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Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture

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Summary of *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 364 pp, 109 illustrations

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Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture is both a monograph on the Victorian writer Walter Pater (1839-94) and an attempt to place his writings and his ideas of art and style within the context of the history of aesthetics from the Renaissance until the late nineteenth century. As indicated by its title, the book is interdisciplinary: the visual arts and literature, both prose and fiction. My juxtaposition of language and sculpture in the title encompasses a range of different aspects of the literary and the sculptural in Pater's writings:

- Sculpture as an art form
- The plasticity of language and prose style
- Sculpture as metaphor
- The critical language employed in discussions of individual works of sculpture
- Sculpture as a state of mind, an image of the process of thought
- The etymological and semantic stratification of language as essentially sculptural

My definition of sculpture is broad and covers far more than three-dimensional sculpture in the round. I employ the term to all art forms which exceed two-dimensional space: engravings, print, inscriptions, weaving, embroidery, all kinds of relief are thus also included under the heading of 'sculpture'. I argue that this broad definition of sculpture is essential for an understanding of Pater's writings. Protrusion from or indentations in a planar surface create tension and relief central to Pater's aesthetics. Pater's 'language of sculpture' pervades his writings with subtle puns on 'relief'. He develops a psychosomatic vocabulary in which sculpture and subjectivity, form and emotion merge. Thus his puns on 'impress/ depress/ repress/ express' run as a strong undercurrent

through many of his texts, suggesting the relation between reader/ spectator and text/work of art.

One of the main arguments of my thesis is that relief – sculpture in two-and-a-half dimensions – is one of the most important art forms for Pater. This is manifest at many levels of his writings. Pater's stylistic ideal and his compositional process revolve around the Flaubertian *mot juste*. His own style is consequently characterized by individual words and concepts, dense with meaning, which protrude against a background of words far less semantically dense. His interest in book design and book production favours the book as an aesthetic object with both a visual and a tactile appeal. Pater's deliberate choice of ribbed paper with frayed edges for the first edition of his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) is thus a clear example of how relief, as aesthetic form, influences the book as a material object. In his art criticism he often focuses on the relief: the ancient fragment, drapery, Luca della Robbia's reliefs, Michelangelo's *non finito*. Pater's focus remains that of textured surface, rather than three-dimensional sculpture in the round. His background as a literary scholar, as a classicist, makes him read sculpture from surface into depth, through a series of parallel planes, which rarely involve three-dimensional space. His discussion of Greek sculpture in the 1870s and 1880s is to a large extent based on the simple line engravings which served as illustrations in some of the many nineteenth-century German surveys of Greek art. In many respects, his approach to Greek sculpture reflects this lack of interest in the volume and spatiality of the works discussed.

A somewhat flippant conclusion to my thesis might be phrased as follows: Pater's language of sculpture is painting. With reference to Michelangelo's famous distinction between sculpture and painting as that of *levare* (a removal of material) as opposed to *porre* (an adding of material) I maintain that Pater's approach to style hovers somewhere between sculptural ideal and painterly practice. Studies of his unfinished manuscripts reveal him as a writer constantly adding words to an already existing syntax. In his essay on 'Style' (1888) he expresses a monolithic ideal contradicted by his mosaic practice in which separate elements are joined to a whole. Along with most of his contemporaries Michelangelo regarded relief as a hybrid form between painting and sculpture. In my book I position Pater's interest in two-and-a-half-dimensional sculpture both within a

Renaissance context and in the context of one of Pater's German contemporaries. The sculptor and art theorist Adolf von Hildebrand published his treatise *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* in 1893. Although it is unlikely that Pater had read von Hildebrand, their ideas of the formal aspects of relief are very similar. With their focus on form, both von Hildebrand and Pater become highly influential precursors of twentieth-century formalist art criticism.

Pater deals with sculpture, painting and literature in his writings. The interrelationship between the arts, their similarities and differences, had been subject to discussion since Antiquity. In the Italian Renaissance the *paragone* debate revives this discussion in attempts to legitimize painting and sculpture as part of the Medieval *Artes Liberales*. I suggest that Pater conducts his own *paragone* in his groundbreaking *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, with reference to Renaissance art theory as well as to eighteenth-century German art theory and nineteenth-century French aesthetic debate. Leonardo, Michelangelo, Vasari, Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder, Gautier and Baudelaire thus all serve as points of reference in Pater's aesthetics. Throughout his writings Pater argues for an acknowledgement of criticism as a genre which not only equals painting, sculpture and poetry, but as an art form which contains them all and surpasses them. Ekphrasis, the ability to describe or recreate a visual work of art by means of words, is thus an absolutely crucial aspect of Pater's writings. According to Pater and subsequently to his disciple Oscar Wilde, criticism is not just summarizing and re-creative, but deeply creative and an art form in its own right.

Pater's highly self-conscious attitude to his own role as a critic finds expression in his frequent, but subtle, attacks on his colleagues. My book demonstrates Pater's rivalry with some 300 years of criticism as a manifestation of his desire to position himself in a long critical tradition. His essays on the Renaissance are thus both in dialogue with Giorgio Vasari and with the nineteenth-century connoisseur duo known as 'the new Vasari', Crowe and Cavalcaselle. Other contemporary authorities such as Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin and George Saintsbury are also targets of Pater's rivalry. Most of Pater's works operate with a double optics: their subject matter may appear to be the art and literature of the past, but at the same time they address issues of topical relevance to Pater's contemporaries. Pater scholarship of the last two decades has to a large extent

focussed on the homoerotic discourse which pervades most of Pater's writings. My book does not inscribe itself within that tradition. The subtext of homoeroticism in Pater's oeuvre is now sufficiently well documented for scholarship to move on to other issues, and my book should be seen as an attempt to take Pater studies in new directions. Where Pater's interest in a number of artists and writers may to some extent be found in their sexual orientation (Leonardo, Michelangelo, Pico della Mirandola, Winckelmann), a purely gender-based approach to Pater's writings is insufficient. My focus is on Pater as a formalist, with an acute sense of literary, musical and visual form. I furthermore wish to stress the cosmopolitan aspects of Pater, his extraordinarily wide frame of reference within Classical, French, German, Italian and English literature and philosophy.

The structure of my dissertation partly attempts to reflect the historical stratification of Pater's aesthetics, at the same time as it constitutes a chronological analysis of his writings. The book furthermore reflects the cosmopolitan aspects of his texts and ideas, as it changes its geographical focusing points from Italy to Germany to France to England to Greece, and in the very last chapter to Pater's idiosyncratic merging of English and French stylistic ideals. As will appear from the Table of Contents of my book enclosed below, the dissertation travels from Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) through his essay 'Romanticism' (1876) to his *Imaginary Portraits* of the 1880s, his Greek essays of the 1870s and 1880s, to his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) to conclude with his essay on 'Style', together with the critical volume *Appreciations* (1889). Covering, albeit briefly and selectively, the history of the aesthetics of sculpture the book begins in sixteenth-century Italy and runs through eighteenth-century Germany to nineteenth-century France, with constant references to Pater and Victorian England. It is my hope that Pater will emerge from my book as a writer solidly grounded in both his European past and present, centrally positioned in Victorian Oxford in relation to contemporary developments within the arts, literature, the science of language and archaeology.

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