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Pater’s Critical Spirit

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ALONG WITH RENEWED and newly appreciative critical attention to Walter Pater in the last decades have come as well, it seems, overdetermined debates about just how his work is to be read. I am thinking, firstly but not solely, of the peculiarly acrimonious exchanges between Jonathan Loesberg and J. Hillis Miller on the nature of Pater’s philosophical genealogy and, even more so, on the question of aestheticism’s purported legacy in deconstruction.1 Generating less heat, but perhaps more light, is the wider-ranging and often less explicit concern over the precise referential value of “historical context”—that is, the question of just what and how much instrumentality we ascribe to the synchronous personal, social, political, sexual, institutional or cultural forces at work as Pater worked, and moreover the question of which force deserves privilege or priority. In some way, these issues have always been in play. And in a sense, current critical controversy is of a kind with that of earlier generations. For the spirit with which we ought to read Pater’s own commentaries in The Renaissance and elsewhere—whether they are to be judged audacious, dangerous, feeble, apologetic, defensive, prophetic, major or minor, consistent or erratic—has been a longstanding locus for debate. Arguably all literary criticism or scholarship involves this uneasy relation to its object, equal parts debt, license, uncertainty, and conviction. Looking at one discursive thread running through his studies in The Renaissance, I would propose that reading Pater’s text occasions this critical dilemma in a particularly dynamic way, and that this dilemma stems at least in part from his own equivocal and shrewdly staged commentary on his future legacy. His uncommon, uncommonly subtle concern for aestheticism’s legacy is relevant to the very critical practices of today, to the spirit with which we read Pater. Put simply, Pater’s critical spirit still haunts.

We can see one suggestive line of questioning concerning this critical legacy—from both within and without the purview of new historicism, cultural studies, or queer theory—in what William Shuter calls the “‘outing’ of Walter Pater.”2 What creates the diversity of critical voices on this issue is not the fairly established consensus that it is fruitful, perhaps crucial, to read Pater’s
texts in light of their variously subtle and unsubtle homoerotic encodings, but rather the readerly purposes to which they are put, and the interpretive methods by which their effects are determined. Shuter considers one instance within this debate in a skeptical analysis of the evidence, first brought to light by Billie Inman, suggesting Pater had a relationship with Oxford undergraduate William Money Hardinge, a scenario that influential readings by Linda Dowling and Richard Dellamora have put to provocative use.\(^3\) Arguing that the equivocality, incompleteness, and hearsay nature of the evidence (in the form of letters by Alfred Milner and Arnold Toynbee, and a diary entry by biographer A. C. Benson) render problematic even a factual determination of Pater’s relationship with Oxford undergraduate William M. Hardinge, Shuter recommends readerly circumspection, and asks that, in his own case, “a skeptic may be forgiven for preserving a state of suspended judgment.”\(^4\) For others as well, Shuter advocates a certain hermeneutic humility, attentive to the questions this debate raises: just what do we know about the man and his times, and how can that knowledge illuminate his texts?\(^5\) To what extent can latent traces, subtle codes, or repressive lapses in his texts come to light from such knowledge? Most pressingly of all, how can we be sure? Shuter proposes extending his “state of suspended judgment” to the practice of reading Pater’s texts as well as his life, and resisting too unitary or absolute a “decoding” when determining what they indicate: “we will need to recall that it is in the nature of a code to be able to transmit more than [one] message and that we have not necessarily deciphered an encoded message merely because we have broken the code in which it was written.”\(^6\)

My interest in summarizing Shuter’s argument is not to position myself in this particular debate, but rather to point out the broad critical question on which it is grounded. For what is at stake in this dispute, as well as that between Loesberg and Miller, is the status and stability of evidence in literary criticism. For Loesberg and Miller—differently engaging the questions of reading, relevance, and reference—the most serious point of contention concerns a similar ground.\(^7\) In the simplest terms, they dispute what Pater’s art criticism is “really about.” Again simplifying, we could say that Loesberg’s answer to that question is philosophy, specifically an empiricist philosophy he inherits and adopts from the fraught debates of the earlier nineteenth century. “Art for art’s sake means,” he writes, “the aesthetic perception of perception; art criticism is an activity leading to that perception, not an objective of it.”\(^8\) For Miller, the argument such a claim serves is galling because, in its “forbiddingly abstract” account of Pater’s project, it ignores that Pater’s ideas (like those of Derrida and de Man) are almost always presented in the context of “exemplary acts of reading” and that “[t]hese writings on literature and art are essential to their work, not peripheral to
In other words, he protests that Loesberg does not read Pater for what his criticism has to say about “Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, Sir Thomas Browne, Shakespeare, D. G. Rossetti, and Du Bellay,” to name just the literary figures Pater studies, but as indices of “something else.” Miller suggests that Loesberg’s quickness to see Pater’s aesthetic criticism as “philosophy or aesthetic theory in disguise” amounts to an “evasion of the performative,” that is, an evasion of the rich rhetorical or tropological texture of his discourse.

In this respect, setting aside consideration of the intensity with which Miller criticizes Loesberg, it is instructive to explore one of his premises—and indeed, a number of critics have asserted it in their own right. That is, it makes a difference in reading Pater’s texts to notice that they are themselves readings, and to consider not only what those readings say but also what they do. Following that hypothesis, I am interested in the possibility that Pater’s many allusively resonant, rhetorically complex, and often painstakingly revised critical essays themselves ask for the sort of readerly disagreement I outline—that, in The Renaissance at least, Pater indeed strategically prefigures it. The purpose of my own argument, then, is to suggest that Pater himself sets up an interpretive undecidability to haunt every critic who has contended with him posthumously. Even more strangely, Pater seems to have encouraged critics to read him posthumously even while he was still alive.

The idea that Pater’s prose would lead readers to regard its author retrospectively is in keeping with the broader dynamics of his historicism. On the complicated question of history, a number of recent critics emphasize that Pater’s “context” must be read not only synchronically (that is, temporally coincident with Pater’s life), but diachronically as well. As Dowling and Carolyn Williams point out, for instance, critical determinations of historical reference are especially difficult with regard to a writer like Pater because he so studiously invokes the historical past as his immediate context, and so self-consciously situates himself at a “belated” moment in literary and cultural history. For Dowling, a rhetorical reading of Pater makes it evident that “Pater displays his own prose as a deliberately written form, a form that self-consciously takes up its position at the end of a written tradition.” Or as Williams succinctly puts it, “all Pater is ‘late’ Pater.” Such self-conscious positioning may project a context for Pater in his future, however, as well as his past. And the “aesthetics of delay” Dowling reads in Pater’s strange sentences may be at work on a larger discursive level as well.

The instances of this possible strategy that most interest me occur largely in two moments whose overall figural logic suggests both their connection to one another and their relation to Pater “himself”—that is, not an autobiographical “self,” what ever that would be, but rather to the figure of Pater as scholar, aesthetic critic, and proper name. These moments occur in the first
and last substantive chapters of *The Renaissance*, as the book appeared in the second and subsequent editions; namely, “Two Early French Stories” and “Winckelmann.” With the exception of “Pico della Mirandola,” these episodes are the only ones that substantially feature scholars rather than artists—Abelard and Winckelmann respectively. In light of the well-chronicled controversy Pater faced after the book’s first edition, which led him to suppress the “Conclusion” in the second and restore it with a warning label in the third, the details of these two portraits suggest rhetorically subtle efforts to lead readers to other conclusions altogether, or rather prevent readers from being able to draw conclusions at all. For Pater’s revisions offer a strangely janus-faced object lesson, in particular, about Pater’s own writerly motivations and, in general, about the supposed success or failure of aesthetic criticism. One effect of this strategy is to give critics of varied theoretical persuasions just the evidence they want or need to make their case, but never enough to make one reading the last reading—that is, utterly fixed or decisive.  

Rhetorically speaking, I would call the sketches of Abelard and Winckelmann “apologies,” in both the weak and the strong sense of the term. There is considerable efficacy for Pater in having it both ways. In the first sense, he presents both Abelard and Winckelmann, whose antinomian parallels to Pater himself are easily readable, facing a tough sentence and a violent death, respectively, as a result of their intellectual passions. Thus Pater seems to condemn the intrepid figures as his critics had condemned him and his project, punishing them accordingly. In the second sense, however, we may also read the convenient deaths each meets on “his way to Rome” as a death sentence that actually functions as a suspended sentence, killing off the aesthete so as to remove him from the contentious arena of accusation and public censure (*Ren/H* 5, 148). If we see Abelard and Winckelmann as figures or types for Pater himself, we can see the strange narratives about their life and death as, together, a proleptic defense about the future case of Walter Pater as well as part of an allegory that encourages readers—as Shuter does—to suspend judgment and find difficulty coming to conclusions. Put another way, Pater’s telling of Abelard’s and Winckelmann’s analogous stories perform narratively and figuratively what Dowling says Pater also enacts stylistically. He writes English as if it were a classical, that is “dead,” language, which for Dowling serves a larger aesthetics of delay. She explains that this rhetorical strategy effectively “puts off the moment of cognitive closure, not least because it is a little emblematic death. And he does this not simply by writing long sentences, but by so structuring his sentences as to thwart—at times even to the point of disruption—our usual expectations of English syntax.”
What I find fascinating about this analysis is just how aptly it describes the very thing Pater does in structuring his stories as well. For, in the accounts of Abelard's and Winckelmann's abortive trips to Rome, Pater dwells on a similarly overdetermined delay, which functions precisely as Dowling says his sentences do. Read in this spirit, the strange stories he tells and how he tells them take on a different aspect: more shrewd than cowardly, a redoubling of conviction rather than a retraction, Pater's defense could in fact be a refusal to defend, forcing readers to contend with him posthumously. The efficacy of such an analysis is not only that it provides another assertion about what Pater's text is “really about,” but also that it may shed light on the interpretive practices that authorize such assertions. Regarding the portraits as equivocal rhetorical performances would offer an illuminating context for understanding the remarkable duality of Pater's legacy, even to this day—that he could be dismissed, by James, or Eliot, or de Man for instance, and at the same time hailed or vilified by so many others—but also that current critical disagreements so often stake their ground on the very question of reading, both Pater's and our own.

What Pater calls “the legend of Abelard” occurs near the beginning of “Two Early French Stories,” just after a condensed history of the Renaissance and a justification for his critical approach. Both reiterate assertions laid out in the “Preface.” Though he begins by declaring that “everyone knows the legend,” he retells it anyway at some length, for, he says, it is “characteristic of the middle age” we will subsequently see in the stories of “Amis and Amile” and “Aucassin and Nicolette” (Ren/H 3). Thus, in the most obvious sense, Pater is doing more than he says he is, for the essay tells three stories, not two. Both the misleading title and much of the five paragraphs Pater devotes to Abelard are second edition augmentations to the first version of the essay. Characteristic of all of Pater’s profiles in The Renaissance, Abelard’s is drawn from accounts of an actual figure of some notoriety, and he serves Pater as an ideal incarnation of the Renaissance spirit. The “great scholar . . . and great lover” was, as Pater stresses, a controversial twelfth-century intellectual figure, whose forbidden love for the exceptionally learned Heloise put him in such disfavor with her clerical relatives that he was condemned by the church and forced to face his accusers by making a trip to Rome (Ren/H 3). As in all of his studies, and to the chagrin of some contemporaries, Pater’s retelling of this “legend” has something other than historical accuracy as its aim. Here he manipulates facts documented by historians by rewriting Abelard’s end. Donald Hill explains that, after being condemned and while on his way to Rome, Abelard was persuaded to give up his ideological battle and seek absolution from the Pope; he did so without ever reaching Rome and lived two more years in serene obedience to the church. Pater omits this infelicitous denouement and instead wishfully
casts Abelard as a type of eternally unswerving “opposition” to—in Pater’s words—“the merely professional, official, hireling ministers” of the church. In his version of the legend, what is important is that Abelard conveniently dies before he has to confront the church, so that we see him, in the end, neither admit defeat nor conclusively doom his soul as a heretic. Pater makes the most of the undecidability his narrative selectivity implies. He writes:

When Abelard died . . . he was on the way to Rome. What may have happened had he reached his journey’s end is uncertain; and it is in this uncertain twilight that his relation to the general beliefs of his age has always remained. In this, as in other things, he prefigures the character of the Renaissance, that movement in which, in various ways, the human mind wins for itself a new kingdom of feeling and sensation and thought, not opposed to but only beyond and independent of the spiritual system then actually realized. (Ren/H 5)

He tells us that it is by the illumination of this “uncertain twilight” that we are able to regard the two French stories to which his study next turns. But we need not strain to hear in this description—following so closely on the heels of his statement of critical method—a proposal of how we might read Pater the aesthetic critic as well. The editorial history of his texts suggest that he would have us do so, for the entire narrative of Abelard’s abortive trip to Rome, and the characterization of his intellectual ideas as “not opposed to but only beyond and independent of” those of his fellows are all 1877 revisions.

If not as well known as the drama of the “Conclusion,” the editorial negotiations of “Two Early French Stories” are similarly overdetermined, as Dellamora has suggested. Hill identifies it as “the only one of the essays significantly expanded after its first appearance in print: the version of 1873 is only about three-fifths as long as the revisions made for the 1877 and later editions” (Ren/H 302). Pater’s expansions are notable to say the least. For the 1873 version, as I have mentioned before, examines not two stories but one, “Aucassin and Nicolette,” which is also the essay’s original title. “Aucassin and Nicolette” tells the relatively sunny story of romantic and purely sensual love that puts the happiest face on Pater’s aesthetic spirit. He expressly delights in the story’s “rebellious spirit” and uses the reading as an occasion to express his intellectual ideals as well. Correspondingly, they too are relatively cheerful and unabashed declarations of aesthetic pleasure for its own sake—the sort of “hedonism” that would bring Pater so much trouble after the book’s first publication, and which so many readers perceived chiefly in the “Conclusion.”

In the 1877 edition and after, Pater precedes this study with the reading of “Amis and Amile.” Both the story and Pater’s critical response to it are quite remarkable. He introduces the stories—“Amis and Amile” and “Aucassin and Nicolette,” that is—as if they represent two versions of the same spirit,
but the former, despite its happy ending, tells a much stranger, more unsettling tale. Needless to say, this augmentation was made in the wake of the 1873 controversy, and the revisions seem to bear its trace. But it is not immediately clear why Pater would substantially augment his first chapter with a gruesome story of more than brotherly love that requires the decapitation of one friend’s own children for its continuance, and why his commentary is so conspicuously approving and delighted, if indeed his changes were motivated solely by a desire either to appease his critics or better to make his case.17

To be sure, in “Amis and Amile” as in the chapter’s other stories, the aesthetic spirit of love above all else is in evidence. In this story, however, at least one kind of spirit comes in the form of an expressly personified and duplicitous messenger angel who guides the story’s astonishing “turn to sweetness” through murder and its miraculous reversal, assuring that the friends stay true to one another at the expense of all else. Pater’s treatment of the story is itself somewhat astonishing, devoting three full, uninterrupted pages to quoting the story and following the story excerpt with only a short, referentially weak response before moving on to consider the next tale. On precisely what details he would have his readers dwell, Pater is unclear. But a likely focus for his readers would be its narrative climax and resolution, that is, Amile’s murder of his children and the startling miracle in which their lives are restored. A kind of gruesome delicacy pervades the description of both moments. The murder is narrated as follows: “And the children awoke at the tears of their father, which fell upon them; and they looked up into his face and began to laugh. And as they were of the age of about three years, he said, Your laughing will be turned to tears, for your innocent blood must now be shed, and therewith he cut off their heads” (Ren/H 10). This particular length to which one friend goes to preserve the life of the other and their love provides a disturbing image of the aesthetic spirit that arguably outdoes any caricature even his most virulent critics could conjure, so much so that it seems that it would have to be either self-defeating, thoroughly capitulating, or something else. So do the story’s last lines. The next day, Amile returns to the scene of the murder and discovers his children “at play in the bed; only, in place of the sword-cuts about their throats was, as it were, a thread of crimson. And he took them in his arms and carried them to his wife and said, Rejoice greatly, for thy children whom I had slain by the commandment of the angel are alive, and by their blood is Amis healed” (Ren/H 11).

Amile’s sacrifice for Amis combines beauty with violence, cruelty with loveliness. He arranges the scene of the crime beautifully. The vestigial sign of the violent act is itself beautiful, and conveniently, the story describes that “thread of crimson” with one of Pater’s own favorite figures—the thread. Yet even in the story, these two moments are “lovely” only figuratively: Amile
covers the children “as though” they slept, and the sword-cut’s scar is “as it were” a pretty thread. The “sweetness” of the sacrifice and its happy ending, thus, in some sense depends upon the anonymous narrator’s rhetorical presentation of it. Pater’s response is similarly dependent. Amile’s seemingly tender—but also cowardly—gesture of “cover[ing]” his children “as though” they slept also hides its violence, however feebly. So does calling the scar a “thread of crimson.” Both Amile and the narrator, in this sense, engage in a cover-up. We might say the same of Pater’s commentary, which weighs in on the side of the messenger angel and its visitants, adopting the narrator’s indulgent sympathy for the heroes’ plight as it delights in the rare aesthetic spirit of this early French story. For Pater too talks around the details of the story, pointing approvingly but vaguely “[t]here” at its “strength,” and then again at its “strength,” and then its “sweetness,” “its early sweetness,” and “a languid excess of sweetness” without ever declaring precisely what he means by strong and sweet (Ren/H 11–12).

Yet just as Amile’s wife, for the first time hearing that her children have been slain, is unlikely to be entirely cheered by Amile’s good news, so might readers of various sympathies likely find Pater’s reading of the story unsatisfying. Because he provides so little commentary, we seem to have only the text of “Amis and Amile” itself to inform our understanding of those terms. It could lead us to believe that by “strength” he means the story’s strange violence, and by “sweetness” its aestheticized presentation of such violence. There is something violent, however, in the very impertinence of such rhetorical negotiations—Amile’s, the narrator’s, and Pater’s own. In this sense, Pater’s aesthetic delight in the “sweetness and strength” of the story paradoxically performs the very cover-up critics often accused aestheticism of making (as Yeats did, for instance)—namely, of hiding its cruelty, or danger, with seductive loveliness. But, like the Abelard narrative, this editorial addition signals unequivocally neither mere self-accusation nor mere antinomian willfulness. For again, just what Pater means for us to take away from the experience of reading it remains unclear. Most expressly, he wants us to see the story’s “sweetness and strength,” but why does he need this story, with all its problematic subject matter, when “Aucassin and Nicolette” demonstrates this aesthetic spirit already? Why, in an edition that omits its inflammatory “Conclusion” in supposed deference to unfavorable criticisms, would Pater bother to include a second reading of another early French story that, by all appearances, just makes matters worse?

And yet, if we consider it implausible that subtle, careful Pater would do something so intrepid, and thus jump to the conclusion that he must instead be giving himself away, giving himself up and admitting to the “crime” of which his detractors accused him, we can remember the legend of Abelard that prefaces “Amis and Amile.” Together, his two stories—that of Abelard’s
death and Amis’ and Amile’s murderous love—help him to cast the relatively straightforward, unabashed aestheticism of the “Aucassin and Nicolette” commentary into the more “uncertain twilight” that has significantly shaped Pater’s legacy. And furthermore, together they point to another conclusion he may have wanted his 1877 readers to draw from a text now lacking its “Conclusion.” In the commentary that precedes the passage from “Amis and Amile,” Pater admires the story’s dynamic dependence upon the “entire personal resemblance between the two heroes” and moreover the narrative’s motivic reminders of that doubleness “through all the incidents of the story” (Ren/H 7). He refers specifically to “the conceit of two marvelously beautiful cups, also exactly like each other,” and suggests that the appearance of these cups, which “cross and recross very strangely in the narrative, and [serve] . . . the two heroes almost like living things” gives us a useful legend for how to read the significance of the text as a whole (Ren/H 7–8). The passage he cites, narrating the angelic visitation and the miraculous sacrifice, relies relatively little on Amis’ and Amile’s personal resemblance, and mentions these cups only initially. But Pater’s emphasis may nevertheless be relevant for his critical narrative and the figures which “cross and recross very strangely in it” throughout The Renaissance.

As Pater’s own figural repetitions and narrative similarities imply, a subtle indication of this other conclusion might be located in the last chapter of The Renaissance (obviously, the de facto conclusion in an edition whose “Conclusion” was omitted). For indeed, with regard to the “uncertain twilight” of interpretive undecidability Pater stresses in his study’s first portrait of a scholar, his last portrait invokes strange resonances as well. Pater’s final anecdote in The Renaissance brings both of these critical propositions together in a disturbing and again complicating narrative of aestheticism’s putative danger, even for the exemplary critic himself. The salient figural moment in the story comes as Pater narrates the peculiar circumstances of art historian Johannes Joachim Winckelmann’s untimely death.20 Despite his “notorious” intellectual propensities, he was well regarded and sought after in his own lifetime (Ren/H 149). And because of this fame, he was, Pater tells us, entreated to “revisit the country of his birth” in 1768 (Ren/H 156). Having lived in Rome for twelve years, Winckelmann got as far as Vienna, where he was “loaded with honours and presents” before “a strange, inverted homesickness, a strange reluctance to leave it all, came over him” (Ren/H 156). Winckelmann halted his trip without ever getting to Germany, his destination, and turned back to Rome. But significantly, that trip was halted as well—irrevocably. Pater describes the event, which Hill confirms is true, with details that we have seen “cross and recross” his text before:

He left Vienna, intending to hasten back to Rome, and at Trieste a delay of a few days occurred. With characteristic openness, Winckelmann had confided his plans
to a fellow-traveller, a man named Archangeli, and had shown him the gold medals received at Vienna. Archangeli’s avarice was roused. One morning he entered Winckelmann’s room, under pretence of taking leave. Winckelmann was then writing “memoranda for the future editor of the History of Art,” still seeking the perfection of his great work. Archangeli begged to see the medals once more. As Winckelmann stooped down to take them from the chest, a cord was thrown round his neck. Some time afterwards . . . Winckelmann was found dangerously wounded, and died a few hours later, after receiving the last sacraments. It seemed as if the gods, in reward for his devotion to them, had given him a death which, for its swiftness and its opportunity, he might well have desired. “He has,” says Goethe, “the advantage of figuring in the memory of posterity, as one eternally able and strong; for the image in which one leaves the world, is that in which one moves among the shadows.” (Ren/H 156–57)

We may debate whether or not Winckelmann could have “desired” a better death, but clearly Pater himself could not have wished for a better story. Unlike the “legend” of Abelard’s halted journey, Winckelmann’s story is historically accurate. But, as Pater himself advises in his essay on “Style,” we should read a writer’s prose attentive to the “transcript of his sense of fact rather than the fact.”21 Surely Pater’s “transcript,” or arrangement, of the particular facts of Winckelmann’s death warrants such consideration, especially as it so strangely recalls Pater’s two early French stories (Ren/H 8). Given his own readerly advice, it seems more than accidental that these are the accounts with which Pater chooses to frame his studies in the Renaissance.22

Above I speculate that Pater provided the details of Abelard’s fictional end to serve as a subterfuge in response to hostile critics, an intervention that forestalls his readers from coming to conclusions about the nature of his project. In his telling of Winckelmann’s death, he articulates that implicit strategy, but here as an explicit tribute, indeed a eulogy, to his subject’s “imperishable influence” (Ren/H 157). Complete with a deadly angel and a forsaken neck, this scene repeats the angelic violence of “Amis and Amile,” but with a difference. If we may read Pater’s treatment of that story and find him lining up on the side of the dark angel and the violence he calls for, the story of Winckelmann’s death puts the aesthetic critic in a different position. Here, it is the critic himself whose neck is on the line. On the side of the angel, Pater is able to delight in the “sweetness and strength” of Amis’ and Amile’s plight. On the side of Winckelmann, Archangeli’s victim, we would assume that Pater’s aesthetic “turn to sweetness” would be more difficult to negotiate. Yet even here, Archangeli proves to be an efficacious spirit both for his victim and for Pater’s reading.23 He provides Winckelmann with an “opportunity,” “the advantage of figuring in the memory of posterity, as one eternally able and strong.” In one sense, we could say that Winckelmann’s death at the hands of a duplicitous angel—who, like Amile’s divine messenger, precipitates an aestheticized treachery—represents Pater’s capitulation to censorious critics, his acknowledgment of such a danger even for aestheti-
cism’s own, most devoted, practitioners. We could read the story of Winckelmann’s end together with the story of “Amis and Amile” and argue that Pater himself admits the danger of aestheticist activity, indeed that these narratives within The Renaissance provide a cautionary tale about that danger. I would argue that is, actually, one story Pater manages to tell.

But he tells another one as well. For Pater’s narration of Winckelmann’s murder just as compellingly recalls Abelard’s end: together they are two scholars who die in the practice of their counter-current intellectual beliefs. In this sense, Pater tells a story that effects not only an alibi, but also an enduring, “imperishable” suspended sentence. Whether removing the “Conclusion” from the second edition or returning it with qualification in the third did Pater any good, “Two Early French Stories” and “Winckelmann” do something even better. Winckelmann has “given him a death” full of the pregnant potentiality and enduring legacy Pater implicitly gives the exemplary aesthetic critic himself. Like Winckelmann, who specifically dies while mapping out his intellectual project for future scholars (while “writing ‘memoranda for the future editor of the History of Art’”), Pater offers a series of textual cues that offer an “uncertain twilight” for his own legacy (Ren/H 156–57). This inconclusive conclusion does not diminish the aesthete’s power, but increases it. Pater gives the last word on Winckelmann’s reputation and strange end to a respectfully indebted Goethe, who offers the retrospective reading that the manner of his death gave Winckelmann “the advantage of figuring in the memory of posterity as one eternally able and strong” (Ren/H 157). By figural association, Pater similarly provides another “future editor” with advantageous textual notes for his own posthumous assessment, proleptically positing his eternal ability and strength—even amidst the controversies of his day—by writing his own epitaph.

It is the motivic repetition across this story, “Amis and Amile,” and the “legend of Abelard” that draw this final anecdote into the network of similitude that make my reading possible, and it is with the question of motives that I would like to conclude. Reading the crossings and recrossings of “uncertain” deaths and deadly angels in the context of one another rather than solely in the service of the specific aestheticist “studies” they perform locally within each chapter is willful. It reads as a leitmotif, a “leading motive,” Pater’s interest in scripting a certain legacy for himself (Ren/H 175). Much Pater says lends justification to such an approach, as I have tried to outline. The word “motive,” by my count, occurs some eleven times in the “Winckelmann” essay alone, almost every time in this narrative or figural sense. But Pater also allows that term its further valence, indicating that “motive” is another name for “interest,” “desire,” even perhaps a critic’s special “plead[ing]” (Ren/H 149, 150, 151, 182). And in this latter sense of the word, we can read both Pater’s own critical desire to find in Abelard, Winck-
elmann, and all his other exemplary figures precisely the “leading motive” of the aesthetic spirit itself and our critical desire to find in Pater allegories of our own interpretive projects. For it is an amazing coincidence that we critics so often find that just what we are looking for has been “there,” full of suggestive promise, in the text all along (as my own has certainly done). That is the coincidence, perhaps the tautology, upon which figural or typological reading is founded. It is a critical model Pater’s vision of the Renaissance (that is, a temporally broad recurrence of felicitously exemplary historical figures) unabashedly exploits. But continued assessments of Pater’s critical spirit involve for our own criticism, I believe, a conscientious effort to attend to both the moments in his texts that are efficacious to our own readerly interests and those that run counter to them—and moreover to attend rigorously to the “risk” involved in any and every readerly, critical act. 26 The recurring figures of angels and necks-on-the-line suggest, among other things, that the critic’s relation to her object is a necessarily unstable, uncertain one, for the language of Pater’s strange commentaries have a way of exerting a kind of life-force resistant to our efforts to lay claim to them. It could follow, furthermore, that criticism in the spirit of Pater’s own requires a more self-conscious, vigilant exploration of what we do when we fix an interpretation on Pater’s texts, when we decisively exert the critical desire for mastery, for decision or conclusion, upon something or someone that gives us numerous indications that it is not so easily subdued.