

[Pater in the 90s](#)[Table of Contents](#)[ELT Homepage](#)

Foreword

Linda Dowling

THE PRESENT VOLUME of essays, collected from the second inter-national Pater conference held at Queen's College, Oxford in 1988, registers a decisive turn in Pater studies that has been gathering considerable force in recent years, a turn toward the "New Historicism" and its project of re-embedding the literary work in history, with "history" understood as an already-symbolic field of significations, "the literary work" as an open and heterogeneous discursive web rather than a unified and self-enclosed artifact. Nonetheless, as the reader will discover, roughly half of the fifteen essays of *Pater in the 1990s* remain within the older tradition of interpretive formalism that in a real sense originated with Pater himself, whose notion of the "House Beautiful" as enclosing a simultaneous and timeless order of artworks is the very image of that autonomous art—unified, self-enclosed, possessing its own laws and center of gravity—that was to constitute the focus, first, of Anglo-American New Criticism and later, by way of a critique in kind, of Euro-American deconstruction.

This Aestheticist tradition of formalist or immanent interpretation has provided the basis for some of the most noteworthy earlier efforts in Pater interpretation—the numerous studies of Gerald Monsman come readily to mind, or, more recently, the minutely detailed readings of Carolyn Williams's *Transfigured World*. This tradition has by no means exhausted itself, as Jonathan Loesberg's even more recent *Aestheticism and Deconstruction* so persuasively demonstrates, and as is demonstrated in these pages by such essays as Maureen Moran's intriguing account of the way in which Pater's language of myth ultimately exposes the very myth of interpretation upon which Pater's own work depends. At the same time, there is a palpable sense in the present volume that the scope and energies of formalist criticism are diminishing, that the outlines of one sort of picture at least have largely been filled in.

Against this background of approaching completion or saturation within the formalist project of Pater studies it is, paradoxically, an older mode of biographical and historical criticism that today seems most compellingly to suggest the outlines of a newer approach, not least because that mode so indispensably provides, in its patient investigation of primary materials, the basis of any New Historicist focus on power or ideology or systems of representation. For what the researches of the older historicism continue to demonstrate is that the specific or local details of history and biography are always in Foucault's sense archival, belonging not to any actual archive but to a vast network of silent relations, the relations of power and knowledge as these stretch invisibly away on every side of any actual surviving document and supply the ultimate conditions of its intelligibility.

No essay in the present collection better demonstrates the continuing value of such traditional research, perhaps, than that in which B. A. Inman, building upon the work of David Newsome, Richard Ellmann, Alon Kadish and Laurel Brake, brings to light hitherto unknown materials relating to the crisis Pater suffered during the period 1873-1877 when he was attacked by Oxford officials as a demoralizing moralizer, was denied a routine promotion to the valuable post of university proctor, and was exposed to humiliating satire in W. H. Mallock's *The New Republic*. Earlier Pater scholarship had been compelled to assume that these defeats flowed chiefly from his contemporaries' persistent hostility to the irreligious and hedonistic message of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Now in an important discovery Inman reveals that Benjamin Jowett, the Master of Balliol College, moved to block Pater's promotion because he knew him to be involved in a homoerotic relationship with a Balliol undergraduate, William Money Hardinge. Among the Balliol undergraduates through whose assistance Jowett obtained his information about the affair, and some letters signed "yours lovingly" that had passed between Hardinge and Pater, may have been W. H. Mallock.

Mallock's role may in any event be taken to illustrate the New Historicist claim that such episodes as this must always be viewed against a background of symbolic struggle within Victorian society, an inevitable concentration of antagonistic forces around issues concerning gender or class or sexual identity. For Mallock's portraits of Pater as Mr. Rose, Hardinge as Robert Leslie and Jowett as Dr. Jenkinson (i.e. the "son" of Richard Jenkyns, an earlier Master of Balliol) were instantly decoded by Victorian readers, and the portrait of Pater was decried as ungentlemanly for its invidious and invasively personal character. The immediate effect of *The New Republic* was to drive Pater from the field of candidates competing for the Oxford Professorship of Poetry in March of 1877. Mallock's invidious portrait then continued to overshadow Pater's career, as when André Raffalovich would much later contrive a real-life meeting between "Mr. Rose" and "Robert Leslie," recording with an almost salacious glee that Pater, always so "affectionate to young men *as they were*," had found the willowy undergraduate Hardinge of 1874 grotesquely transformed by the mid-1880s into a portly roué more than anything else resembling, says Raffalovich, the Duke of Cambridge.

The picture Inman's essay provides of a sexually predatory Pater—the "ingratiatory vampire" and "Minotaur" of Raffalovich's reminiscence—thus illustrates in particularly dramatic terms the sense in which the Victorians themselves would always view Oxford as a symbolic site, a veritable battleground on which undergraduate minds, bodies, and souls were daily being contested for in deadly earnest. By the same token, the story as it involves Pater, Hardinge, and Jowett illustrates in an equally exemplary way the point of the New Historicism in insisting that "Oxford" in any such account is the name less of a single institutional entity than, in Foucault's terms once again, a conjuncture of discrete and competing discourses, an abstract convergence of power relations which, constantly shifting and entering into new strategic combinations, underlie all local groupings in any struggle for cultural legitimacy. This is the context in which, for instance, the one bit of condemnatory evidence in the Hardinge affair—the fact that Pater, at a time when he was teaching as a Fellow at Brasenose, had signed his letters to an undergraduate "yours lovingly"—must be taken as nothing less than a locus in a war of antagonistic discourses.

To understand how so innocuous a phrase could carry so momentous a significance in the Hardinge episode, moreover, is to have seen that the invisible battleground involved is really the Oxford tutorial system, that unique mode of instruction that had put generations of undergraduates in an always potentially intimate relationship with a Fellow of their college. For it is an earlier revolution in the tutorial system that had made the phrase "yours lovingly" a wholly conventional bit of undergraduate slang, the insistence of Newman and others in the Oxford Movement that the tutorial, having been originally and most importantly a pastoral relationship, could not be meaningfully conducted on any other grounds. As adopted by subsequent generations of Oxford undergraduates—by, for instance, William Morris as a closing in letters written to his Oxford friends—"yours lovingly" will thus testify merely to a culture of spiritual intimacy that had survived the Tractarian collapse of 1845, the attempt of undergraduates like Morris, arriving at an Oxford that seemed chillingly empty of idealism and noble aspiration, to recover something of the Tractarians' sense of fervent religious brotherhood.

By the time it became available to Pater and Hardinge in 1874 as the codeword for an unconventional physical relationship, then, "yours lovingly" had become, precisely in its seeming innocence, a phrase in which Jowett would instantly sense a threat to the entire tutorial system. For, freed by precisely Jowett's brand of university reform from having to declare for the Anglican priesthood in order to hold his fellowship at Brasenose and teach at Oxford, Pater had nonetheless inherited the quasi-pastoral powers and permission that had been developed for college tutors by the Tractarians and preserved for them by university reform as the most efficient means of producing a leadership class for imperial Britain. In that crucial transformation from disinterestedness to instrumentality, and in that shift from soul to mind, had opened the discursive space in which Pater could begin to make claims for the sensuous experience of the body, enacting his own larger interest in the polemical project that Richard Dellamora, both in *Masculine Desire: the Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* and in his essay in this volume, has described as intended "to revalorize desire, especially between males."

It is a tribute to Pater's genius, no doubt, that for more than a century now the notion of an anti-polemical, apolitical, transhistorical "Art," Pater's own most significant contribution to Victorian culture, has tended to obscure for us the otherwise unmistakable signs of personal and political struggle in his writing, the symptoms of an underlying warfare of values and assumptions that has not ceased today. Yet the ostensible autonomy of Pater's literary art from the tumultuously shifting matrices of Victorian culture is no longer, as Paul Tucker's essay on Pater's ethical Aestheticism in the present volume cogently demonstrates, the unexamined premise from which Pater studies may innocently begin. Within the wider perspective suggested by the New Historicism, it is itself the assumption that most demands scrutiny and analysis. As the reader will discover, one of the larger and more invigorating implications of *Pater in the 1990s* is that the already acknowledged richness of Pater's prose—"brooding over itself with delight"—is only further enriched when we understand it in the fuller complexity of its ideological negotiations, and more fully grasp it in the torsions of its shifting historical moment.