Walter Pater
edited by Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins, Carolyn Williams

Published by ELT Press

edited by Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins, Carolyn Williams.
Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/11053.

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The Politics of Formalist Art Criticism: Pater’s “School of Giorgione”

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I Reading Politics in Pater

IN THE OLD, well-rehearsed critique of Victorian aestheticism, many twentieth-century critics take the movement at its apolitical word, reading “art for art’s sake” as the catch-phrase for an idyllic and irresponsible dream-world of art, removed from the vested interests of daily life. Peter Bürger gives this idea its most famous expression in his Theory of the Avant-Garde, framing aestheticism as the necessary apolitical precursor to modernism, with the avant-garde triumphantly returning art to the political realities of the world. Contemporary criticism has moved beyond this myopic reading of aestheticism, in part because “the political” has been re-defined: the notion of politics in literature is no longer simply a question of government, but a characterization of the power relations between different groups, individuals, or ideologies. As Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell write in their introduction to Politics and Aesthetics in the Arts, “[A]ny relationship among humans that purports to be principally mediated by, or sustained by, a shared interest in the arts, for instance, is ipso facto a power relationship. In this case, aesthetic and political judgments may become indistinguishable.”

In the realm of Pater studies, an expanded notion of the political has allowed for the contextualization of Pater’s seemingly insular prose within the turbulent moment of its genesis. Much scholarship has gone towards demonstrating Pater’s coded participation in a discourse of homoerotic liberation; other critics have examined Pater’s textual history within the world of periodical and book-publishing. In this essay, I contextualize Pater’s 1877 essay “The School of Giorgione” against the backdrop of contemporary events in the art world. Written four years after the critical controversy which greeted the first edition of his Renaissance, Pater’s essay at first appears to embody aestheticism at its most apolitical and withdrawn, cautiously praising paintings for their formal qualities over any discernible “message” or content. Yet, as I will show, the essay actually participates in
two art-critical debates of the 1870s. Pater defines his “aesthetic critic” against two models of critical authority he wants to attack: the “recent critics,” Crowe and Cavalcaselle, whose 1871 *Painting in North Italy* is a model of the new scientific connoisseurship of art; and the “popular critics,” the bevy of art critics writing in the periodical press, who tended to judge paintings by their narrative content rather than by their formal qualities. The attack on the latter inserts Pater into the controversy surrounding an event which shook the art world in the spring of 1877: the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery, a haven for aesthetic painters and champion of such protoformalists as James McNeill Whistler and Edward Burne-Jones. As we will see, Pater’s advocacy of formalist criticism was a politicized response to some of the dominant ideologies of Victorian bourgeois culture, as expressed by both the Grosvenor’s critics and the Giorgione connoisseurs.

II On “Recent Critics”: Against the Science of Connoisseurship

By the later nineteenth century, the most influential development across all of the disciplines was the adoption of science and scientific method in the pursuit of knowledge. For example, in the writing of history, colorful anecdotes and a providential, moralistic interpretation of historical events were replaced by a more sober, “objective,” fact-based analysis. These developments manifested themselves in the field of art history most notably in Crowe and Cavalcaselle’s histories of Italian painting, written between 1864 and 1871. In these works, the authors harness all of the modern advances in art-historical scholarship: they carefully consider archival source material, such as documents relating to patrons or local annals of Italian villages, in order to determine the proper attribution of the painting. Not only are their methods scientific, but perhaps more importantly, so is their attitude: they distrust myths and legends, and are completely willing to overturn traditional attributions in the attempt to be scrupulously accurate. One of their most venerable targets is the sixteenth-century Venetian painter, Giorgione, an artist with a huge number of imitations and forgeries ascribed to his name. In their 1871 *History of Painting in North Italy*, Crowe and Cavalcaselle use characteristic zeal to debunk the attribution of some of Giorgione’s most famous paintings.

Although Pater uses Crowe and Cavalcaselle’s book as the main source for “The School of Giorgione,” his essay is in fact an extended critique of their work—its very title a polemical attack on their discoveries. Pater responds to the diminishment of Giorgione’s *oeuvre* by asserting that mere authorship, or a “name,” cannot fully encompass the phenomenon of Giorgione’s influence on his era: a “School of Giorgione,” emphatically italicized by Pater, more fully expresses the “Giorgionesque” perfection of art. The defining feature of a Giorgionesque painting for Pater is not its authenticated
authorship but its formal unity, the perfect melding of artistic shape with intellectual idea. He evokes this synthesis with a recurring metaphor of woven golden threads, as when he says, “[A] great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a few moments on the wall or floor: is itself, in truth, a space of such fallen light, caught as the colours are in an Eastern carpet, but refined upon” (Ren/H 104). The thread imagery reappears when Pater attacks the “new Vasari,” as he sarcastically terms Crowe and Cavalcaselle, and their reduction of Giorgione’s canon: “And now, in the ‘new Vasari,’ the great traditional reputation, woven with so profuse demand on men’s admiration, has been scrutinized thread by thread; and what remains of the most vivid and stimulating of Venetian masters . . . has been reduced almost to a name by his most recent critics” (Ren/H 113). Pater’s metaphor of “threads” works on two levels, describing both the light-color illusion of Giorgione’s “cunningly-wrought” painting and the myth woven around the fake works of the artist. Crowe and Cavalcaselle’s sort of connoisseurship is distasteful to Pater because of its narrow-minded approach, pulling apart “threads,” looking at minute details to determine authenticity. Their fact-based truth, what Pater humorously calls the “salt of genuineness,” is a less important kind of truth than his idea of “vraie vérité,” or the truer truth of the aesthetic philosopher, which aims to capture the more refined essence of spirit behind a painter and his school.

Crowe and Cavalcaselle stake their claims to scientific accuracy in part on their scrupulous documentation. In their volumes, each painting is accompanied by a footnote detailing its location, condition, and a provenance of other sources where it is discussed, old or new—a practice which is still used today to establish the authenticity of a painting in the art world. Pater uses Crowe and Cavalcaselle’s book as a source for his facts, but his other major source makes for a striking contrast—it is Rossetti’s famous sonnet on one of the mis-attributed paintings, “For a Venetian Pastoral by Giorgione (In the Louvre).” Pater writes of Giorgione’s Fête Champêtre as “A favourite picture in the Louvre, subject of a delightful sonnet by a poet whose own painted work often comes to mind as one ponders over these precious things” (Ren/H 114). With its languorous figures and leisurely pursuits, this painting strikes the dominant chord of Pater’s essay (Fig. 1). Rossetti’s paintings, meanwhile, are the modern-day inheritors of Giorgione, and hence another manifestation of the “Giorgionesque” school, continuing the tradition of expressing sensuous form. Rossetti’s ghostly presence in the passage establishes an alternative provenance for the Fête Champêtre, a genealogy based on poetry and painting rather than scientific evidence.

Pater’s essay on Giorgione is striking, then, for its deliberate refusal to participate in a scientific discourse of art criticism—despite Pater’s well-
Figure 1 Titian (formerly Giorgione), *Fête Champêtre*
versed knowledge of current scientific thought. The anecdote, the incidental myth, the curious story, all carry more weight than the documented fact of biography. Even Pater’s prose is suggestive and obscure, laden with metaphors and poetic devices, as opposed to the writing of Crowe and Cavalcaselle, which bristled with the art jargon of the day. Just as Pater argues that painting should be more like music than poetry—that is to say, not legible at all but formal—so too art criticism should not be like science, but more like an art form itself, in which legible content is replaced by an indeterminate fusing of form and content, metaphor and meaning.

If Pater’s notion of the “aesthetic critic” is a subtle attack on the critical authority of scientific language and methodology, the choice of Giorgione as the platform for his critique is a deliberate one. Giorgione is usually credited with inventing the genre picture, otherwise known as a conversation piece or “cabinet picture,” whose subjects, significantly, were not devoted to the Church or the State. These paintings were meant for private consumption, moving out of the public world into the private cabinet, the home, the boudoir. Pater imagines that Giorgione’s genre paintings, freed from their institutional moorings, might “come like an animated presence, into one’s cabinet . . . and, like persons, live with us, for a day or a lifetime” (Ren/H 111). The picture-viewing process itself becomes a little genre scene, where the painting is personified as an “animating presence” within one’s own chamber, with whom one might hold a special, private discourse. In fact, the entire essay “The School of Giorgione” might itself be read as a genre scene, inviting the reader in to an intimate, aesthetic conversation with the author. That Pater imagined the Giorgionesque not merely as a two-dimensional painterly style, but also as an atmospheric space for the experience of beautiful moments of art is shown in a passage from his 1877 essay cancelled in the later Renaissance edition:

Who, in some such perfect moment, when the harmony of things inward and outward beat itself out so truly, and with a sense of receptivity, as if in that deep accord, with entire inaction on our part, some messenger from the real soul of things must be on his way to one, has not felt the desire to perpetuate all that, just so, to suspend it in every particular circumstance, with the portrait of just that one spray of leaves lifted just so high against the sky, above the well, forever?—a desire how bewildering with the question of whether there indeed be any place wherein these desirable moments take permanent refuge. Well! in the school of Giorgione you drink water, perfume, music, lie in receptive humour thus forever, and the satisfying moment is assured. (Ren/H 242)

Once again we are privy to a glimpse of people gathering in a pastoral Giorgionesque frame; but with Pater’s mention of the “spray of leaves,” evoking the Louvre Concert, and his addressing of the reader as “you,” the reader/viewer is completely assimilated into the painting. (Indeed, if all of the essays in The Renaissance create some sense of an intimate conversation with the
reader, the “Giorgione” essay is remarkable for the number of times it invokes the second person, and widens the frame of a painting to encompass scenes from modern life.) The school of Giorgione thus becomes literalized as a place, a “refuge” of aesthetic critics indulging in a private, intellectual party.

Who exactly did Pater imagine would populate this private room? That is, who were his ideal readers, and who did he consider worthy of the title “aesthetic critics”? Pater did not imagine that his book would be a popular success. In an 1872 letter to his publisher in which he suggests the special type of binding and paper he wanted for *The Renaissance*, he writes, “Something not quite in the ordinary way is, I must repeat, very necessary in a volume the contents of which are so unpretending as in mine, and which is intended in the first instance for a comparatively small section of readers.”

And in another letter he writes that such an exquisite book “would, I am sure, be much approved of by many persons of taste, among whom the sale of the book would probably in the first instance be.”

Even though the essay “School of Giorgione” was only published in a later edition of *The Renaissance*, I think that the same aesthetic applies here: the book becomes the space of Pater’s own creation, a room for private conversation with like-minded men of taste. In his introduction to *The Renaissance*, Kenneth Clark describes Pater’s lifestyle: “A small group of friends delighted in his conversation. For the rest he was mysteriously impenetrable.”

It is completely appropriate that Pater dedicated the book to “C.L.S.,” a cryptic set of initials unless one is in the know—in fact, Charles Lancelot Shadwell, one of his closest male friends, and the man with whom he traveled around Italy looking at paintings. Importantly, the protective space of the Giorgionesque permits the fraternizing of aesthetic young men behind closed doors, suggesting the homoerotic nature of this idealized intercourse.

If Pater creates a private room for intimate conversation within the crafted space of his essay, in contrast Crowe and Cavalcaselle’s book stakes out a markedly public world. The dedication page of *The History of Painting in North Italy* is inscribed, “To her Imperial and Royal Highness Victoria, Crown Princess of Germany and Prussia; Princess Royal of Great Britain and Ireland; Painter and Critic; These Volumes are most respectfully and humbly dedicated, by the Authors.” This dedication serves to remind us of the fact that, in the 1870s, the writing of art history, as a subcategory of “culture,” was an intensely politicized act, intertwined with European national ambitions, rivalries, and, quite literally, wars. The 1871 reviewer of *A History of Painting in North Italy* in the *Quarterly Review* spends two pages ranting against the dangers of Paris-style “Communism” and “Internationalism” before he actually starts to address Crowe and Cavalcaselle’s book. In his opinion, such art histories as these are necessary to uphold the “glorious
monuments” of Western tradition and stave off the forces of anarchy threatening from opposing shores—a very Arnoldian opinion, coming just two years after the publication of Culture and Anarchy.\(^\text{17}\)

Crowe and Cavalcaselle were more liberal in their political leanings than their panicked reviewer, but it is worth considering for a moment the dedication page of their book. With all of its imperial fanfare, the dedication positions the History of Painting in North Italy into a nationalist imperial program, in which the Crown Princess is both conqueror and critic, sovereign and artist. She becomes an ambassador of culture, assimilating the cultural superiority of Renaissance Italy into the economic and political dominance of modern-day Britain. The way in which Crowe and Cavalcaselle’s book paints the biographies of its artist-heroes—a tradition ever since Vasari—celebrates the creative individual in a way very amenable to British liberal ideas of healthy capitalist competition. And the practice of connoisseurship was seen as a boon to national commerce, because the determination of a painting’s authenticity ensured that it would get a fair price on the art market. Crowe himself was deeply involved in the connection between culture and commerce, serving as Britain’s Commercial Attaché for the entire Continent.\(^\text{18}\) In the 1895 preface to his Reminiscences he writes of how, “as commercial attaché for Europe at Berlin and subsequently at Paris, it has been my fortune to help to negotiate treaties, and assist in defending the commercial interests of the British nation.”\(^\text{19}\) Indeed, the contemporary British notion of an art historian evolves from these roots; throughout the twentieth century and even today, the scholarly discipline of art history has been linked to the definition of a painting’s commercial worth, through careful research into its provenance and origins.

The work of Crowe and Cavalcaselle was a part of the changing notion of connoisseurship in the later nineteenth century. Whereas, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the connoisseur was usually an aristocrat secluded in his private gallery, the later nineteenth century saw the connoisseur becoming a public, professionalized identity: a scientist of art. The work of Crowe and Cavalcaselle reflects the professionalization of art scholarship. Their coinage of art jargon, their attempts to determine the truth of attribution with scientific clarity, their use of a standardized “objective” methodology to give an account around which a consensus might gather, all work to define a critical readership of informed laymen and professional scholars: a community of experts. The politics of this professionalization were fundamentally liberal, aimed at standardizing and publicizing the knowledge of art.

The subjective criticism of Pater, on the other hand, is aimed at a small, exclusive group of initiates, with essays like intimate conversations between author and reader. We can begin to see how aestheticism gained its reputa-
tion for political irresponsibility and disengagement from the world at large; even Kenneth Clark, in his introduction to Pater’s Renaissance, writes of Aestheticism as “a passing phase for Prime Ministers.” But Clark ignores the fact that Pater’s championing of the private is, in and of itself, a political act. In The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy, Linda Dowling calls The Renaissance a document of liberal humanism, with its sinuous argument for the freedom of any individual to judge a work of art as he or she likes. Dowling points out the subversive possibilities of Pater’s creed, which Tory critics of his day saw and feared: even while “culture” is a building block for empire or a stable civilization, it contains within itself the seeds for anarchy, for the radical dissolution of community into small private spaces. The intimate conversation can be seen as a kind of extremist separatism, bowing to no higher power. In his 1874 essay “Modern Culture,” conservative W. J. Courthope explicitly attacks “Culture” as “Academic Liberalism,” in which “the individual mind is the measure, and, in a sense, the maker of all things,—a conclusion which destroys all distinction between what is true and false, while it bases knowledge on pure sensation.” In his critique of Crowe and Cavalcaselle, then, we can read in Pater the liberatory suggestion of a world radically un-anchored from the strictures of Victorian values.

But, as we will see, for all of the theoretical liberation offered by aesthetic criticism, the reality was quite a different story. The eyes of the public, represented for Pater by the “popular critics,” were not trained in the elite ways of the aesthetic critic, and hence could not all share in that exclusive freedom.

III On “Popular Critics”: Against Reading Painting as Literature

In his argument for a private aesthetic criticism, the public arena of connoisseurship was not the only public Pater was writing against. When he censures the “popular critics” in his essay, Pater takes on the journalists who covered art exhibitions for the periodical press. If Crowe and Cavalcaselle are to blame for reducing paintings to a commodified “name,” the popular critics are guilty, in Pater’s account, for reading visual art as though it were a transparent medium for a “message” or narrative—as though it were literature. Thus he opens the “Giorgione” essay:

It is the mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music, and painting—all the various products of art—as but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought, supplemented by certain technical qualities of colour, in painting; of sound, in music; of rhythmical words, in poetry. In this way, the sensuous element in art, and with it almost everything in art that is essentially artistic, is made a matter of indifference; and a clear apprehension of the opposite principle—that the sensuous material of each art brings with it a special phase or quality of beauty, untranslatable into the forms of any
other, an order of impressions distinct in kind—is the beginning of all true aesthetic criticism. (*Ren/H* 102)

The action of the “aesthetic critic,” as opposed to the popular critic, is to recognize in art the special nature of its “sensuous element,” giving proper attention to its form, as expressed through medium. And it is in the realm of painting, Pater tells us, that “most spectators and many critics” usually make the mistake of reading only for content, and ignoring visual form: “[I]t is in popular judgments on pictures that false generalization of all art into forms of poetry is most prevalent” (*Ren/H* 103). Although he invokes Lessing, Pater is interested not in comparing painting with poetry, but in exploring how works of art in each medium use form to be expressive. Thus he prefers painting in which the sensuous material—the drawing, the coloring, the composition—is emphasized, rather than a narrative content; and he prefers poetry which is “lyric” (with the unmistakable musical resonances of the word), formally perfect, rather than a poetry which, like that of Victor Hugo, works only to convey a “moral or political aspiration” (*Ren/H* 107).

For all of its denigration of “moral or political aspiration,” Pater’s theoretical position takes on a more distinctly political slant when we view it in the context of a controversial event in the art world that was generating much comment in the press in the summer of 1877, when he composed his essay. May of that year had seen the opening of the new Grosvenor Gallery, an elegant and intimate public exhibition space established by Sir Coutts Lindsay and his wife as an alternative to the dominant Royal Academy show. The hegemony of the Academy exhibition in the art world was a constant source of frustration for both artists and critics. Painters submitted works to be judged by an elite selection committee comprised of Royal Academy members, and this conservative body usually rejected works that were daring or innovative. In the crowded exhibition hall, paintings were crammed together frame-to-frame on the wall, sometimes placed so high that they could not be properly viewed. Yet artists had to work within this system if they wanted to become known and successful. Painters with more avant-garde tendencies, like Edward Burne-Jones and D. G. Rossetti, stopped submitting their works to the Academy altogether. Sir Lindsay hoped to alleviate some of the Academy problems by inviting a limited number of artists to show their work in his gallery, and by giving each painting a space of its own. Where the Royal Academy had the frenetic atmosphere of a circus, the Grosvenor was remarkable for the pains Sir Lindsay took to make his gallery look like a private room in an aristocrat’s house, complete with china and potted plants (Figs. 2, 3).

The Grosvenor exhibition challenged the Royal Academy not only in its methods but also in the art it displayed. Sir Lindsay invited such controversial artists as Burne-Jones, who had been avoiding the public eye after
Figure 2  Harry Furniss, *Strictly Private View, Royal Academy*

*Punch*, 3 May 1890
Figure 3 West Gallery, The Grosvenor Gallery of Fine Art, New Bond Street

Illustrated London News, 5 May 1877
charges of indecency greeted his previous exhibition seven years earlier; and James McNeill Whistler, who was already notorious for giving his paintings musical titles, transforming groups of men and women into “arrangements” and “symphonies.”

Whistler’s paintings were almost universally panned by mystified critics, most famously in Ruskin’s vituperative attack in *Fors Clavigera*, which spurred Whistler to sue him for libel, and resulted in the sensational court case which took place in the following year. Ruskin wrote, “I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.”

When he composed his “Giorgione” essay in the summer of 1877, Pater was certainly aware of the sensation being caused by this avant-garde exhibition in London. In her scrupulous study of Pater’s reading, Billie Andrew Inman records that Oscar Wilde, then an undergraduate correspondent at Oxford, sent Pater a copy of his review of the Grosvenor show. As always with Pater, one must read in between the lines to decipher the references to the contemporary Victorian world he inhabited. Yet when he singles out the “popular critics” for attack, he subtly but unmistakably inserts himself into the current debate between the Royal Academy and the Grosvenor. The kind of art and criticism which Pater describes as “popular”—paintings which were most notable for the stories they told, and critics who judged paintings based solely on those stories—was inevitably associated with the aesthetic of the Royal Academy. As Shearer West has written, the Royal Academy was the great upholder of the tradition of a “British school of art,” derived from Hogarth, in which paintings delivered moral lessons of modern life encapsulated in perfectly legible narratives. This style was associated with painters like William Powell Frith in his blockbuster scenes *Derby Day* (1858) and *Railway Station* (1862) (Fig. 4), and critics like Tom Taylor for the *Times*, who published pamphlets dissecting Frith’s paintings into a series of moralizing narrative episodes.

These paintings were also associated with the upwardly mobile bourgeois viewers who patronized the Royal Academy, especially the first-time gallery visitors who constituted the burgeoning new audience for art in the later nineteenth century. The “narrative” interpretation of art was popular, accessible to anyone who could follow a visual story. The public preferred spectacle, splash, story, and sentiment, all depicted in a realist manner, a populist kind of Ruskinian “truth to Nature” which could be discerned by even the most untrained eye.

It was the general critical opinion that the paintings at the Grosvenor, on the other hand, needed a special kind of education in order to be appreciated. A disgruntled *Daily News* reviewer exclaimed, “It may all be very well and the pictures may please the learned, but they are not what the public is
Figure 4 William Powell Frith, *The Railway Station*, 1862
accustomed to. The spectator feels inclined to cry anxiously, "Where is the baby?" for babies and cradles are but inadequately represented in the Grosvenor Gallery. This is not as it should be; this is not in accordance with the practice of the Royal Academy and with the traditions of British art. The Royal Academy was seen as the bastion of familiar bourgeois family values, while the Grosvenor was cordoned off as the realm of the "learned." The tastes of the public, and the traditions of British art, were opposed to the radical new aesthetic embodied by the Grosvenor paintings.

That new aesthetic might be characterized as a "formalist" one, in which art refers not to life but to other art, to conventions of painting; hence one must have a knowledge of art in order to appreciate it. This proposition might seem counterintuitive to us today—it seems like a spectator needs much more cultural knowledge to appreciate, say, a depiction of a story from Greek myth, than to appreciate an abstract blend of colors which invokes no external narrative. But Victorian critics were emphatic in their pronouncements that the Grosvenor show only could appeal to viewers with a trained eye and a knowledge of art. In effect, the Victorians were enacting a quintessential type of art-viewing experience which is still familiar to us today: a mystified viewer stands before an abstract work of art and asks, "This is art?"

For all of the twentieth-century press given to Whistler as one of the great formalist progenitors of modernism, the artist at the Grosvenor who was most associated with a "learned" and "esoteric" formalist aesthetic was, in fact, Edward Burne-Jones. Even though Burne-Jones's paintings are figurative, with depictions of character and narrative, the criticism found his paintings to be the most worthy of comment for their "eccentric," "freakish," and "peculiar" qualities. In fact, I would argue that Burne-Jones was a more important vehicle for the dissemination of a formalist aesthetic in the 1870s than Whistler was—and that Pater's Giorgionesque-formalist aesthetic is as much a commentary on Burne-Jones as it is on Whistler. Critics focused on the fact that all of Burne-Jones’s figures—especially the languid female angels in his Days of Creation series at the Grosvenor—had almost the same expression, the same features, and the same poses (Fig. 5). His abstracted figures and intense stylization, influenced by the example of the Italian quattrocento "primitives" like Botticelli, all put his paintings into the category of the "decorative" for contemporary reviewers. The qualities of flatness, repetition, pattern, and abstraction were all steps on a path away from the realist transcription of nature and the narrative mode of imagery.

In his review of the Grosvenor show, Henry James sums up the larger critical feeling most eloquently. He imagines a critic saying of Burne-Jones, "It is not painting... It is literature, erudition, edification; it is a superior education, a reminiscence of Oxford, a luxury of culture. Painting is a direct rendering of something seen in the world we live in and look at, we love and
Figure 5  Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Fifth Day*, 1875–1876
admire, and in that sense there is certainly no painting here.”39 As James’s comments make clear, while the narrative method of interpreting art was considered hopelessly bourgeois or working-class, the formalist method of finding immanent beauty in art was a privileged mode of seeing, based on a cultivated knowledge of art and its conventions. It was not just a training of the eye, but a training of sensibility; it was to know how to behave in front of art, to invoke a quasi-religious gallery experience, to have been to Oxford not just to receive an education and read books, but to gain the cultivated stamp of the “Oxford man,” with a whole index of expected behaviors, attitudes, and class-specific cultural knowledge.30 This is in effect what Bourdieu speaks of when he coins the much-quoted notion of “cultural capital”: not simply an idea that cultural knowledge itself has upper-class associations, but specifically that the ability to appreciate a work of art for its formal rather than representational qualities is a learned ability, and a privilege of the educated classes.41

To bring Pater into this debate, it is striking how his depiction of the Giorgionesque as a refuge for the private veneration of formalist paintings so closely approaches the reality of the Grosvenor. With its trappings of a private room in a gentleman’s house, the Grosvenor had an aura of the “private” which fully accords with the space Pater longingly evokes in his essay. I think that the genre-space of Pater’s “Giorgione” essay, the privileged room he creates for the contemplation of beautiful art, must be seen in the context of the Grosvenor’s success. Both “rooms” embody an aesthetic of private, exclusive contemplation, cut off from the crowding demands of the hoi-poi.

In this connection, then, Pater’s Giorgionesque can be critiqued as the exclusive enclave of those privileged with a certain class and education. Pater harnesses the language of class himself to evoke his discriminating aesthetic, with words like “refined,” “consummate,” and “quintessence”: the Giorgionesque is an exquisite cultural product which only the special few can produce or extract. The Victorian class-based critiques of formalism have been echoed by critics in the twentieth century, especially those with Marxist allegiances; they see the Kantian notion of a “pure” aesthetic as a tool used by cultural elites to shore up their social and economic power. These critics, which include Pierre Bourdieu in his Distinction, Terry Eagleton in The Ideology of the Aesthetic, Peter Bürger in Theory of the Avant-Garde, and Martha Woodmansee in The Author, Art, and the Market, find the supposed “disinterest” of an aesthetic gaze to be in fact profoundly interested, not only in the promotion of its own class superiority, but in the assertion of its value in the face of the market’s preference for other, more “accessible” types of art.42
Figure 6  George du Maurier, *Modern Aesthetics*  
*Punch*, 10 February 1877
Yet this class critique of Pater—along with the reduction of Kantian disinterestedness to economic factors—does not take into account the fact that the assertion of an object’s value beyond market forces has in itself liberatory political connotations: by arguing for the value of art apart from its market reception, Enlightenment authors like Kant or Schiller might also be asserting the value of “liberty,” liberalism, autonomy from mass opinion—in effect, the famous definition of liberalism as set out in Mill’s _On Liberty_, as the right to differ from the hegemony of public taste. This is the contradictory promise of subjective criticism, as Linda Dowling interprets it: even while Pater’s _Renaissance_ could be seen as a defense of the liberal subject’s right to judge, it also contained within it the seeds for an “aristocracy of the aesthetic,” which would bear its most famous fruit in the person of Oscar Wilde. Indeed, the contradictions inherent in the ideology of subjective criticism are also those of liberalism itself: the right to one’s own judgment protects for _differences_ of opinion, and hence allows for a disparity that might lead to the formation of an elite. With regards to art criticism, the theoretical equality of every judging eye ignored the culturally conditioned aspect of the art experience, which in itself was profoundly unequal in the Victorian world of the 1870s.

If formalist criticism was attacked for its elitist bent, it was also seen as a threat by conservative critics, because any spectator of any background could lay claim to its upper-class prestige by simply standing before a painting and declaring it “aesthetic.” For this reason, the art world became a locus for dramatizing the tensions of social mobility in late Victorian England. A remarkable number of cartoons of the period—especially those by the conservative du Maurier in _Punch_—caricatured the dandy or aesthete making absurd pronouncements in front of a work of art. A classic example comes in du Maurier’s 1877 _Modern Aesthetics_ (Fig. 6), where a foppish “Ineffable Youth” defeats every protest by a “Matter-of-Fact Party” to insist on the inexplicable beauty of a painting. The aesthete’s comments are a parody of the formalist aesthetic, where “subject” is no matter and “truth to Nature” is a bore. Du Maurier’s Aestheticism cartoons, with their cast of social-climbers and pretentious know-nothings, mockingly portray art criticism as a ladder to social superiority which bypasses the traditional channels of social power—birth, class, wealth, and so forth. With the influx of new voters, new viewers, and an inexperienced audience of art, it was a commonplace for critics to overhear country bumpkins making obnoxious _faux-pas_ before pictures, or pompous frauds with no social standing making larger claims than was appropriate to their “station.”

Pater’s “Giorgione” essay embodies some of the same tensions satirized by du Maurier. There is an element of dissimulation to his proposal for an “aesthetic critic” who, like an eighteenth-century virtuoso, lovingly studies
his art objects in a private room far removed from the exigencies of the mar-
ket or the public—because, in the end, Pater’s championing of the private is a
rhetorical move, appearing as it does in a widely circulated periodical. Pater
was an art critic who gained prominence and money by publishing in the pe-
riodical press; like Crowe and Cavalcaselle, he was a professional of art.
When he began publishing in the *Fortnightly Review*, his signed articles
gained him both notoriety and an increasing following: the public platform
created his own “name” and his own “school.”

Indeed, in a final ironic twist, for all of formalist criticism’s opposition to
mainstream Victorian bourgeois values, it could only bring about its own
fame by becoming, itself, a commodity. All avant-garde art struggles with
this paradox, setting itself against the ideologies of bourgeois culture even
while it strives to be noticed, accepted, and ultimately approved of by that
culture through the institutions of the capitalist art market—the museum,
the gallery, or the periodical press; making itself, in other words, into a com-
modity. This is true of Pater’s writing just as much as it is of Burne-Jones’s
or Whistler’s paintings. Even while he outlines in his essay his ideal audi-
ence—a rapt group of young “men of taste,” gathered in an intimate
space—the affirmation of his ideas would ultimately be expressed not by
such a gathering, but by the purchase of his book in the literary market.