Walter Pater

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Physiology, Mesmerism, and Walter Pater’s “Susceptibilities to Influence”

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All acts of thought are either immediately or remotely dependent on sensations; and, if all their inlets were closed from the first, the mind would remain dormant, like the seed buried in the deep earth.

W. B. Carpenter

WALTER PATER uses strikingly dynamic terms to describe the nature of aesthetic objects. In the “Preface” to The Renaissance he asserts that the “objects with which aesthetic criticism deals—music, poetry, artistic and accomplished forms of human life—are indeed receptacles of so many powers or forces” (Ren/H xix). Pater elaborates, “The aesthetic critic, then, regards all the objects with which he has to do . . . as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations . . . . This influence he feels, and wishes to explain, by analysing and reducing it to its elements.” This language of “forces” and “receptacles,” of “powers” and “influence,” is not purely metaphoric, simply alluding to an unknowable process whereby an aesthetic object (“all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life” [Ren/H xx]) produces an impression of pleasure for us. In this essay, I will argue that Pater’s scientific vocabulary is appropriated from and a response to nineteenth-century discussions of the mechanisms of influence, and in particular to the debates around mesmerism and to the emerging discourse of physiology, which brought great public attention to these topics. In texts such as “The Child in the House” and Marius the Epicurean Pater is himself staking out a position within the highly contested discourse about reception and influence. The investigations of the mesmerists and physiologists suggest that aesthetic experience—in Pater’s words, being “under [the] influence” of “the picture, the landscape, the engaging personality in life or in a book” (Ren/H xx)—presents the risk of a complete loss of autonomy and self-control, of being reduced to a “mere puppet” “to be pulled by suggesting-strings.” I will analyze Pater’s writing, especially in “The Child in the House,” as efforts to
imagine a heightened reception of aesthetic experience in ways that do not entail a loss of critical self-consciousness.

Pater likens the critic’s work to that of the chemist:

the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced. His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue, and noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element, for himself and others. (Ren/H xx–xxi)

Unlike the chemist, however, who observes dispassionately the reaction of one element with another, the aesthetic critic analyzes the effects of “a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book” on his or her own self. What is most important therefore is that the critic be capable of receiving, and of being acted upon by, these powers and forces of both natural and human origin. Pater states that “a certain kind of temperament” is necessary: “the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects” (Ren/H xxi). In Marius the Epicurean, which presents the Bildung, the formation and education of a young man, Pater states that paideia, “a complete education,” is “directed especially to the expansion and refinement of the power of reception,” and he describes the ideal of “refining all the instruments of inward and outward reception . . . till one’s whole nature be[co]me[s] one complex medium of reception” (ME 1: 147, 143). Pater’s writings are explorations of the mechanisms and effects of the reception of art.

The key question for the scientist is, what are the underlying rules that govern these forces or reactions; for the aesthetic critic, in contrast, the essential question is, “How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?” (Ren/H xx). The reception of the aesthetic object is not primarily a matter of registering its force, like a seismograph (if that were the case, sensation novels would be the highest form of literature for Pater), or of gaining a complete knowledge of its form, its elements, and its sources, but rather of undergoing its influence. Speculation about what is, and what should be the influence of art underlies Pater’s writing.

Pater’s first book, The Renaissance, is a study of powers of influence, and the Renaissance is itself characterized as a series of instances of undergoing and transmitting influences that have survived the passing of their first appearance.² The focus on the creators of art, more than on the reception of special impressions of beauty and pleasure (with the exception of the concluding essay on Winckelmann), provides few direct answers, however, to the question, “What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me?” (Ren/H xix–xx). After publishing The Renaissance, Pater turns to imaginary portraiture to develop all that is at play in
undergoing the influences of art, especially for someone other than an artist. “The Child in the House” lays bare the preliminary stage for exploring the influences of works of art: it traces a chain of sensations and accidents that almost “mechanically determine” the sensibility that the child develops and carries on into adulthood, and it details the first impressions of light and color that awaken a “desire of physical beauty” (MS 179, 189). Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas, taking off from where “The Child in the House” concludes, explores the radical possibility that the self’s “seemingly active powers of apprehension were, in fact, but susceptibilities to influence” (ME 2: 68), and considers at great length where one might be led—or how one might be misled—by the influences one receives. The fictional, narrative form of these works provides the freedom, without being bound by the historical record, to explore all the sensations produced by the reception of aesthetic objects, to analyze what is involved in being “under the influence” of an artwork, and to speculate about the temporal dimensions of influence by tracing all the lingering effects of an experience.

Before examining further Pater’s explorations of the reception and the influence of art, I want to bring out some of the tensions that structure the discourse around influence. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there is a deep concern that susceptibility to the powers of art may be dangerous, unhealthy, and a sign of degeneracy. These debates about the malevolent influence of art are a stage in a larger discussion of the nature of influence throughout the century that engages essential questions concerning the forms of authority and the sources of cohesion in society, the modes of cultural transmission, and the relation of mind and body. Nietzsche, at about the same time that Pater was composing the essays of The Renaissance, poses the question (in On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life, published in 1874) of what it might mean for “[t]he most astonishing works” to have “an influence in the true sense—an influence on life and action.” Nietzsche disparages the historical critics of his era, claiming: “The most astonishing works may be created; the swarm of historical neuters will always be in their place, ready to consider the author through their long telescopes. . . . The historical training of our critics prevents their having an influence in the true sense—an influence on life and action.” It is not only these historically minded critics, however, who resist undergoing the influence of astonishing works. Most academic critics today, for example, are loath to admit being “under the influence” of an artwork, as that would undercut their critical authority and autonomy. There is necessarily a tension, if not a power struggle, in the intersubjective relationship of influence.4

The fear of being influenced—of giving oneself up to the power and the suggestions of another—is common in late nineteenth-century literature.
Lord Henry Wotton expresses such concerns in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

“All influence is immoral—immoral from the scientific point of view.”

“Why?” [asks Dorian]

“Because to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of some one else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him.”

Yet Lord Henry later states, “There was something terribly entralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it.” Is influence always a matter of making someone else one’s “thrall,” a person in bondage to another? Or is it only in extreme and perverse instances that influence involves the domination of one person by another? Wilde’s book repeatedly poses such questions. The larger issue here and elsewhere is not whether a particular work of art (or in Pater’s words, “this engaging personality presented in life or in a book”—Pater continually blurs the line between life and art) has a good or bad influence on others, but whether the state of being susceptible to the influence of art is in itself good or bad, a healthy or an unhealthy condition.

Max Nordau in his lengthy study of degeneration diagnoses all the maladies that are involved in or result from being susceptible to the influence of modern art, but we also see such concerns in many works of art, such as in Tolstoy’s “The Kreutzer Sonata.” The central character Pózdnyshev explains: “Music makes me forget myself, my real position; it transports me to some other position not my own. Under the influence of music it seems to me that I feel what I do not really feel, that I understand what I do not understand, that I can do what I cannot do.” In this story, music certainly has a strong effect on “life and action”; the character claims that this experience of being transported out of his usual self destabilizes his life and sets forth a chain of events that leads him to murder his wife (and the courts find him not guilty of murder). Should we read this effect of music (“it transports me to some other position not my own”) as synonymous with Pater’s notion of “being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects”? And does “being moved” therefore entail a loss of “my real position”?

Tolstoy’s character invokes hypnosis to convey the influence that music has on him: “How can one allow anyone who pleases to hypnotize another, or many others, and do what he likes with them? . . . It [music] is a terrifying instrument in the hands of any chance user!” The effect of art is compared directly to the process of hypnosis, in which people lose self-consciousness and control of their thoughts and actions, and respond to the suggestions of another. The mention of hypnosis is not an incidental metaphor; the reception of music was often likened to a mesmeric process at this time. More gen-
erally, debates about mesmerism, animal magnetism, somnambulism, and later hypnosis were the primary staging ground for discussions about the nature and propriety of influence in the hundred years after Anton Mesmer brought his theory and practice of animal magnetism to Paris in 1778. Both scientists and the public were fascinated by the notion of an invisible force, similar to gravity or magnetism, that could be used to put people in a trance-like state with apparently curative powers, in which they were often impervious to sensation (anesthesia) or on the contrary extremely responsive to sensation (hyperesthesia), in which they were highly suggestible, and in which they even became, according to many accounts, clairvoyant.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the power of art is frequently described in similar terms, and with similar anxieties about loss of will, hysteria, falling under the domination of a charlatan, and becoming part of an unthinking crowd. George du Maurier’s *Trilby* provides a stark example, in which music not only has a mesmerizing effect on others, but in which the production of the most sublime music itself depends on the singer (Trilby, now known as La Svengali) being in a mesmeric trance, completely under the influence of Svengali. Great art, which provides in du Maurier’s words “that heavenly glimpse beyond the veil,” is inextricably linked to suggestibility, loss of autonomy, and being under the influence of another, and the effects can be deadly: Trilby quickly fades away and dies when she is no longer able to return to the mesmeric state, after the death of Svengali.

I do not have the space to explore in detail the trajectory of the debates about influence that proceed from the fascination with mesmerism in the 1830s and 1840s to the anxieties about the influence of art in the latter part of the century. Here I can only suggest that a topic central to aesthetic criticism—the modes and effects of reception and influence—needs to be understood in relation to this context. From the moment that mesmerism first became a fascinating and controversial topic for the Victorians (typically, it was the arrival of a French mesmerist in 1837, Charles Dupotet, that sparked the excitement), it quickly generated both public fascination and scientific debate, and was of major interest to many of the leading cultural figures of the day. Harriet Martineau, for example, underwent a mesmeric cure and became an advocate of mesmerism, claiming that she was able to experience a state of “translucent intellectuality... in which all things seemed to become clear,” and that through a “natural influence”—“the direct action of a force of nature on her nervous system”—the “physiological capabilities of the brain can be enhanced.” Jane Carlyle was mesmerized (though she did not let the people watching know that she could not resist the mesmerist’s powers); Dickens and Wilkie Collins experimented in mesmerism; and Thackeray dedicated *Pendennis* to his doctor, John Elliotson, who was the leading proponent of mesmerism (and who was forced to
resign his post as professor of medicine at London University because of his refusal to give up its practice). One can find examples of the language of mesmerism in many letters of the time, such as when Elizabeth Barrett describes her first meeting with Robert Browning in “strikingly mesmeric terms”: “I felt as if you had a power over me & meant to use it, & that I could not breathe or speak very differently from what you chose to make me.” 15

The debates about mesmerism and the influence of art center around the possibility and the desirability of being overpowered by the suggestions of another.

In response to the phenomena of mesmerism, which suggest a vast potential power for the doctor—or for the artist—to lead or to mislead others, there quickly developed a scientific discourse that sought to provide alternate explanations for these forms of influence. The work of British physiologists from W. B. Carpenter in the 1850s to T. H. Huxley in the 1860s and 1870s is also an attempt to understand mesmerism, somnambulism, and electro-biology (in the terms used by their proponents) or unconscious cerebration, suggestion, and reflex action in the vocabulary promoted by the physiologists, and to subject these processes to the forces of discipline, training, and voluntary control. Carpenter, the leading physiologist of his generation, radically revised and expanded his best-selling Principles of Human Physiology in the 1850s to explain “The peculiar states which are known under the designations of Somnambulism, Hypnotism, Mesmerism, Electro-Biology, etc.” and he extended the notion of reflex action to processes of unconscious and automatic thought in an effort to throw “considerable light upon the nature of these aberrant forms of psychical action.” 16 The crux of his physiology of mind becomes the exploration of “ideo-motor” reflex actions and the delineation of aberrant from normal forms of automatic, unconscious thought. 17 The physiologists, in other words, are also responding to the question of what it is to be “under the influence,” and are developing theories of the mind in order to explain rather than to reject altogether any evidence that challenges the autonomy and supremacy of consciousness.

I want to follow a little further this particular thread of the debates around notions of influence—the physiological theories of the nervous system and the brain that were developed in part to explain the mesmeric effects of unconscious action and thought in response to the suggestions of another—since I will read Pater’s “The Child in the House” as undertaking a related investigation. 18 In “The Child in the House” Pater, like the physiologists, explores the pathway from sensation and impression to idea and emotion, and from external stimulus to internal awareness, and he is especially keen at noting the ways in which an initial sensory impression determines the pattern for later experience. The “accident, or trick, in the mode of their first entrance to us” leaves an indelible mark and creates the mold for the fu-
ture: “giving form and feature, and as it were assigned house-room in our memory, to early experiences of feeling and thought, which abide with us ever afterwards, thus, and not otherwise” (MS 177).

For both Walter Pater and the physiologists, the brain is something that is built, that is formed by outside influences and shaped by the habits of association imprinted in our early years. Carpenter writes that “All acts of thought are either immediately or remotely dependent on sensations . . . The activity of the mind is just as much the consequence of external faculties by which its impressions are called into play, as is the life of the body”;19 he gives the factors “which unmistakeably indicate the influence of physical conditions in the determination of mental states”; and he provides “the explanation of all that automatic action of the Mind, which consists in the succession of ideas, according to certain ‘laws of thought,’ without the exercise of any control or direction on the part of the individual to whose consciousness they present themselves.”20 Pater also portrays a state of early receptivity (“he saw a child moving, and could divide the main streams at least of the winds that had played on him, and study so the first stage in that mental journey” [MS 173–74]); he invokes “the law which makes the material objects about them so large an element in children’s lives” (and the process by which the “sensible vehicle or occasion became . . . the necessary concomitant of any perception of things” [MS 186]); and he describes the ways in which “accidents like those I have been speaking of so mechanically determine” (MS 179) our instincts.

Carpenter, however, distinguishes an “earlier period of our lives,” in which “our characters have been formed for us, rather than by us,” from a later period, “when each Ego may take in hand the formation of his own character.”21 He asserts that the “Ego . . . can turn to his own account the automatic activity of the cerebrum, regulating and directing the succession of his thoughts, the play of his emotions” (even though the “succession is in itself automatic”). Proper brain-building thus requires training and disciplining “the mental Automaton.”22 The goal of such training for Carpenter is to strengthen the power of the will, since it is only this power that enables us to be independent and to resist the “suggestive influence” of others.23 Mesmerism represents a regressive state, in which “the individual being [is] for the time (so to speak) a mere thinking automaton, the whole course of whose ideas is determinable by suggestions operating from without.”24 Carpenter dislikes and condemns the mesmerized state because the individual at that time has no power to dispel any false idea suggested to him. The powers of judgment, of comparison, “of referring to our ordinary experience,” and of any control over the currents of thought are lost when yielding to suggestion.
Such ideas about the development and education of the mind were popularized not only by such widely read writers on physiology as Huxley and Henry Maudsley, but also by such leading figures as Herbert Spencer and Walter Bagehot. Huxley argues in the chapter “The Reflex Actions of the Brain” of his Lessons in Elementary Physiology that “the possibility of all education . . . is based upon the existence of this power which the nervous system possesses, of organizing conscious actions into more or less unconscious, or reflex operations.” He continues: “The object of intellectual education is to create such indissoluble associations of our ideas of things, in the order and relation in which they occur in nature.” Bagehot, himself a student of Carpenter, turns to contemporary physiology in Physics and Politics (1872) to explain “the continuous force which binds age to age”:

I do not think any who do not acquire—and it takes a hard effort to acquire—this notion of a transmitted nerve element will ever understand “the connective tissue” of civilization. We have here the continuous force which binds age to age, which enables each to begin with some improvement on the last, if the last did itself improve.

Here it is our very nerves—rather than a magnetic fluid—that is the carrier of the experiences and the civilization of others (Pater too will invoke “the delicate nerve-work of living creatures”). The physiologists offer very different explanations than the mesmerists for the mechanisms and the sources of influence, but “influence” is used to describe a literal rather than a metaphorical, and a physical rather than a metaphysical process.

In “The Child in the House,” Pater utilizes the insights and ideas of the physiologists, and provides wonderful examples of mental physiological development: of the effects of seemingly trivial sensory experiences on the development of our minds; of the ways that early, chance associations “acted on his childish fancy, so that ever afterwards the like aspects and incidents never failed to throw him into a well-recognised imaginative mood, seeming actually to have become a part of the texture of his mind” (MS 176); and of the manner in which “the discovery of our powers . . . belong[s] to this or the other well-remembered place in the material habitation” (MS 178). The physiologists, in their exploration of sensation, impression, and influence, avoid a deterministic materialism or a “human automatism” by arguing for the need to develop the will (Carpenter) or to develop “indissoluble associations of our ideas of things, in the order and relation in which they occur in nature” (Huxley). Pater also faces the question of how to avoid being enslaved by influences, especially by the influence of the sensible, but he provides a very different response. Paradoxically, Pater pursues a freedom from automatism through a more ardent receptivity. All the qualities of reception that Carpenter associates with the mesmerized state—susceptibility to suggestion, reflex action and lack of voluntary control over one’s
thoughts, yielding and being played upon—Pater appropriates and reconfigures. Pater embraces figures of receptivity (“So he yielded himself to these things, to be played upon them like a musical instrument” [MS 188]), but he adds a self-conscious and an aesthetic dimension to the “passive” experience of yielding and being played upon (“and began to note with a deepening watchfulness . . .”; “he too became an accomplice in moving . . . that great machine in things, constructed so ingeniously to play pain-fugues”). Pater’s text not only claims that we can gain an awareness of these reflexive responses—this is the work accomplished by the physiologists, who shed light on our unconscious actions—but that this awareness can be incorporated into the experience itself.

“The Child in the House” poses the question: what are “the influences of the sensible things which are tossed and fall and lie about us, so, or so, in the environment of early childhood” (MS 177)? The text traces the relation between sensations and the growth of sensibility, and Florian’s development seems to be characterized by an excessive responsiveness: “the growth of an almost diseased sensibility” (MS 181) is described, and we are told of “a kind of tyranny of the senses over him” (MS 186) and of “the necessity he was under of associating all thoughts to touch and sight” (MS 187). Words like “diseased,” “tyranny,” and “necessity” suggest that Florian’s high degree of “sensibility” entails a diminishment of freedom and even a threat to health. An undue influence of sensible things might be described as an unhealthy hypersensitivity, in which a small external stimulus produces a disproportionate reaction, and in which the nervous system and the automatic reflexes have not been properly trained and disciplined.

The central moments in the development of Florian’s “sensibility,” his responses to “two streams of impressions, the sentiments of beauty and pain” mark, however, the undoing of a reflexive or automatic version of sensibility, and provide a dramatic shift in the understanding of “sensible things.” The first half of “The Child in the House” describes a harmony between child and house, in which each sensation receives an adequate response and is taken up within the web of associations so that “a system of visible symbolism interweaves itself through all our thoughts and passions” (MS 178). This harmony between outside and inside, in which each sensation receives an adequate response, is ruptured by new impressions that break in upon “a place ‘inclosed’ and ‘sealed’”:

But upon this assured place, upon the child’s assured soul which resembled it, there came floating in from the larger world without, as at windows left ajar unknowingly, two streams of impressions, the sentiments of beauty and pain—recognitions of the visible, audible, tangible loveliness of things, as a very real and somewhat tyrannous element in them—and of the sorrow of the world, of grown people and children and animals, as a thing not to be put by in them. (MS 181, emphasis added)
A new sensing of powers in things disrupts the “assurance” of the child, and
performs an opening to “the larger world without” (figured in the text by “a
garden gate, usually closed, stood open” and “windows left ajar unknow-
ingly”). The several “occasions of his recognition of the element of pain in
things” (MS 182) describe his becoming aware of and being moved by the
pain of others: the “mute and resistless” face of Marie Antoinette on the way
to her execution; the cry of his aunt upon learning of the death of her brother;
the “lingering sickness” of a cat; the “responsive cry” of a caged bird seeking
her nestlings. The recognition of what is “in things” involves experiencing
“what comes floating in” both as “sensible things” (things “that can be felt or
perceived”) and also as “sensible things” (things that are “capable of feeling or
perceiving”).28 Multiple meanings of “sensible,” which revolve around the
extent to which the adjective pertains to “things” or to our relation to things,
hover around all the usages of this word and its cognates.29 The growth of
sensibility is marked by various impressions of the ways in which certain
things are not in-sensible, and entails a shift from receiving the sensation of a
thing to sensing something within a thing that has the capacity to affect us.30
The young Florian Deleal, and the mature aesthetic critic, escape from a me-
chanical responsiveness to “sensible things” by developing the capacity to
recognize and submit to their powers of influence.

A similar process of becoming aware of the “influences . . . of sensible
things” is at work in the reception of “impressions of beauty”:

But the beauty of the thing struck home to him feverishly. . . . Always afterwards,
summer by summer, as the flowers came on, the blossom of the red hawthorn still
seemed to him absolutely the reddest of all things; and the goodly crimson, still
alive in the works of old Venetian masters or old Flemish tapestries, called out al-
ways from afar the recollection of the flame in those perishing little petals, as it
pulsed gradually out of them, kept long in the drawers of an old cabinet. Also then,
for the first time, he seemed to experience a passionateness in his relation to fair
outward objects, an inexplicable excitement in their presence, which disturbed
him, and from which he half longed to be free. (MS 185–86)

What is it exactly that “calls out”? The “crimson” of certain old works of art
that is “still alive” even as the natural flowers have died, or the “flame in those
perishing little petals”? And what is that “pulsed gradually out”? The bright-
ness of the flowers, or a “flame” that is always also mediated by recollection?
The temporality, the causality, and the status of the objects (inanimate, aes-
thetic, or living) are radically confused in this passage, which evokes the
physical source of “an inexplicable excitement” yet conveys something that
finally cannot be localized, defined, or measured, but only known through
the series of its effects. The impression of beauty (which “struck home to him
feverishly”) entails the reception of a force that exceeds anything that can be
explained by a physical analysis of its container.
The beautiful object is akin to the mesmerized object: it contains a charge, a power of influence (Mesmer and his followers “mesmerized” trees, iron rings, and other objects in order to convey the magnetic force to many people at a time, and without always requiring the presence of the mesmerist). The work of Pater’s portrait of receptivity, however, is to present a process of “brain-building” that requires neither a recourse to a new external element (an invisible magnetic fluid) nor to the diagnosis of an internal morbidity to explain an acute response to beauty and pain. All of aesthetics depends upon an excessive response to sensible things, a reaction as if there were powers in the object beyond its strictly material components. The “overly sensible” path detailed by Pater of a heightened receptivity to powers in things that might move us does not produce a stricter automatism or reflexiveness in which one is completely under the sway of external forces. It leads instead to a freedom from automatism insofar as it entails being moved disproportionately (at least from the perspective of those who, in contrast to Florian, assign the most weight to abstract thought and are unresponsive to physical beauty) and unpredictably—not mechanically or automatically—by what is “sensible,” and it also opens a new recognition of the qualities of things. The embracing of this very process of being moved, a “yield[ing] to these things, to be played upon by them like a musical instrument,” is what makes possible an aesthetic criticism that provides a conscious appreciation of rather than a mindless subjection to these forces.

The figure of being “played upon” like a musical instrument appears frequently in the nineteenth century, and gains its force from physiological writings in which the fibers of the nervous system are compared to the strings of a musical instrument. To be played upon describes an unconscious process, in which the nerves respond reflexively to sensations or suggestions, and the body gives forth the appropriate physiological or psychological “note.” Johannes Müller, whose extremely influential *Physiology* was translated into English in 1838, “portrayed the major nerves of the body lining up in sequence in the brain . . . in the same way as . . . the keys of a piano.” The power of this figure of speech lies in its threat: the body and the brain reduced to a mere instrument, no longer in control of the original stimulus for the “music” (someone else plays the instrument), nor even fully aware of the sounds that are produced. Mesmerism represents the extreme version of being played upon (one mesmerist “claimed that he could ‘play’ the brain of human beings as musicians played a piano”), in which the body can be made to speak and the subject has no conscious knowledge of what is revealed. Yet the nervous system of everyone, not just that of the mesmerized subject, can be played upon. Mrs. Oliphant describes the innovation of the “sensation” novel as a new power to bypass the mediating consciousness and judgment of the reader while directly presenting what happens to the characters:
“Few readers will be able to resist the mysterious thrill of this sudden touch.... The reader’s nerves are affected like the hero’s.... The effect is pure sensation, neither more nor less.”34 This trope of playing upon someone as if they were an instrument was of course in use well before the nineteenth century. One of the most famous examples occurs in Hamlet: “You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass: and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ; yet cannot you make it speak” (Act III, Scene 2). Here, the conflict is about whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can induce Hamlet to give voice to his innermost thoughts and make public his private intentions. They do not seek to probe his unconscious desires, or to make Hamlet reveal anything that he himself is not aware of; Hamlet can resist becoming an instrument in the hands of others simply by recognizing their motivations, and by choosing not to speak: “though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me.” In the nineteenth century, in contrast, “playing upon” usually describes acting directly on someone’s nervous system, and bypassing consciousness altogether. For Walter Bagehot, hearing the “nicer music” produced from playing upon “the nerves of men” is essential for orchestrating the modern state, and for producing social harmony rather than anarchy. In Physics and Politics he writes:

There is, by this doctrine [“this notion of a transmitted nerve element”], a physical cause of improvement from generation to generation... but unless you appreciate that cause in its subtle materialism, unless you see it, as it were, playing upon the nerves of men, and, age after age, making nicer music from finer chords, you cannot comprehend the principle of inheritance either in its mystery or its power.35

Nor will political leaders, without such a comprehension, be able to “guide by an insensible but an omnipotent influence the associations of [their] subjects.”36 Only those who can detach themselves sufficiently from the masses of society by attaining a knowledge of both physics and politics will be able to hear and appreciate this music.

The figure of being played upon embodies the dilemma of aesthetic reception: if one is not susceptible to new sensations, ideas, and influences, if one is no longer deeply moved by “the picture, the landscape, the engaging personality in life or in a book,” one cannot even take the first step of aesthetic criticism, which is to “realise such primary data for one’s self,” much less begin to explain such experiences to others. Yet if one continues to yield “to these things, to be played upon by them like a musical instrument,” how is one ever to gain an appreciation and a critical awareness of these experiences, and to avoid falling under the power of others? For Carpenter and other physiologists, the goal, as one grows older, is to resist being “played upon” by others through bringing more of the “instrument” under the train-
ing and control of the “will”; one’s own volition, rather than the suggestions of another, will come to occupy the place of the musician and strike the keys of the instrument. In “The Child in the House,” the departure from mere instrumentality comes not through the development of the will, but through a multiplying of consciousness: the child is played upon, but at the same time also becomes aware of “that great machine in things” which does the playing, and begins to listen to and appreciate the “music” that is thereby produced. One of the primary moments of recognizing the pain in things comes through the transformation of a bird’s cry into a “pain-fugue”:

So he wanted another pet; and as there were starlings about the place, which could be taught to speak, one of them was caught, and he meant to treat it kindly; but in the night its young ones could be heard crying after it, and the responsive cry of the mother-bird towards them; and at last, with the first light, though not till after some debate with himself, he went down and opened the cage, and saw a sharp bound of the prisoner up to her nestlings; and therewith came the sense of remorse,—that he too was become an accomplice in moving, to the limit of his small power, the springs and handles of that great machine in things, constructed so ingeniously to play pain-fugues on the delicate nerve-work of living creatures. (MS 184)

The phrase “the springs and handles of that . . . machine in things, constructed so . . . to play . . . on the delicate nerve-work of living creatures” could come from the physiologists; the extra words—and what separates “The Child in the House from more typical texts is its continual excess of words—take us beyond the realm of the mechanical. “Great” and “ingeniously” hint at a designer; “delicate” heads in the direction of sympathy, feeling what other creatures feel; and “pain-fugues,” combining and transforming cries expressing pain into the counterpoint of the fugue, shifts our attention from the machine (similar to a hurdy-gurdy?) and from the nerves that are “played upon” to our own aesthetic appreciation of the sounds.

In this passage there is a movement away from a purely passive or mechanical receptivity: from being an instrument to becoming “an accomplice in moving,” and from listening to cries to hearing a music that fuses beauty and pain. The task of “The Child in the House,” however, is to present this new “sense” as an expansion of the child’s sensibility, and not as a transcendence of the condition of being played upon, nor as a compensatory, retrospective reimagining supplied by an adult consciousness. The transition from hearing birds cry to apprehending pain-fugues occurs within the narrative of the experience itself: he “saw a sharp bound of the prisoner up to her nestlings; and therewith came the sense of remorse,—that he too was become an accomplice in moving. . . .” Perceiving the painful music in things is described as an immediate experience of the boy’s, even if it occurs after the precise moment of hearing the birds, and not as a reinterpretation by the
adult narrator. The language of the second half of the sentence, such as “that
great machine in things, constructed so ingeniously to play pain-fugues on
the delicate nerve-work of living creatures,” may not sound like the thoughts
of a young boy who would capture a starling for a pet, but the text, in order to
portray the dawning aesthetic responsiveness of the boy, refuses to separate cleanly the moment of an early impression from the awareness of its impact and significance.

At stake is the nature of the aesthetic response. If a deeper apprehension of beauty were presented as occurring only retrospectively, as a recollection in tranquility or as the vision of the adult writer, then the recognition of “the visible, tangible, audible loveliness of things, as a very real and tyrannous element in them,” would itself be only the product of a phase of childhood that one must go beyond in order to reach a more profound appreciation. The child in this text, however, provides a model for later experience. The mechanisms of receiving impressions and influences are not superseded—they do not belong to an early phase one passes through and outgrows—but are instead carried forward. In a later passage, after the elaboration of the effects of the “two streams of impressions, the sentiments of beauty and pain,” the stance of being “played upon” is combined with a “deepening watchfulness”: “So he yielded himself to these things, to be played upon by them like a musical instrument, and began to note with deepening watchfulness, but always with some puzzled, unutterable longing in his enjoyment, the phases of the seasons and of the growing or waning day, down even to the shadowy changes wrought on bare wall or ceiling. . .” (MS 188). For Pater, being “played upon” does not describe the operation of a completely unconscious process, but instead provides an opening to a greater consciousness of the effects and the beauty of impressions of the sensible world. In contrast to the “very poor” who are “quite unconscious” of “a certain desirable, clear light ... on their way to their early toil,” Florian Deleal yields himself to these impressions in order to be able to note them “with deepening watchfulness.”

Pater links yielding and watchfulness with the purpose of complicating the opposition between the reflexive, the mechanical, the involuntary, and the unconscious, on the one hand, and the volitional, the critical, the attentive, and the conscious on the other—an opposition that underpins the usage of “played upon” by Carpenter, Oliphant, Bagehot, and others. The stance of the aesthetic critic depends on a capacity to be deeply moved, to receive the influences and to yield oneself “to these things, to be played upon by them,” yet at the same time to retain the ability to watch over what is happening, to note and analyze the powers in things, and to convey all their effects to others. In a typical work of (auto-)biography, awareness arrives long after the moments of receiving influences. Pater’s portraiture attempts to collapse this interval, to maintain a state of productive tension between
“deepening watchfulness” and “puzzled, unutterable longing,” and to pro-
vide a genesis for the aesthetic critic by describing a critical awareness that
proceeds directly out of the experiences of being played upon.

The genesis that is presented in “The Child in the House” may not de-
scribe the actual stages of physiological and psychological development, but
this “imaginary” dimension of the portrait does not undermine the claims
for the development of an aesthetic consciousness out of early experiences of
being played upon. The text actually performs what it appears to describe,
and the extremely long sentences create more than they reflect a “process of
brain-building.” The many phrases of each sentence, moving from one per-
ception to the next, responding with sensuous prose to specific pressures
and impressions, and connecting different moments in time and the particu-
lar to the general, forge for us the links present in Florian’s mind, and per-
form for us the rhythm of thought, feeling, and sensation. The writing enacts
the possibility of responding to rather than simply registering impressions,
and it thereby also shifts the focus of the text from “he was influenced” to
“he is influenced by sensible things”—what has played upon him still retains
its power. If the text were merely to chronicle what had happened, in trans-
parent prose, all that is narrated would have already lost its power to deeply
move; an account free of any retrospective consciousness would be exiled to
a distant past, at most tenuously connected to the reflexes, sensibility, and
textures of the brain and spirit whose construction is being recounted. The
“proof” that an aesthetic consciousness has been formed is given by the text,
through its power to make active the connections it traces, and thus to allow
the instrument of Florian Deleal to put forth its music—despite, or perhaps
because of, any deviations from a steadfastly accurate or “scientific” account
of the order and logic of brain-building.

“The Child in the House” comes to an end as it reaches the threshold of
what is received through the senses: “Also, as he felt this pressure upon him
of the sensible world, then, as often afterwards, there would come another
sort of curious questioning how the last impressions of eye and ear might
happen to him, how they would find him. . .” (MS 189). This “curious ques-
tioning” does not provide any final answers about the knowledge provided
by the senses, but instead gives rise to figures that are themselves ambiguous,
neither entirely material or spiritual, neither fully of this world or of the next.
In place of the harmonious relation of “the child in the house,” an image of
separation is envisioned: “only a few poor, piteous bones; and above them,
possibly a certain sort of figure he hoped not to see” (MS 191). The figures
that Florian imagines in the concluding paragraphs—first the revenants, or
“home-returning ghosts,” and then idealized figures such as a “sacred dou-
ble” or “celestial correspondent”—belong neither to the familiar world of
the senses nor to the transcendent realm of the supra-sensible. The possibil-
ity of perceiving a double, whether uncanny or ideal, further expands the temporal dimension of each impression; “sensible things” now also suggest a place amidst other lives, whether among those who have lived before us or those in an ideal realm who still remain after our death. The sense of place, of the house, the garden, the familiar trees, is altered, touched by unseen influences. These figures that double our terrestrial presence open up a new mode of reception and another pathway for influence that goes beyond what is strictly recognizable “in things” or through the senses.

“The Child in the House” preserves a precarious balance, as each heightening of the sensitivity to sensible impressions or opening to new modes of receiving influences is accompanied by a gain, rather than a loss, of critical powers. In almost all of the literature exploring influence in the late nineteenth century such a balance proves impossible to maintain. Ghost stories provide typical examples: to perceive the ghost is already to be haunted by it, and many tales revolve around a character’s attempts to free him- or herself from the ghost’s influence; death often provides the only means to escape the “uncertain presence” of the ghost. In narratives about aestheticism, responsiveness to art usually leads to a loss of autonomy; Des Esseintes, Huysmans’s ultimate aesthete in *Au Rebours*, becomes progressively less able to function even within the space in which he is confined.

“The Child in the House” gives us a version of the growth of the child in which remaining open to the influence and to the suggestiveness of sensible things is not in conflict with the development of the higher critical faculties, as it is for Carpenter, or in different ways for Bagehot. In this text without a plot, and without the conflicts that typically drive the drama or the novel, we see very little of the effects of the influences that Florian undergoes. “The Child in the House” takes us to the threshold: the mechanisms for receiving and responding to impressions have been finely developed, but Florian has not yet reached any crossroads where he must decide to accept or reject certain influences. The text ends before any insurmountable tensions arise, such as the contradiction between submitting to influences and pursuing autonomy and self-development, or between aesthetic and ethical demands.

Yet Pater prefers to stay at the threshold, and to explore the preparatory moment. In *Marius the Epicurean*, the finely developed capacities for receiving influences and impressions of beauty are brought out into a world of conflicting demands, ambitions, philosophies, and ways of life. Throughout the entire course of his life, Marius attempts to increase his “susceptibilities to influence,” and “[t]he perfection of its capacity might be said to depend on its passive surrender, as of a leaf on the wind, to the motions of the great
stream of physical energy without it” (*ME* 2: 68). But Marius postpones ever having to address possible conflicts that might arise from falling under the influence of any of the people he meets, the works of literature or philosophy he reads, or the cultural movements he experiences, since he always pulls back from these influences, awaiting a more perfect incarnation, or a more ideal art. The novel ends with Marius still awaiting the arrival of some powerful influence to which he could wholeheartedly give way: “Throughout that elaborate and lifelong education of his receptive powers, he had ever kept in view the purpose of preparing himself towards possible further revelation some day—towards some ampler vision” (*ME* 2: 219).