph is probably a similar gesture towards Emerson (just as Arnold in Borchardt’s dialogue may have been a hint at Matthew Arnold). What principally distinguishes this from Hofmannsthal’s or Borchardt’s writing is that Kassner sees the critical or the Platonic as essentially German rather than English, which is yet another stage in the “integrative” response of German-speaking authors to the English critic.

The translator of Pater’s *Renaissance* was Wilhelm Schölermann, who did a version of Emerson’s essays in the same year and one of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* a year later. He also went on to translate travel writing by Arthur Symons and Wilde’s *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Interestingly, in view of the vogue for Englishness, he also published books on modern garden design, based on English models. It was Schölermann’s translation of *The Renaissance* that started the second phase of Pater reception, and it was originally intended as a pendant to the Diederichs edition of Ruskin. The translator’s introduction to Pater’s book echoes something of Hofmannsthal’s attitude to Pater by claiming that it is a book for the few, presupposing as it does a finesse of sensation and a breadth of knowledge that the masses will simply not possess.
This elitist stance is gently questioned at the end of an influential review of the book published in a Bremen newspaper in July 1902. The reviewer hopes instead that the book might awaken the consciousness of some of the “many” and make them realize that they, too, can belong to the “few.” The reviewer was none other than Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke had long been interested in the Italian Renaissance, as his diaries and the collections of poetry *Das Stundenbuch* [The Book of Hours] and *Neue Gedichte* [New Poems] clearly show. He begins the review by noting how fruitful the combination of the Italian and the English has been, both in the person of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and this book of essays. Not unlike Borchardt, he counterposes the worthy but dry historiographical approach to the Renaissance with Pater’s empathetic procedure: “Es steht auch gar nicht in der Macht des Historikers,” he says,

uns Erscheinungen wie die eines Botticelli, eines Giorgione oder Lionardo näherzurücken; denn es gilt nicht so sehr, sie aus dem Dunkel ihrer Zeit auszulösen, als vielmehr, in der Dämmerung ihrer Seele nach ihnen zu suchen und durch ein tiefes, von allen Zufälligkeiten befreites Erforschen und Lieben ihrer Werke jene intimen Wege zu ihrem Wesen zu gehen, die auch der besten Gelehrsamkeit immer verschlossen bleiben.³⁹ [It is simply not in the power of the historian to bring into genuine proximity such phenomena as Botticelli, Giorgione or Leonardo. It is not so much a question of detaching them from the obscure background of their age, as of searching for them within the twilight of their own souls, and of treading the intimate paths towards their essence by probing their works deeply, without being distracted by superficialities, and by loving them, a process which is not open even to the best of scholarship.]

Again taking his cue from Pater himself, Rilke argues that the masters of the Renaissance can only be approached by sensing—he uses the mysterious and evocative word “ahnen”—the secrets of their art, which in turn is predicated upon being clear in ourselves about our own need for art, about what it can give us and about, when and why we need it.⁴⁰

A short passage in a recent book on Rilke by Judith Ryan convincingly argues that elements of his first major success—a prose poem called *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke* [The Lay of Love and Death of the Cornet Christoph Rilke], first composed in 1899 and revised for publication in 1904—that vignettes in this work echo specific examples of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism. Moreover, Professor Ryan sees in the *Cornet* a precise affinity with Pater’s concept of the “aesthetic poet” as applied to Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Rossetti and Morris, according to Pater, share as their leading sentiment “the continual suggestion, pensive or passionate, of the shortness of life. This is contrasted with the bloom of the world, and gives new seduction to it—the sense of death and the desire of beauty: the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death.”⁴¹ This, too, is the essence of Rilke’s *Cornet*. Ryan cites Carolyn Williams on Pater’s “aesthetic historicism” and
“the process of secularization that has intervened between the Middle Ages and his own time, so that religion is now displaced into a sense for the aesthetic object. ‘Aesthetic poetry’ is more aware than its predecessors of the loss this shift has involved: a loss, primarily, of direct sensory contact with the world.” This is one of Rilke’s most important themes, developed independently of Pater, but reinforced by his reading of his writings.

Like Hofmannsthal, Rilke was to retain his interest in Pater for a while, getting hold of a copy of Imaginary Portraits the following year. He wrote to Schölermann that the essays on Leonardo, Luca della Robbia and Gior­gione “bleiben dem Wenigen zugezählt, was ich immer wieder lesen werde, sobald eine stille Stunde kommt, die nach eines guten Buches Stimme verlangt” [“remain amongst those very few things that I shall read again and again as soon as there is a quiet moment that demands the voice of a good book”]. Ryan suggests plausibly that a passage in one of the Duineser Ele­gien [Duino Elegies] describing “the continual interchange between one human being and another, between human beings and nature, human beings and the space in which angels move . . . reads like a modification of Walter Pater’s contention [in The Renaissance]: ‘That clear, perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours.’” Whether or not Rilke had Pater in mind is not provable, and I suspect also echoes here of Ernst Mach’s influential writings on identity and the perception of identity, but Rilke is here certainly swimming in the river fed by the streams of both Mach and Pater.

Walter Pater was thus read and appreciated by some of the most influential writers and thinkers of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany and Austria. In some cases this was because he offered a model for a new and sympathetic form of criticism that reinforced their hostility to the empiricist or Naturalist styles of writing so pervasive in the 1880s and 1890s; in others it was because he was felt to reinforce a strong movement in this direction that the writers concerned had already taken. An outline essay such as this can hardly hope to give more than a taste of the major trends, but if it stimulates further study into such an important strand of the development of aestheticism and modernism in German-speaking Europe, it will more than fulfil its aim.