Walter Pater

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Pater’s Body of Work

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A writer, full of a matter he is before all things anxious to express, may think of those laws, the limitations of vocabulary, structure, and the like, as a restriction, but if a real artist will find in them an opportunity.

—Walter Pater, “Style”

[The] body may be eclipsed by its own representations; it may disappear, like a god, in the abundance of its attributes; but it is outward, from its invisible musculature, rather than inwards, from its avid gaze, that all the images flow.

—Norman Bryson, Vision and Painting

FOR THE WEAK SOUL who lacks the confirming flourish of “real art” in his own work, Pater’s recommendations on aesthetics can be interpreted as inhibiting the talents he frequently seeks to promote, and it is one effect of his highly vigilant attitude towards art to turn the aesthete not into the hero, but rather the servant and, at times, the broken slave of the aesthetic. This is why the failed talent, who cannot help but feel diminished by the severity of Pater’s lesson, frantically imagines the erasure of an inadequacy he cannot stand to tolerate, something inside of him that defines his nature. And if the nature he fights against appears to take on the coating of the unnatural, then no amount of talent, work, or love will assist him in recovering a self whose deviant art will always be portrayed as being against nature.

And yet the failed talent’s anxiety over an identity he feels has been assigned to him without the promise of hope or productivity, is not a matter that is casually sustained by Pater, for whom the image of the artist trapped inside a failure’s body, or the failure trapped inside an artist’s body, provocatively describes a condition that now starts to move beyond the range of the aesthetic. Such a body-crisis comes to evoke the moment at which the problem of art coalesces with the fears spread by a rival coming-out story, one whose thickening plot finds in the aesthetic a representation of a certain minority experience that both speaks through and is silenced by the modes of artistic production according to which it operates.

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This essay seeks to articulate the difficulties that a Paterian body is committed to labor over in spite of its own apparent shortcomings—a body that must work in order to survive, and which finds, more often than not, its identity central to the anxieties that circulate around Pater’s aesthetics. By attending to the kinds of exemptions each artist suffers on his own terms and by following the embodiment of such nuances and the work that the body is consequently inclined to perform throughout Pater’s writings, I hope to explore what takes on the elements of a struggle to both represent and deny the prejudices entertained by a society that seeks to numb the representation of and attraction to the homoeroticizing of the male body.

Pater’s campaign for reform in style serves the same rigor as does haute couture, which reminds that the fascination for high fashion parades its privilege at the expense of embarrassing the ordinary body ill-fit or simply unfit to wear its designs. Like all poor clotheshorses, then, Pater’s readers find their frustrations excited by a need to demonstrate obedience at the altar of a writer who at times appears, if not full of a matter, simply full of himself. But also affined to such an alert ritual is the desire to exercise the ordinary body by subjecting it to a careful regime of aesthetic dieting, one that favors lighter pleasures in order to remind the wearied aesthete that with moderation, everything we digest will ultimately come to haunt us until we work ourselves off: “To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike” (Ren/H 189). To burn with this flame emulates the burnings of a workout that has us assume we are lighter because we have purged anything on the inside and outside that would make us heavy at the expense of fattening influences. A mandate, then, to trim ourselves in body comes around in confessing a parallel aesthetic desire that encourages a levity of appreciation and seeks to keep our bodies underweight and underfed at the dangerous threshold of possible demise.

If coming close to dying for one’s pleasures without actually being dead offers a swift, if not risky, crash-course in the trimming of aesthetic excesses, then the pleasures that are rapturously expected will come to make the sacrifices seem all the more worthwhile. In “Aesthetic Poetry,” Pater describes a type of jealous personality characteristic of Provençal love poetry whose expressions of love are tested and “defined by the absence of the beloved, choosing to be without hope, protesting against all lower uses of love, barren, extravagant, antinomian” (Ap 192). Desire limited serves a love whose endurance is measured in the broken heart that pines for a reprieve from the “vassalage” to which it is inextricably bound: “Another element of extravagance came in with the feudal spirit: Provençal love is full of the very forms of...”
vassalage. To be the servant of love, to have offended, to taste the subtle luxury of chastisement, of reconciliation—the religious spirit too knows that, and meets just there, as in Rousseau, the delicacies of the earthly love” (Ap 192).

Pater’s rich choice of the word “extravagance” resonates with its full meaning here: to go beyond limits. Championing a form of desire that turns the beleaguered servant of this romance into the star of the very pain he seeks to alleviate, Pater describes a type of aesthetic and sexual circulation that would be invidious were not the humiliation so absolutely necessary to its force. Like the mode of ascēsis he speaks of in the Preface to The Renaissance as the “austere and serious girding of the loins in youth” (Ren/H xxiii), Provençal poetry commits the individual to suffer for the sake of an art whose industry and punishments he believes are truly his own: “A passion of which the outlets are sealed, begets a tension of nerve, in which the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliancy and relief—all redness is turned into blood, all water into tears” (Ap 193). Here the person’s suffering evokes a crisis between the art of poetry and the humiliation of the body; he discovers that his demise is somatically choreographed as a ritual dissolution of redness into blood, water into tears, a process that does not so much purify as portray the body’s necessary, elemental breakdown. What emerges in the image of the body corroded is a description of its dissolution into language and material objects—the capacity Elaine Scarry identifies as specific to the human desire to project ourselves into external things and then consequently reabsorb them as if they were “now actually ‘felt’ to be located inside the boundaries of one’s own skin where one is in immediate contact with an elaborate constellation of interior cultural fragments that seem to have displaced the dense molecules of physical matter.” Scarry’s searching enquiry points to the ways in which the spatial freedoms we enjoy through various objects are refracted and reinscribed upon our bodies with an indelible menace that registers just how difficult it is to fully eradicate the kinds of oppression that inform such spaces in the first place. It is a quality of Pater’s thought to similarly suggest the body’s vexed dependence upon the imagery it creates, tries to escape into, and invariably assimilates along with the pains intrinsic to that assimilation.

The lingering death of the body at work comes to thematize what is often disinterred in the literature of decadence as the mortified body, which at some point arrests its course of development, like a bonsai tree, and shows off a weirder, more degraded flowering: “Here, under this strange complex of conditions, as in some medicated air, exotic flowers of sentiment expand, among people of a remote and unaccustomed beauty, somnambulistic, frail, androgynous, the light almost shining through them. Surely, such loves were too fragile and adventurous to last more than for a moment” (Ap 192). Unfa-
miliar both aesthetically and sexually, sleep deprived and translucent, beauty is for a moment contained in something phantom-like; it passes too quickly, like the anti-body identified in “Diaphaneité.” Such beautiful sterility would seem utterly impossible to maintain were not its deathliness part of the palette of the “pagan spirit” in aesthetic poetry, “which is on its surface—the continual suggestion, pensive or passionate, of the shortness of life. This is contrasted with the bloom of the world, and gives new seduction to it—the sense of death and the desire of beauty: the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death” (Ap 198). The world’s bloom and decay illustrate an exasperating entropy which finds its fleeting example in the ruined, mortal body—Pater’s source for the implication that the creation as well as the afterlife of beauty is already quickened by an art that is only lovely when it is truly dead. But the body, of course, must not always die right away: rather, it lives on to tell its exploits as a sort of survivor’s tale precisely because Pater conceives of death as a type of aesthetic practice of the mind—a masochism which secures the imagination by requiring the body to undergo a seductive cruelty: “the maddening white glare of the sun, and tyranny of the moon, not tender and far-off, but close down—the sorcerer’s moon, large and feverish. The colouring is intricate and delirious, as of ‘scarlet lillies.’ The influence of summer is like a poison in one’s blood, with a sudden bewildered sickening of life and all things” (Ap 193). The survivor who emerges, however scathed, bears the sort of slim physique that is not entirely the result of a meagre food intake or system of rationing (in spite of the rumors): he radiates the translucent sheen of the aesthetic gym rat who has worked for this body all along in order to pridefully transform and install it as an icon of art.

If this image of the fitness guru is far from the sort of hothouse flower Kenneth Burke thought Pater resembled, then it is because art, popularly, not only cannot stand in for real bodybuilding, but fails to approximate or substitute for it under most conditions. The hothouse flower, however, can nevertheless share a sympathy with the gym rat: in both cases, the body must continue to methodically preserve and exert its unique splendor, but it must do so by conveying the illusion that its routines and exercises are as effortlessly becoming as the twink appeal of the blueboys idealized in gay porn, gloriously endowed with athletic muscle, sheen, and the bias of goodlooks. To linger with this fantasy, promoted by the Prior in “Apollo in Picardy,” what the hothouse flower and the gym rat share is an awareness of the body’s bold exhibitionism:

A flood of moonlight now fell through the unshuttered dormer-windows; and, under the glow of a lamp hanging from the low rafters, Prior Saint-Jean seemed to be looking for the first time on the human form, on the old Adam fresh from his Maker’s hand. A servant of the house, or farm-labourer, perhaps!—fallen asleep there by chance on the fleeces heaped like golden stuff high in all the corners of the place. A serf! But what unserflike ease, how lordly, or godlike rather, in the posture!
Could one fancy a single curve bettered in the rich, warm, white limbs; in the haughty features of the face, with the golden hair, tied in a mystic knot, fallen down across the inspired brow? And yet what gentle sweetness also in the natural movement of the bosom, the throat, the lips, of the sleeper! (MS 148–49)

The emotions in this passage travel well beyond any phobic proprieties that would promote abstinence in the presence of the male body on display. The Prior, by virtue of his anonymity, has us discover dominance through his eyes, as the attention paid to the erotic body gradually absorbs his consciousness. It is here that the narrative moves beyond distractions in order to audition for a homosexuality only the mind and body can imagine or perform, but perhaps be unwilling to act out. The boy’s innocence is not read as self-originating in the way in which the crystal character in “Diaphaneitê” ostensibly appears. By contrast, the boy’s Edenic beauty arises from an initial act of manual work, “fresh from his Maker’s hand,” whose implicit masturbatory pleasures are recreated and embodied in the languid boy’s eroticism, himself a materialization of the labor of his origins by figuring as a servant or farmhand, caught unaware in his sexiness as he continues to figure for other (manual) forms of work. The Prior compares himself to the boy through a fantasy in which the latter’s virtuous, self-originating polish is described as free of the self-conscious performance of bodybuilding that the Prior jealously worships and rehearses himself: “And is not the human body, too, a building, with architectural laws, a structure, tending by the very forces which primarily held it together to drop asunder in time? Not in vain, it seemed had the Prior Saint-Jean come to this mystic place for the improvement of his body’s health. Thenceforth that fleshly tabernacle had housed him, had housed his cunning, over-wrought and excitable soul, ever the better day by day, and he began to feel his bodily health to be a positive quality or force, the presence near him of that singular being having surely something to do with this result” (MS 155). With similar motivation, the hothouse flower works to make others see the sheen of his tabernacle’s sweat, which garners brightness from the gut feeling that, regardless of the rankness of the odor betraying the body’s lack of hygiene, the body which cultivates a style of shaping up will ultimately achieve the distinction (amongst others) of becoming paradigmatic, a standard, *first in its rank.*

The Prior is thus furthered in his intellectual productivity by the inspirations provided by the country boy—inspirations that in turn measure the Prior’s devotion to the other’s body figured and desired within his own. But the workings of the intellect, much like the erotic fantasies it juicily spins, must fall victim to the sobering, daily work schedule. If the basic black of the night proves to be not only more slimming, but concealing of those features we most seek to hide in the heat of noon, the working body that rises at dawn and cannot afford to hide itself all day will have to face having its vicious
blemishes and faults exposed in the daily light, a light that also theatrically designed the downfall of another, more famous contemporary portrait of the artist as a young man: “There it is still in the faded gold and colours of the ancient volume—‘Prior Saint-Jean’s folly’:—till on a sudden the hand collapses, as he becomes aware of that real, prosaic, broad daylight lying harsh upon the page, making his delicately toned auroras seem but a patch of grey, and himself for a moment, with a sigh of disgust, of self-reproach, to be his old unimpassioned monastic self once more” (MS 165).

The influence of the younger man upon the older stimulates the longings of a desire whose name would be more often than not consigned to anonymity were it not for the structures of a paiserastic education that kept it circulating both as a formal necessity and a queer seduction. For the country boy of “Apollo in Picardy,” like his counterpart in “Diaphaneité,” his beauty and intelligence are not simply perceived as being more naturally attuned—“nature” by this time, according to Linda Dowling, alluding to “Greek” in the tradition of Hellenistic paiserastia. The erotics of his physique and pose express a passivity that is intimately enacted (rather than intended) in the luscious swagger he performs in blithe ignorance of the appetites he inspires: “In short, these creatures of rule, these ‘regulars,’ the Prior and his companion, were come in contact for the first time in their lives with the power of untutored natural impulse, of natural inspiration” (MS 156). And if such naturalness also partakes of the aeriness of a desire that penetrates the soul rather than tops the body, it is because it can only claim an approximate, material reference to male physicality. The male body is not entirely suppressed, however: like the nervous typecasting in films that knows which actors are gay enough to be seen and not seen, or the sort of management that recognizes the desirability of the gay actor for a straight audience while dispensing with his identity for the sake of wider commercial release, the body’s relevance is given a supporting rather than starring role, one whose necessity as foil underwrites the even brighter performance of the star who fortunately has never had to look back and smile at the gutter. The body’s double-hinged closet life both teases and disavows any sense that might genuinely construe the love that serves to influence as eventually turning over the sheets to become the love that can have sex—a difference Dowling gives context in the opposition between late Victorian Uranian love and a more carnal homoeroticism: “This is the paradox: even as its ideals of spiritual procreancy and nongenital eroticism went on silently expanding the dimensions of intentionality and inwardness necessary to constitute ‘homosexuality’ as a positive social identity, the Uranian ideal could in the early years of the twentieth century be contemptuously dismissed by such influential voices as that of Lytton Strachey as nothing more than a weak attempt to deny that physical desire now pronounced by Freud and others to
be universal and all pervasive—as, in short, nothing more than a ‘higher sodom-
omy.’”

Strachey’s complaint about the higher sodomy registers a more probing
protest against the degaying of the male body for the sake of preserving its
dreadfully false sense of modesty, one that stereotypically governs the ideol-
ogy of the straight male. Like the sheer underwear that barely conceals the
ripe bulge of the cinematic male body, and yet is entirely absent from the
wardrobe of his female co-star, the humility of the straight male is often the
excuse for a careful foreclosure of those desires that threaten to dislodge his
prominence. The tease such a covered up body performs on screen is accom-
panied by a sense of how well it disables not only the female moviegoer who
sees the male body in the kind of objectivity usually reserved for her, but the
gaze of the gay male who, if not already fortuitously blind, is denied the right
to fantasize, as well as any complicity with the desires of the straight woman.
Not only is the starpower of the cinematic male body never to be gayed, but it
must never enable the worst possible dream: the gay moviegoer finally seeing
himself on screen. This denial of carnality does not so much dispose of the
body as impose upon it the attitude, that, regardless of the oppression which
visits the Paterian body in the form of a cover up, the body must actively re-
main and work for the sake of the star performance it invariably cannot claim
as its own vehicle—a body that works without pleasure and certainly has no
time for gay sex. By figuring rather than being afforded actual representa-
tion, the working body just described participates in a type of art that neces-
sarily operates through recourse to abstraction, as this passage from the
“Winckelmann” essay suggests:

Again, Greek sculpture deals almost exclusively with youth, where the moulding of
the bodily organs is still as if suspended between growth and completion, indicated
but not emphasised; where the transition from curve to curve is so delicate and elu-
sive, that Winckelmann compares it to a quiet sea, which, although we understand
it to be in motion, we nevertheless regard as an image of repose; where, therefore,
the exact degree of development is so hard to apprehend. (Ren/H 174)

The pre-developed body of the youth is endlessly desirable because in being
hard to hold, it promises at the very least a *moment* of holding, a moment as
spare and free of blame and fault as the teenage body can be. And yet, the
passage’s paiderastic embarkations suggest a more important formalizing
change. The sheer physicality of bodily organs is carefully transvalued into
the outline of a being who figures as a “transition from curve to curve . . . so
delicate and elusive.” The extraordinary image Pater borrows from Winckel-
mann to describe the transitions (rather than qualities) operating on the
youthful body—“a quiet sea, which, although we understand it to be in mo-
tion, we nevertheless regard as an image of repose”—intimates the fine cali-
brations of a desire that seeks to prolong, through the abstraction of the sea,
its devotion to a young body. The sea both contains and erotically buoys the body which either floats or swims in it, but more significantly, it suggests mobility and stillness as conditions taking place at the same time—conditions which also set up the terms not only for a type of ideal aesthetic appreciation that is conscious of changes present in a natural seascape, but those that the seascape and the act of viewing perform on the body, which remains unaware of its susceptibility to influence. In other words, attentiveness to aesthetic change here echoes the intimations of mortality in the viewing subject. For Pater, figurality becomes the theme of a complex slippage between a disavowal and a recovery of referentiality, whose cultural and social nuances compel the body to suffer the disruptions of being either entirely fulfilled by aesthetics, or caught in the vanishing act of a vibrant spectacle which threatens to undo it.\textsuperscript{11}

The image of the youthful body at sea—a body in the midst of change—appears subject to affections that are capable of absolving both itself and its admirers of all responsibilities through the pathways of its flickering sexuality. I am influenced in my remarks here by Kristin Ross’s description of Rimbaud’s adolescent body, whose distinguishing feature of appearing “at once too slow and too fast, acts out the forces that perturb bourgeois society’s reasoned march of progress. For that progress is disrupted by two phenomena: it can be slowed down by the superstitious and the lazy, and it can be thrown offtrack by the impatient, violent rush of insurrection.”\textsuperscript{12} The menace of the adolescent body often painfully confesses a body in revolt against the social conformism that designates it as a peril in the first place. It is in fact the body’s confrontation with a system that threatens to destroy it (the gay teen’s body, for example) that overcharges it with an energy sufficient enough to rebuff its oppressors, lest it allow itself to be imperilled: “Over and over again the world has been surprised by the heroism, the insight, the passion, of this clear crystal nature. Poetry and poetical history have dreamed of a crisis, where it must needs be that some human victim be sent down into the grave. These are they whom in its profound emotion humanity might choose to send” (\textit{Dia} 253).

What deserves particular attention is Pater’s willingness to encrypt the adolescent body with a sense of aesthetic mobility. By bestowing such status to this body, Pater perceives it as exemplifying a virtuous strike against adulthood. For this reason, Pater’s thoughts often prove controversial because they converge upon a central question: to whom must one extend aesthetic licence—the youthful body, or the body steeped in aesthetic maturity? Moreover, the controversy sometimes arises from a convergence of these two bodies (or at least their qualities) in the same character. If a very select few aesthetes in the world appear worthy, it is also true that they share their rare worthiness with the spectacular talents of the youthful teenager, whose
own innately volatile body reflects something of the dandy’s equally conflicted nature in the marketplace, while also differing considerably from the latter’s avid connoisseurship: “While the bourgeoisie was preoccupied by material accumulation,” observes Christopher Lane, “the dandy expressed his class dissent by disdaining labor and affecting an indifference to economic advantage. This dissent was disingenuous, however, because the dandy’s relentless search for ‘distinction’ automatically increased his reliance on market forces,” compelling him to “anticipate patterns of consumption, and to cultivate a knowledge of commodities which he paradoxically dismissed as ‘vulgar’ and ‘mediocre.’”

The dandy subscribes to the same desires and dissents that characterize Pater’s youths insofar as he scoffs at the concepts of work and remuneration. Both he and the youth can afford not to work if all moments are already conceived of as fleeting, because regardless of their content, their endless circulation renders them insubstantial and transparent in a capitalist economy which hallucinates objects as always being scarce.

This fear of an object’s evanescence, which translates into a fear concerning human scarcity, not only finds an objective correlative in the lives of the dandy and the youth, but it distinguishes their parting destinies: the dandy latches onto the phantom life of objects because his connoisseurship depends upon the very economy that both alienates and attracts him; by comparison, the youth can only embrace a phantom life to whose strictures he seems naive, becoming not the connoisseur (he has no time for that activity) but the object of a paralyzing connoisseurship.

The body luxuriously objectified by this fantasy of objecthood exhibits the same qualities as wealth does in a system of conspicuous consumption where material things, according to Thorstein Veblen, flout beauties conditioned by a “canon of expensiveness,” one that says as much about the price of the objects as about the body’s own pricelessness. The body on display, like the wealth of objects amongst whose company it is ranged, repudiates the ideology of work, although with this difference: unlike objects, the body renounces not merely work in principle, but its own physical agency. Both the objects and the body of wealth radiate a beauty that aggrandizes their prestige, while at the same time dispossessing them of any investment in the labor that brought them to that plateau. They are not self-originating, but rather foreign to the notions of work and production—negatively assessed in isolation by Raymond Williams as embodying “the reduction of a whole process, characterized by its movement and its interactions, to a fragmentary, isolated product.” The homoerotic body in Pater comes into being first as a fetish, avidly cultivated by the collusion of sexuality with the commodity space of capitalism. Both the body and the object of wealth are now, according to the logic of capital, exemplars of a fantasy engendered by work. The erotic physique of the male who works to produce the fantasies of
which he is the subject—the true body of wealth from whose treasury the stuff of dreams is made of—is slowly effaced from the final product; whatever is left of his body and inscription in the fantasy becomes as vacuous as the eroticism he is meant to exotically supply.\footnote{16}

The body of wealth, however (a body \textit{belonging to}, but not in \textit{possession of}, the system of wealth), cannot always outfit itself in the style that pretends a resemblance to the wealthy body, whose status, like the Mona Lisa’s, always remains intact thanks to the fortunes it hordes.\footnote{17} And though it may fake its fortune by assuming the character of affluence while in private struggling with the torments of its debts, the false body of wealth that has everything to hide eventually succumbs to its poverty by losing precisely those qualities that money \textit{can} buy: mobility. The achieved stillness of the impoverished body brings into focus the intolerances visited upon other bodies already seen: the body that cannot have sex, the body coerced into work without pleasure, and the body that must work in order to survive. In all of these cases, the embodiment of work is dissociated from the very labor that would ostensibly alleviate its sufferings. The false body of wealth is often imagined in Pater as the body of youth, which cultivates the illusion of its high life amongst the \textit{nouveaux riches} where not only is its provenance always that of the \textit{parvenu}, but its worries blithely ignored. Like the waifs and boytoy models who are the pride of gay and fashion publicity, the commercial desirability of the youthful body prevents any consideration of the actual abuses and manipulations that such a body must support and undergo. By rendering us blind with love, the homoerotic body-as-commodity unwittingly advertises itself as the ideal marketplace fantasy that seems to be always physically available, only because its life has been entirely consumed.

The inexhaustible pleasures of the boy-object also come to elaborate a certain theory of sexuality, which proves to be especially seductive to the consumerist-seducer. For him, the love that lasts only for a moment is more specifically the love that defines a one-night stand—desires turned on and off by the next morning as quickly as garments are either put on or torn away. Necessarily free of weight and unencumbering, such a love has the effect of releasing the seducer from the burdening rumors of his sexual identity. The exhilarations of closet sexuality potentially turn the spectacle of gay male cruising into a site of gay \textit{eluding}: the body fucked and fucked over again has not so much been damaged as it has been recycled and dispersed into an economy that valorizes such environmentally friendly practices because the body remains reusable and utterly useless according to the terms of an anonymity that keeps the gay body distinctly inviolate.\footnote{18}

The commodification of the boy invariably aligns him in the heterosexual male mind with the trafficking of women, as Lee Edelman notes. Such an alignment succeeds in devaluing the male body at the expense of perceiving
it as a walking advertisement that is necessarily effeminized: “[The] textualized body that the regime of patriarchal heterosexuality compels us to recognize as ‘gay’ enters the public imagination as a body that ‘flaunts’ or advertises its difference, demanding the attention that straight society so eagerly... accords it and activating the force of heterosexual repugnance by the alleged coerciveness, that is, the openness, with which it displays its commodification and negotiability in the sexual marketplace.” The marketing of the gay man takes place under the aegis of a homophobia that tries hard to conceal its own desires for the body it cannot have; by entertaining the fantasy of the body as private property, the heterosexist (and potentially closeted) male gaze finds a dangerous complicity with the desires of a sexual anonymity that is both a sign of gay liberation and dread. The pleasures undertaken in ignorance of the epistemologies of the closet that serve to instruct the closeted gay male, never quite fully escape the desired objects he silently keeps behind closed doors, and which represent his own horde and self-estrangement—in other words, his homosexuality.

Against such models of oppression, Pater does offer a more seductive theory of masculinity, one which can be carefully surmised from his writings as entertaining those desires and prerogatives usually bestowed upon women, but frequently foreclosed from the template of possibilities privileged to men. These desires and prerogatives are denied often for fear of not only revealing the cultural arbitrariness of gender assignments, but more precisely, of unveiling the secret, overwhelming aspiration of the male to prove himself extravagantly beyond the contours of his own gendered desires, performances, and embodiments. The intrigue of gender trouble is given explicit portraiture in the images of hermaphrodites found amid Leonardo’s drawings:

They are the clairvoyants, through whom, as through delicate instruments, one becomes aware of the subtler forces of nature, and the modes of their action... Nervous, electric, faint always with some inexplicable faintness, these people seem to be subject to exceptional conditions, to feel powers at work in the common air unfelt by others, to become, as it were, the receptacle of them, and pass them on to us in a chain of secret influences. (Rem/H 91)

Pater’s description here of ambiguous genders and sexualities can be said to nullify the male heterosexual hierarchy for those queer members of the team who are exhausted by the tedium of rigid gender dichotomies. It renders the appeal of difference an erotic fantasy enriched by the dream of the feminine inside the body of the boy. This is not to say, however, that Pater forges such a fantasy within a truly resilient concept of gender, for the excess overruns he frequently ascribes to the body at times mean to enhance and imbue the very palpable postures of what is always ultimately corporealized as the only object of Paterian desire: the male body on show. This engendering serves to strain
the male body out of and into the softer conditions of late-Victorian androgyny and effeminacy, but always return its excesses to what is embraced as a distinct homoeroticism. But Pater’s real misogyny notwithstanding, one can say that insofar as the queerness of Pater’s thought—his queer theory avant la lettre—manipulates in part the logic of gender theory while also being substantially exclusive in its own operations, the body he ultimately comes to produce again and again in his writings can be said to confound the social persecutions that surround it by fully courting its own gay desires at the expense of openly expressing a very militant kind of effeminacy. Such a stance and pose make clear the gay body’s own sexual indifference to women, but at the same time it also insinuates that it shares the space which heterosexual masculinity thinks it understands, but is ultimately alien to: the fantastic space of femininity, which straight boys assume is entirely a woman’s privilege and their right, though by no means the changing room for their own macho sexuality.

Though this sounds all too close to the Freudian account of Leonardo’s homosexuality, the argument Pater anticipates does not merely repeat the stale homophobic definition of a gay man being a woman in disguise. Instead, it cultivates the erotic possibilities of a fantasy of masculinity and femininity which solicits those boys who desire other boys, but who never suffer the fear of the straight macho whose dread of his mother ever visiting him for a weekend conceals the more primal scene of being found “out” in bed with his boyfriend. Straight “machismo” often devolves into the “masochism” that haplessly tries to straighten the soul by mortifying the body, all in order to redeem the ass it has been covering up and fucking all along.

Pater’s often feverishly wishful fantasies of the gay male body at work do not, of course, always find fanfares as great as those launched in “Diaphanité,” where the almost celestial reverences paid to the male form retract the specter of decrepitude from a new sort of auspicious body, one undaunted by developmental theories that inscribe it with various stages of progress—stages defining not what the body intuitively believes and glories itself to be, but rather what its physical and psychological states must resemble according to a theoretical narrative of beginning, middle, and end. And yet, if the promise of an eternal beginning affords the dream of pure presentness, which Paul Morrison observes “can be celebrated as sexual ideal, moreover, only if all sexual activity aspires to the condition of perversion, which Freud construes as lingering in, dilating upon, the sexual present,” it is also soberly evident in Pater that the desires of the moment regularly forecast the elegy of a person who, much like the talentless artist deluded by his own desires, enjoys the imaginary freedom of immortality as a temporary smokescreen to ward off his own inevitable death. The numerous gruesome fatalities in works such as “Apollo in Picardy,” “Emerald Uthwart,” or
Marius the Epicurean, where violent death becomes the necessary punishment carried out on the youthful body that lingers for too long, correspond to a sad denial of such a body’s future in the world. And freighted with this denial is the pressure to read the demise of the youth as another scenario for the gay teenager, whose only drive is geared towards death—a pressure reminding us, as Morrison does, that the fantasy of renovation is complicit with a certain aloofness to the crisis at hand: “It’s not simply that there are no more perfect moments; rather, there never has been one, at least not for gay men.”

The boy becomes the victim of a genocidal impulse that visits, more than once, both him and the entire sexual minority he represents, a minority whose tributes to a Paterian aesthetic are terribly rewarded by a bleak narrative cleanup that bequeathes the youth’s body to the earth.

There is a ghastly mayhem resonating within Pater’s narratives of bildung or body Bildung (in D.A. Miller’s wonderful coinage): on the one hand they seek to promote programs to invigorate the self; but on the other, they are disrupted by acts of violence that leave behind something closer to a crime scene whose scenography is designed according to an aesthetics that hits its highest mark in the ghoulish light of a fatal late-night performance:

[Apollyon’s] shout of laughter is turned in an instant to a cry of pain, of reproach; and in that which echoed it—an immense cry, as from the very heart of ancient tragedy, over the Picard wolds—it was as if that half-extinguished deity, its proper immensity, its old greatness and power, were restored for a moment. The villagers in their beds wondered. It was like the sound of some natural catastrophe. (MS 168)

Apollyon “[saws] through [Hyacinth’s] face,” “crushing in the tender skull upon the brain” of his playmate (MS 168) with a savage energy that bespeaks the difficult limits of pleasure and pain in Pater’s thought—limits Linda Dowling has identified as obstacles to a tradition of liberalism he sought to imbibe and practise. The body that athletically overworks itself ends up laboring to dig the grave of its own confinement inside the pine box that not only keeps the body on display, but assures it will go to a restful utopia—in other words, no place. Even more distressing is the transformation the spectacle of male love undergoes in Pater: if the love between men has become not only too big for the closet but for the bedroom as well (where its rights are guarded by privacy laws which secure gay affections at the expense of locking away all boyfriends from view), then the only manner in which the emotional male body can now be accounted for (during those times when it is fully seen) is by being characterized as blithely ignorant of the restrictions that seek to contain it. Male love is excused as being too young: “Men’s minds, even young men’s minds, at that late day, might well be oppressed by the weariness of systems which had so far outrun positive knowledge; and in the mind of Marius, as in that old school of Cyrene, this sense of ennui, combined with ap-
petites so youthfully vigorous, brought about reaction, a sort of suicide (instances of the like have been seen since) by which a great metaphysical acumen was devoted to the function of proving metaphysical speculation impossible, or useless” (ME 1: 140–41).

It is a chilling and extreme desire that finds its most extraordinary intensities at the moment of death, especially when the body that lies in state died before its time. Such a body also becomes the perfect specimen of the kind of formalism Pater has often been thought of as anticipating—the New Criticism that not only relegated Pater to the cutting room floor of literary history, but was also hampered by its own structural resemblance to the very “disease” it meant to cure. By eschewing person and personality from literature altogether, the newfound glossiness and svelte carriage of New Criticism, however pristine and pure, did not so much announce a modern literary specter nullifying the effects of age and weight, as it assisted in the last rites for a weak, vanishing body, transparent against the skeleton showing through. For Pater, the interest in death brings about an exposure of the body at a moment when it can no longer be scorched or humiliated: it is finally afforded appreciation. But this does not take away from the fact that its process to recovery has been traced through a trajectory of abasements and oppressions, none of which presume the body is ever too close for comfort—rather, it always seems too far from total annihilation. The working body is dealt with specially in this regard: its demise manifests the pietistic reward for those hardships and sufferings that were never capable of being represented while it was still alive, because there is no rest for a body that, in order to seek escape from the pain that cripples it, must constantly be in motion. At the end of the day, distractions are tolerated only if the working body has become non-sentient, a working stiff. Its death has allowed for it to become appreciated for its physicality, for the evidence of its labors: for the body of work which has furnished proof of what it has been trying to accomplish all along—the desire, quite simply, to endure, to be.