The Imaginary Portrait: 
Pater’s Contribution to a Literary Genre

WHILE THE IMAGINARY PORTRAIT is often considered Pater’s unique narrative form, it has seldom been the specific object of critical note even though the widespread tendency has been that of dealing with it in comprehensive discussions of the writer’s output. If we except Gerald Monsman’s seminal and pioneering *Pater’s Portraits: Mythic Pattern in the Fiction of Walter Pater*, there is indeed no critical text completely devoted to Pater’s short fiction. Nor are there, on the other hand, many critical readings which depict the imaginary portrait as a formula exploited by writers other than Pater. In fact, I could only detect two isolated studies postulating the existence of the genre as a typical late-Victorian literary expression: Jan B. Gordon’s article “The Imaginary Portrait: Fin de Siècle Icon” (1969) and the more recent *L’incanto della distanza: Ritratti immaginari nella cultura del Decadentismo* (1992) by Benedetta Bini. Both trace possible evolutionary lines for aesthetic portraiture, the former highlighting the psychoanalytical implications of the mode (with a stress on voyeurism and exhibitionism), the latter concentrating mainly on the thematic aspects shared by a number of late-Victorian short stories that Bini—borrowing, like Gordon, a Paterian term—chooses to classify as imaginary portraits. Both, however, fail to state explicitly which should be the typical features of the genre, whilst perhaps putting too much emphasis on the division between art and morality as a determinant factor in the birth of fin-de-siècle literary portraiture.

A third study, Wendell Harris’s *British Short Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (1979), devotes an interesting chapter to the so-called Victorian “aesthetic fiction,” a definition roughly corresponding to Gordon and Bini’s “imaginary portrait.”1 Harris convincingly explains how, both before and after Pater’s stories, there were tales inspired by the same aesthetic issues and sharing common thematic and stylistic features. He then mentions a few traits as being typical of the first examples of pre-Paterian aesthetic fiction by D. G. Rossetti and William Morris, and later exploited by other authors fol-
lowing the same mode of writing. These traits are, in Harris’s words, “a style which is touched with strangeness,” “a distanced setting,” “a focus on something other than a series of overt events and actions (the ‘plot’ in the most conservative sense of that term),” “a point of view about the world which is of special importance to the author . . . at a time when most short stories, except for those overtly didactic, were scarcely concerned with significant themes,” and eventually “a special kind of impressionism: an attempt to render the writer’s intense impression not of the actual world he has experienced, but of a past age, a type of mind, or a point of view with which he cannot have had direct or full contact.”

Debatable as Harris’s analysis may appear—in fact, it is only applicable to narratives set in a remote past—its centering on the distinctive features of aesthetic portraiture has proved significant in helping support my idea that the imaginary portrait could represent a sub-genre of late-Victorian short fiction which several writers adopted, though only Pater institutionalized. Through his work, a literary expression born some thirty years before as a timid, empirical and almost casual exercise by young painter-poets was finally granted an identity and a raison d’être of its own.

Such considerations have led me to conclude that the first step towards recognition of the imaginary portrait can actually come from the sole clue Pater himself left to a definition of its nature. This is found in the famous letter to George Grove of 17 April 1878, where his first experiment in short fiction, “The Child in the House,” was illustrated in the following terms:

It is not, as you may perhaps fancy, the first part of a work of fiction, but is meant to be complete in itself; though the first of a series, as I hope, with some real kind of consequence in it . . . I call the M.S. a portrait, and mean readers, as they might do on seeing a portrait, to begin speculating—what came of him? (LWP 30)

I shall start from these words in order to broadly define the origins and nature of the imaginary portrait and then trace a brief history of its possible development. Apart from Pater, I shall therefore indicate a few authors who, either before or after him, contributed to the evolution of aesthetic short fiction.

Essentially, the passage in Pater’s letter to Grove highlights three significant points. The first and clearest is that “The Child in the House” was primarily a fictional expression, though sui generis. Secondly, as its very name suggests, the imaginary portrait was connected with Pater’s role as an art critic and certainly ensued from his interest in painting. It, thus, resulted from a combination of narrative writing and critical writing on figurative arts (most probably the kind of essay elaborated in The Renaissance). Hence it was the fruit of a generic interrelation. Thirdly, the new type of writing originated in an interplay of the sister arts, literature and painting, and so reflected a characteristic late nineteenth-century concern with artistic hybridization. The imaginary portrait, Pater explains, should have enabled
the audience to perceive or, even better, to “see” its protagonist as if in a pictorial portrait.

But, as the final question in the letter—“what came of him?”—suggests, the contiguity of the genre to portrait painting also implies the reader’s active and sympathetic involvement with the central personality described in the story. Such a process requires a co-participation, or even an identification, of the reader and, implicitly, the author of the literary work with its subject in order to both communicate and grasp its essence. Thus the new form appears as markedly autobiographical and biographical and conforms to another typical trend of the nineteenth century, the age of the institutionalization of biography in England and of the success of modern autobiography, modeled on Rousseau’s *Confessions* and accordingly registering the author’s innermost impulses and sensations. At the same time, the imaginary portrait appears to stem from one of the central motifs of aesthetic and fin-de-siècle poetics, namely the confusion of roles between art and life.

However, if a process of sympathy involving the reader, the writer and the personality sketched in the story seems to be as essential to Pater’s literary portrait as in fact it is, according to Langbaum’s classical analysis, to the dramatic monologue, a hybrid expression to which it has often been compared, the adjective “imaginary” insists on the fictional nature of the genre. And since fiction functions as a screening and dislocating device, “imaginary” seems to emphasize the utopia intrinsic in any idea of a total revelation of the artist in his work. It moreover implies that the interpretation of art on purely autobiographical and biographical grounds can lead to misrepresentation. By contrast, the combination of “imaginary” with “portrait” invites an approach which is only partly (auto)biographical, thus stressing the ultimately ambiguous and elusive character of the genre.

Other elements for a comprehension of the origin and nature of the imaginary portrait are offered by its connection with artistic and generic hybridization. If, as Todorov maintains, a genre is a social and therefore a historical institution, Pater’s statements to Grove do nothing but confirm the dependence of the imaginary portrait on the cultural climate of the second half of the nineteenth century, when European art aspired to the Wagnerian *Wort-Ton-Drama* (a unique expression merging gesture, word and sound) and *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a work of art meaning to encompass all artistic forms), two concepts theorized by Wagner in his mid-century writings, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1849) and *Oper und Drama* (1850). At this time—precisely after the 1848 revolutions and the social and intellectual crisis ensuing from the collapse of the middle-class ideology, a situation examined in detail in Roland Barthes’s *Le degré zéro de l’écriture*—the crossing of genre and art boundaries represented the ideal of the most innovative artists.
They recognized the necessity to find more complex and composite artistic forms capable of reflecting their difficult situation in an increasingly contradictory world.

Some decades later Irving Babbit polemically commented on such artistic inclinations in *The New Laokoon* (1910), where he condemned the nineteenth-century “general confusion of the arts, as well as of the different genres within the confines of each art. To take examples at random, we have Gautier’s *transpositions d’art*, Rossetti’s attempts to paint his sonnets and write his pictures, Mallarmé’s ambition to compose symphonies with words.”9 Contrary, therefore, to Lessing’s strict precepts in the epoch-making *Laokoon* (1766), recommending that painting and poetry should represent different aspects of reality and never invade each other’s field, the former art being spatial, and thus descriptive, the latter temporal, and so narrative, nineteenth-century European avant-gardes pursued the ideal of artistic and generic hybridization. Within English culture the best-known evidence of such demand for an interrelation of various artistic expressions is of course constituted by Pater’s essay “The School of Giorgione” (1877), with its considerations on the *Anders-streben* impulse and its famed dictum that “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” (*Ren/H* 106). Not fortuitously, perhaps, “The School of Giorgione” was also the last piece Pater wrote before composing his first fictional portrait, a hybrid and interartistic expression, as already stated, “The Child in the House.”10

In view of these reflections, a few immediate forerunners of Pater’s portraits are easily detected in some tales by Victorian artists committed to both literature and painting. The earliest is Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Hand and Soul” (1850), a novella published in the April number of *The Germ*, the first English periodical to divulge the ideal of a blending of the sister arts. Centered on Chiaro dell’Erma, an imaginary thirteenth-century Tuscan painter hankering after an undefined artistic ideal and partly reflecting the young Rossetti’s aspirations and doubts, “Hand and Soul” anticipates some essential features of the Paterian portraits, both at a thematic and a structural level. Thus, besides its primary inspiration from an osmotic interchange between literature and painting, “Hand and Soul” first delineates the protagonist that will become paradigmatic of aesthetic portraiture: a male artist, or an artistically gifted young man, in whom imaginary and autobiographical features conflate. As an evident projection of the author (a fact which accounts for his invariably being male11), he generally shares his creator’s vision of life and often reproduces some of the author’s actual experiences and feelings. Hence he displays a certain dissatisfaction with the world and a longing to bury himself in a consuming passion or task (be it art, philosophy, religion, or an anguished search for artistic and emotional self-fulfillment). His character is also portrayed as fundamentally passive and prone to sterile
cogitation, while he functions as the quasi-exclusive focal point of narration. Otherwise speaking, apart from a number of episodes (for instance, the narrative frames in “Hand and Soul,” “Denys l’Auxerrois,” “Duke Carl of Rosenholtz” or “Emerald Uthwart”), the imaginary portrait mode basically exemplifies what Genette calls fixed internal focalization.12

Within the same genre of Rossetti’s short story belongs the first of the nine tales William Morris composed for the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine in 1856, “The Story of the Unknown Church.” Similarly to “Hand and Soul,” it concentrates on a young artist (this time a sculptor), chooses a late-Medieval southern setting, and finally uses a language studded with archaisms and foreign words and a style characterized by very complex sentences, often modeled on Latin rather than English syntax. But the indebtedness of Morris’s sketch to Rossetti is perhaps even more manifesting in the attempt to create a work translating figurative art into words, as emerges from the frequent descriptive passages evidently based on the device of ekphrasis, and thus openly contradicting the lesson of the Laokoon.13

A third story by a painter possesses a similar visual quality, while it also anticipates other traits of Pater’s portraits. It is Simeon Solomon’s only fictional work, A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep, privately printed in 1871, and composed, as was the author’s intention, “to prove, both to himself and to others, that, like Rossetti, he too could be the master of two mediums of art.”14 Though encumbered by a heavy allegorical design which hinders interpretation, Solomon’s Vision contributed to divulge the formula of the Pre-Raphaelite novellas among the aesthetic circles of the seventies. Yet unlike in Rossetti and in Morris, here widespread homosexual undertones conflate with classical and Christian motifs in the delineation of the hero and in that of the Soul and of the allegorical personifications that guide him through a journey in search for Love. Far from being portrayed as a Pre-Raphaelite “stunner,” as in Rossetti’s germinal imaginary portrait, here the Soul possesses the features of an androgynous young man, whose description evokes the ephebic traits of ancient-Greek male iconography. Furthermore, the entire narrative is based on the protagonist’s voluntary submission to a series of cathartic ordeals in order to expiate unnamed past sins.

There is, of course, in these fictional details more than a passing allusion to Solomon’s shame and contrition for his own homosexuality—a fact which probably accounts for his decision to print the story privately, so as to make it accessible only to a choice coterie of readers. Among these there were two writers of later imaginary portraits sharing an analogous epicene sensitivity. Echoes of the homoerotic energies permeating Solomon’s story are thus perceptible in such Paterian portraits as “Emerald Uthwart” and “Apollo in Picardy,” as well as in Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr W. H.”
Despite these similarities, divergences between Pater’s tales and the imaginary portraits ante litteram of Rossetti, Morris and, particularly, Solomon come forth especially in regards with characterization. If in the earlier narratives the protagonists are drawn with a stateliness and with stereotyped traits suggestive of Medieval representations (in Solomon, for example, the hero appears as a latter-day everyman, rather than a fully developed character), in Pater’s they possess a distinctive psychological dimension closer to Renaissance and post-Renaissance painting. A deeper concern in characterization parallels in Pater a more accurate thematic development and modern range of subjects. His stories mainly concentrate on typical fin-de-siècle motifs, such as the vision of childhood as the privileged reign of irrationality and intuition, the sense of existential and artistic failure, a widespread feeling of life-weariness interspersed with rare epiphanic moments, a morbid, claustrophobic image of sex, the oppressive presence of physical, or more characteristically psychological disease, and a longing for death.

Stylistically, then, Pater follows Rossetti’s and Morris’s use of obsolete, often Latinate words, their elaborate sentence structure, but also their fastidious search for what Linda Dowling has called the Pre-Raphaelites’ linguistic “ parsimoniousness,” a definition which in Paterian terms could be translated as “self-restraint” or “ascēsis” (Ap 17). Yet, Pater clearly achieves a greatly superior mastery of language and phrasing that would be largely imitated by later writers. But it is especially the fusion of different literary genres that typifies Pater’s portraits, rather than previous aesthetic fiction. As variously conjectured, here within merges the influence of some pivotal works of Western culture, spanning from Plutarch to Vasari to Sainte-Beuve, or from Montaigne to Rousseau, to Wordsworth. For my part, I recognize in Paterian portraiture the basic influence of the following literary typologies:

1) primarily, the Victorian short story as expressed by the sub-genre of the proto-aesthetic novellas of Rossetti, Morris and Solomon. But also other nineteenth-century narratives, both long and short and not necessarily English, set in the past or exploiting and re-elaborating historical, mythological or legendary motifs, such as Mérimée’s “La Vénus d’Ille,” Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun, Flaubert’s “Légende de Saint-Julien L’Hospitalier,” and George Eliot’s Romola. If Pater adopted the autobiographical centrality of the artist and of the discourse on art typical of the Pre-Raphaelite tales, he was likewise indebted to the hints at the imaginary return of the pagan gods in modern times which characterizes the works of Mérimée, Hawthorne and Eliot. In Flaubert’s conte one can also recognize marked analogies with “Denys l’Auxerrois” and “Apollo in Picardy,” both for the Medie-
val French setting and the disturbingly oxymoronic characterization of their heroes;

2) the critico-biographical mode represented through the centuries by such works as Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*,19 Vasari’s *Vite*,20 Dr. Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*, Aubrey’s *Brief Lives*, Hazlitt’s *The Spirit of the Age: Or, Contemporary Portraits*, Landor’s *Imaginary Conversations*, Sainte-Beuve’s *Portraits littéraires and Portraits contemporains*, and whose influence is primarily evident, within Pater’s work, in *The Renaissance*. This consideration gives further credit to the theory, corroborated by a few critics,21 that the studies of *The Renaissance* constituted the first necessary step towards the delineation of the fictional *personae* of the imaginary portraits. In any event, the works cited above share the constant focus on the personality and psychology of one single character with both *The Renaissance* and Paterian fictional portraiture. In some of these texts (Hazlitt’s *Contemporary Portraits*, Landor’s *Imaginary Conversations* and Sainte-Beuve’s *Portraits littéraires and contemporains*, all titles being evidently suggestive of Pater’s new genre), one can also distinguish an idiosyncratic, highly subjective form of criticism in which the author’s presence, though seldom explicit, is nevertheless pervasive. While again being typical of *The Renaissance*, a similar tendency appears conspicuous in “A Prince of Court Painters.” But it is similarly manifest in other portraits, whenever the discourse on art comes to the foreground;

3) the greatest expressions of confessional literature by Augustine and Rousseau, together with some nineteenth-century English works written in the same vein, namely Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Suspiria de Profundis*, and Newman’s *Apologia*. The basically autobiographical essay writing of such disparate authors as Marcus Aurelius, Montaigne, Sir Thomas Browne, Pascal and Lamb is likewise to be included in this category.22 Deriving from these literary mode is the self-revelatory tone inescapable in Pater’s stories, although more markedly observed in those that I shall later define as “histories of a conscience.”

Since most of these texts belonged to Pater’s personal canon,23 and he devoted single studies to many of these authors, there should be no wonder that he chose to re-elaborate them in a highly idiosyncratic literary form, which struck a few original notes despite its fundamental dependence on the short story genre. One innovative trait, already foregrounded by Harris in his analysis, is undoubtedly the presentation of a plot ultimately failing to solve the crucial narrative knots. Even the death of the hero—an event invariably ending Pater’s tales—can lay itself open to a variety of interpretations, as is the case with Sebastian van Storck’s self-immolation as a
Christ-like savior, or with Watteau’s and Marius’s singular deathbed conver-
sions. Such open endings certainly do not contribute to the achievement of
the unity of impression which constitutes a typical trait of earlier nineteenth-
century short fiction.24

Another modern feature of the Paterian portraits lies in the tendency to
portray the protagonist’s inner world—his “sensations and ideas”—rather
than his actions. This can in turn result in tentative experimentation with the
chronological and narrative dimensions, as once again in “Sebastian van
Storck,” where narration often proceeds through alternated analepsis and
prolepsis, while the hero’s thoughts are occasionally reported through inte-
rior monologue. Other examples of unconventional handling of temporal se-
dences and narrative techniques can be found in some parts of the
imaginary portrait _sui generis_ of Marius. Here as elsewhere in Pater, the intro-
duction of privileged moments in which the hero reaches a different percep-
tion of himself can also function as a pretext to experiment with narration.25

In turn, the frequent insertion of epiphanies26 intended in a modern
sense, that is as mainly casual and trivial experiences in which the protago-
nist clarifies questions of primary significance to him, although often par-
tially and temporarily,27 seems to be a further innovative trait of the Paterian
imaginary portrait as compared with high-Victorian fiction.28 Invariably,
Pater’s stories are structured as quests for some undefined truth that never
proves wholly satisfactory, though momentarily gratifying. If in the novellas
of Rossetti, Morris and Solomon the central characters reach a final revela-
tory moment which seems to quench their existential and artistic thirst, the
Paterian questors are never permitted to achieve a definitive explanatory
point. Better still, they can attain truth only in death.

The aspects hitherto defined as typical of Pater’s portraits are traceable in
a number of _fin-de-siècle_ short stories which constitute a unique group within
the various sub-genres of late-Victorian short fiction. Their main debt to the
genre however emerges in their conformation to one or the other subtype
into which the writer’s tales quite naturally fall. According to the relevance
conferred to the autobiographical element, Pater’s short fiction can be dis-
tinguished into what I have chosen to define as “histories of a conscience”
and “historical-mythological portraits.”

The primary feature of the “history of a conscience” is a contemporary or,
in any case, nineteenth-century English setting, and then a more immedi-
ately perceptible confessional or strongly autobiographical strain, as appears
in such portraits as “The Child in the House” and “Emerald Uthwart”
(1892). Notoriously composed at crucial, emotionally intense moments in
Pater’s career: the former when he first decided to try his hand at fiction, the
latter following his most mature creative phase, in a state of declining health
and retrospective mood towards his life and art,29 both stories derive inspira-
tion from the writer’s childhood and adolescence. These he saw, in Rousseaian and Wordsworthian terms, as the sources of his adult personality and artistic vein. The unfinished “An English Poet” is clearly to be considered as a “history of a conscience” as well, although one can also recognize here the original but tentative introduction of the mythic motif which Pater would more extensively develop in later fiction.

The historical-mythological portraits, on the other hand, aim at decontextualizing the autobiographical element from a temporal, spatial and cultural perspective. Set in the past and never in England, such tales can be seen as contributing to the high-Victorian dislike of an overly direct confessional mood, and then once again as prose counterparts to the dramatic monologue. A few of them, besides, refer to classical myths to further dilute the personal strain, and, in doing so, they furnish a surprising anticipation of the mythical method of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce.

After Pater, the two kinds of imaginary portraits he devised evolved separately. There were thus Oscar Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr W. H.” (1889, 1893) and Vernon Lee’s “A Seeker of Pagan Perfection: Being the Life of Domenico Neroni, Pictor Sacrelegus” (1890). Both set in the Renaissance (though the former in England and Germany, the latter in Italy), they similarly exploit mythological allusions along with other Paterian motifs, such as the reincarnation of the soul seen in neo-Platonic terms, or the conformation to a cyclical, almost Viconian vision of history. More precisely, however, Wilde’s “Mr W. H.” could be interpreted as an original and successful attempt to merge the two typologies of imaginary portraiture, since the development of its parallel, though intermingling, Renaissance and Victorian plots, entails an interaction between the history of a conscience and the historical mythological portrait.

Deriving uniquely from the history of a conscience subtype were on the other hand a larger number of tales—W. B. Yeats’s “Rosa Alchemica” (1896), J. M. Synge’s “Étude Morbid: Or ‘An Imaginary Portrait’” (1899), the stories in Ernest Dowson’s Dilemmas (1895) and Arthur Symons’s Spiritual Adventures (1905)—which appear recognizably autobiographical and intentionally so. Grounded in fin-de siècle and decadent poetics, these fictions exasperated the confessional vein of Pater’s “The Child in the House” and “Emerald Uthwart” and likewise never exploited the device of a past setting to distance or filter a marked personal mood.

With the publication of Arthur Symons’s Spiritual Adventures in 1905, a collection of stories modeled, as the author himself admitted, on Pater’s short fiction, traces of the imaginary portrait were apparently lost. Written immediately after the historical conclusion of the Victorian Age, Symons’s work represented the perfection and, to a certain point, the exasperation of a narrative form originated in a combination of the most modern literary
trends of that same period. And the clearest example of the ultimate development attained by the aesthetic literary portrait in *Spiritual Adventures* is offered in the last tale of the collection, “Extracts from the Journal of Henry Luxulyan.” Here the characteristic theme of the exchange of roles between art and life reaches its furthest degree of evolution, since the story seems to foretell, with surprising accuracy of detail, the tragic turn that Symons’s life was to take in a three-year span.

Despite Symons’s conclusive interpretation of proper imaginary portraiture, still a number of critics have not failed to observe how the genre remarkably influenced two Modernist novels which represented its extreme achievement, although also its overcoming and parody. The first is, perhaps quite naturally, Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, that Perry Meisel has read as “a lengthy rewriting of . . . ‘The Child in the House’” and in which he has perceived echoes of the other short story by Pater set in the nineteenth century, “Emerald Uthwart.” Meisel’s opinions have been convincingly championed in Moliterno’s recent study of the Paterian influence on Joyce, where emphasis is especially laid on the debt of Joyce’s novel towards *Marius the Epicurean*.

But *A Portrait of the Artist* has also been discussed in terms of a partial revision of an intensely autobiographical imaginary portrait by Symons, “A Prelude to Life,” whose antecedents can, in turn, be found in two notable expressions of English confessional literature: Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and, once again, “The Child in the House.” Joyce’s novel seems therefore to me to express the consummation of the history-of-a-conscience typology of aesthetic short fiction, centered on a strongly and even, in Victorian terms, embarrassingly personal and revelatory mood.

The second early twentieth-century novel drawing basic inspiration from the imaginary portrait mode is Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, which Eugene Brzenk saw as deriving from Pater the concentration on “the same temperament under altered historical circumstances,” thus conforming to an interpretation advanced at first by Mario Praz and corroborated, in more recent years, by Perry Meisel. Autobiographical and biographical (it was notoriously inspired by its dedicatee, Vita Sackville-West), *Orlando* exploits the device of history to distance its hero-heroine from overly facile references to the author. What, however, strikes most clearly in *Orlando* is being derivative from the fin-de-siècle short stories analyzed so far is the portrait-like centrality of a single personality, as well as the play on biography, fiction, gender and time. These traits indicate that the second subtype of imaginary portrait—the historical-mythological—may be the basic model for Woolf’s novel.

Yet despite the opinions of a few critics, recognition of aesthetic portraiture as a seminal literary mode is occasional, and the real hold of the genre
on twentieth-century prose writing remains as yet underestimated. If the possible reason for this lies in the strictly epochal character of a typology still regarded as responding to the needs of a generation of aesthetes, a similar interpretation is, to say the least, reductive when considering its experimental nature, versatility and modernity. What cannot, however, be denied is that Pater’s imaginary portraiture stands out as the epitome and codification of English *fin-de-siècle* short fiction. Hence any critical assessment of later works of the influence of English aesthetic and decadent short story should necessarily view his fictional portraiture as a starting point.