

The New Criterion

Features May 1995

Art vs. aestheticism: the case of Walter Pater

by Roger Kimball

On a new biography of Pater by Denis Donoghue.

In an age when the lives of artists were full of adventure, his life is almost colourless.

—Walter Pater, “Sandro Botticelli”

If we had not welcomed the arts and invented this kind of cult of the untrue, then the realization of general untruth and mendaciousness that now comes to us through science—the realization that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation—would be utterly unbearable. Honesty would lead us to nausea and suicide. But now there is a counterforce against our honesty that helps us avoid such consequences: art as the good will to appearance.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

For most of us, the Victorian essayist Walter Pater survives chiefly as a kind of literary aroma punctuated by a handful of famous phrases. Having grown up with the astringent qualms of modernism—which ostentatiously defined itself in opposition to the earnest aestheticism of writers such as Pater—we are likely to find that aroma a bit cloying. Few serious modern writers indulged themselves in prose so effulgently purple as did Pater. His meticulous adumbrations of mortal things quickened into beauty by death will strike most contemporary readers as quaint, neurasthenic, or both. Perhaps the notion that “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music,” as Pater wrote in “The School of Giorgione,” is sufficiently abstract and elusive still to occasion productive meditation. But the idea—another of Pater’s nuggets—that Leonardo’s Mona Lisa “is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave” seems little more than a set-piece of timid fin-de-siècle morbidity. Even the celebrated apothegm from the conclusion of *The Renaissance*, Pater’s first and most famous book, is troublesome: “To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life”—maybe, but for most of us the scintillations will long ago have been quenched by too-frequent repetition.

It is a matter of some curiosity, then, that the well-known literary critic Denis Donoghue should have undertaken a critical biography of Walter Pater. Although he has written on a wide range of topics and figures, including Swift, Emily Dickinson, and the critic R. P. Blackmur, Donoghue is familiar to most of his readers as a champion of high modernism and its decidedly un-Pateresque ambitions.

At least, we might have thought them un-Pateresque. It is part of Donoghue's purpose in this book to restore Pater to his place as an important, though largely unacknowledged, precursor of modernism. "Pater," he writes, "gave modern literature its first act. The major writers achieved their second and third acts by dissenting from him and from their first selves." It is not, Donoghue thinks, so much a question of "influence" as of "presence." He sets out to show that Pater is "a shade or trace in virtually every writer of significance from Hopkins and Wilde to Ashbery."

In addition to those just named, his roster of Pater's literary heirs includes James, Yeats, Pound, Ford, Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, Aiken, Hart Crane, Fitzgerald, Forster, Borges, Stevens, and A. R. Ammons. The first "poem" in Yeats's eccentric edition of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) is a versified snippet from

Pater's expostulation on the *Mona Lisa*. The mature T. S. Eliot would take sharp exception to Pater and everything he stood for; indeed, his essay "Arnold and Pater," from 1930, is a *locus classicus* in modernism's attack on Victorian aestheticism; but early works such as "Preludes," "Portrait of a Lady," and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* are instinct with a Pateresque languor, brimming as they are with personages measuring out lives with coffee spoons while they come and go talking of Michelangelo.

Similarly, the early Stevens is full of Pateresque themes and aspirations. Pater certainly does not hold the copyright on the idea (as Stevens put it in "Sunday Morning") that "death is the mother of beauty." But taken in conjunction with complacent peignoirs, late coffee and oranges, and "the holy hush of ancient sacrifice," the identification of mortality as the condition of beauty assumes a distinctly Pateresque coloring. Again, Pater was hardly the first to favor evocation over declaration; but his *style* of embracing intimation echoes plainly in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird":

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

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If Donoghue is right, Pater's presence is more than a collection of echoes and insinuations. "Whatever we mean by modernity," he insists, Pater "is an irrefutable part of it." His first published essay, on Coleridge, in 1866, sounds the distinctive, disabused note: "Modern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the 'relative' spirit in place of the 'absolute.' ... To the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under certain conditions." Then, too, Pater's interest in French literature and German aesthetics helped to make English literature more cosmopolitan, more worldly. And the French element, especially, opened up exotic new avenues of feeling. In brief, Pater instigated for English letters something like what such writers as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Huysmans, and Mallarmé did for the French. He made the forbidden, the outlandish, the silent a central literary preoccupation—though he did so quietly, with the greatest possible tact. If he was a "lover of strange souls" (Donoghue's subtitle comes from Pater's essay on Leonardo in *The Renaissance*), if "strangeness and beauty" was his "favorite conjunction," it was for him a matter of discriminating delectation not abandonment. In this respect, he betrays a kinship with Mallarmé, who advocated painting "not the thing itself, but the effect that it produces," and who once defined poetry as "a brief tearing of silence." Pater's route to exquisiteness was not through absinthe, hashish, sexual extravagance, or conscious blasphemy, but via a diffident voraciousness of appreciation.

Nevertheless, despite Pater's enormous reserve, there is a direct line of descent from *The Renaissance* (which was first published in 1873) to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and other such turn-of-the-century manifestations of arty decadence. Mario Praz was right (in *The Romantic Agony*, his classic study of the literature of decadence) to identify Pater as "the forerunner of the Decadent Movement in England." Not for nothing did Pater expatiate on the "fascination of corruption" and the poetic aspects of a countenance tinged with a deathly pallor. Algernon Swinburne was not only a friend but also a spiritual brother. Especially in his early years, Pater liked to think of himself as a champion of pagan virtues. But an underside of pagan vices clings firmly to Pater's prose. G. K. Chesterton perceptively noted the duality that accompanies the championship of paganism: "A man loves Nature in the morning for her innocence and amiability, and at nightfall, if he is loving her still, it is for her darkness and her cruelty. He washes at dawn in clear water as did the Wise Men of the Stoics, yet, somehow at the dark end of the day, he is bathing in hot bull's blood, as did Julian the Apostate."

Donoghue duly registers this aspect of Pater's legacy, but he shifts the emphasis: "It was Pater, more than Arnold, Tennyson, or Ruskin, who set modern literature upon its antithetical—he would have said its antinomian—course." That is to say, Donoghue highlights those elements of Pater's achievement that anticipate the critical, Romantic side of modernism: the side that exalted art as spiritual armor suited to a secular age and that found expression (for example) in Nietzsche's dictum that "we have art lest we perish from the truth." (Or—Nietzsche again—"Only as an aesthetic phenomenon is life and the world eternally justified.") As it happens, Pater claims us less through his ideas than through his sensibility, his style. He was not, Donoghue notes, really "learned in the history of art or in any of the subjects he took up—Greek myths, English poetry,

Greek philosophy." Indeed,

he was not an original thinker: virtually every idea he expressed can be traced to a source in English, French, or German writers. He is a force in the criticism of these subjects because he devised a distinctive style of writing about them: the Pateresque, a new color in the palette.

Donoghue's book is an effort to define and nurture that "new color," to recommend it anew as a compensation for the diminishments and losses of modernity. It is a measure of his eloquence that he succeeds in rendering the Pateresque at least momentarily plausible; it is a measure of the limitations of his chosen subject that that plausibility remains momentary, episodic.

Mr. Donoghue has segregated the biographical portion of his story in a "brief life" of some seventy pages at the beginning of the book. In some ways, it is remarkable that he was able to draw it out as long as he did. Pater extended his discretion even into the minutiae of his biography: his was a life notable above all for its lack of incident. We do, however, have the usual official signposts. We know that he was born Walter Horatio Pater near Stepney in 1839, the second son and third child of Richard and Maria Pater. A fourth child, Clara Ann, was born in 1841. Pater's father, a surgeon who catered to the poor, died shortly after Clara's birth at the age of forty-five. The family then moved to Enfield and, later, to Canterbury. In 1854, Pater's mother died, leaving the children in the care of their aunt Elizabeth. Pater was educated at the King's School, Canterbury, and then at Queen's College, Oxford, where he read widely but took an indifferent degree in 1862. While at Oxford he studied with the great Platonist Benjamin Jowett and came under the influence of Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin. He also, like so many university students then and later, used his college years as an opportunity to shed his religious faith. By 1859, Donoghue reports, Pater's attitude toward Christianity was "frivolous." He was, for example, overheard to say that it would be great fun to take Holy Orders without believing a word of Christian doctrine. His effort to put this scheme into effect was prevented by a friend who wrote to the Bishop of London, acquainting him with the state of Pater's beliefs.

In 1862, Pater's aunt Elizabeth died, and he set up house in London with Clara and his elder sister, Hester. In 1864, he won a provisional fellowship to Brasenose College, Oxford. The fellowship was confirmed the following year, and Pater settled into the pattern he would maintain for the rest of his life. Cared for by his maiden sisters, he shuttled quietly between Oxford and London, made occasional trips to the continent, and devoted himself to reading, writing, teaching, and aesthetic refinement. His circle of friends included Edmund Gosse, Mr. and Mrs. Humphry Ward, the classicist Ingram Bywater, as well as the influential Oxford don Mark Pattison and his young wife, twenty-seven years his junior, who are generally thought to have provided George Eliot with her models for Mr. Casaubon and Dorothea in *Middlemarch*. Pater's first visit to Italy, in the summer of 1865, was a revelation. He found in the Renaissance paintings he saw in Ravenna, Pisa, and Florence "the imagery of a richer, more daring sense of life than any to be seen in Oxford." It was then that he began "to associate the Italian Renaissance with freedom" and abundant sensuous life.

In effect, “the Renaissance” for Pater named not a historical period but a state of mind, a promise of fulfillment.

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It is here, just as Pater’s career is about to begin, that things get difficult for the biographer. Like his image of Botticelli, Pater’s life was “almost colourless.”

Donoghue notes that most people who write about Pater assume that “he must have had

more life than appears, since otherwise he would have to be deemed a freak of nature.” But the record shows that “by comparison with his grand contemporaries, he seems hardly to have lived.” Thomas Hardy, meeting Pater in London in 1886, noted that his manner was “that of one carrying weighty ideas without spilling them.” Deliquescence was as much a theme in his life as in his work. “There are,” Donoghue notes, “weeks or even months in which he seems to have taken his favorite theme of evanescence and drifted away. We assume that he is still alive, but the evidence for his breathing is meagre.”

Although he was clearly homosexual by disposition, Pater’s fastidious nature—what Christopher Ricks called his “greed for fineness”—forbade anything so obvious as a love affair or a sex life. He was, as Edmund Wilson put it, “one of those semi-monastic types . . . that the English universities breed: vowed to an academic discipline but cherishing an intense originality, painfully repressed and incomplete but in the narrow field of their art somehow both sound and bold.” In the event, Pater contented himself with a few passionate friendships and an ardent contemplation of youthful male beauty wherever it chanced to present itself. It was a great sorrow to him, a lover of elegance, that he was himself physically unprepossessing: bald, bulky, and bushy in his formidable mustachios. Nonetheless, beginning in 1869 Pater dressed the part of a dandy. Donoghue equips him with top hat, black tailcoat, silk tie of apple green, dark-striped trousers, yellow gloves, and patent leather shoes. Pater appears as Mr. Rose in W. H. Mallock’s satire *The New Republic* (1877): a “pale creature, with large moustache, looking out of the window at the sunset. . . . [H]e always speaks in an undertone, and his two topics are self-indulgence and art.” In 1894, the last year of his life, Pater was invited to meet Mallarmé, who was then lecturing at Oxford. Mallarmé taught English in a *lycée*; Pater’s French was excellent; but the two connoisseurs of intimation apparently thought it too vulgar actually to speak. According to one account, they “regarded each other in silence, and were satisfied.”

Pater was not entirely without gumption; only he tended to hoard it for his imagination. The infamous Frank Harris—editor of the *Saturday Review*, sexual braggart, and author of the pornographic fantasy *My Life and Loves* (four volumes)—is notoriously an unreliable witness. But his anecdote about Pater has the ring of authenticity:

He seemed at times half to realize his own deficiency. "Had I So-and-so's courage and hardihood," he cried once, "I'd have—." Suddenly the mood changed, the light in the eyes died out, the head drooped forward again, and with a half smile he added. "I might have been a criminal—he, he," and he moved with little careful steps across the room to his chair, and sat down.

The problem with Harris's anecdote is that it traps Pater in his caricature. It may be true; but it is not the whole truth. Such stories make it difficult to understand the genuine boldness of Pater's work: to appreciate, for example, the enormous scandal that *The Renaissance* caused when it was first published in 1873. Originally titled *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, the slim volume consists of nine essays, some of which had been already published in one form or another, plus a brief preface and (in most editions) a conclusion. As Pater's friend Mrs. Mark Pattison noted in an otherwise friendly review of the book, the title is "misleading" because "the historical element is precisely that which is wanting. ... [T]he work is in no wise a contribution to the history of the Renaissance." Pater took the point. In subsequent editions it was called by the title we know today, *The Renaissance; Studies in Art and Poetry*.

Not that the change of title really addressed Mrs. Pattison's criticism. "The book," another contemporary reviewer warned, "is not for any beginner to turn to in search of 'information.' " "Facts" and historical accuracy are not the coin in which Pater traded. For him, history was a mine to be worked for the *frisson* of insight; a certain amount of poetic license only aided the process.

Perhaps the chief instance of poetic license concerned the term "Renaissance." That Pater's conception of the Renaissance was idiosyncratic is clear first of all from the topics that he aggregated under the rubric. The book includes essays on such bona fide Renaissance figures as Pico della Mirandola, Leonardo, and Michelangelo; his essay on Botticelli did much to introduce the relatively unknown painter to the public. But the book also includes pieces on the medieval philosopher and ill-fated lover, Abelard, and the eighteenth-century art historian and impresario for "the glory that was Greece," Johann Winckelmann.

Pater notes that although interest in the Renaissance "mainly lies" in fifteenth-century Italy, he understands the term in "a much wider scope than was intended by those who originally used it to denote that revival of classical antiquity in the fifteenth century." For him, the Renaissance is a distinctive "outbreak of the human spirit" whose defining characteristics include "the care for physical beauty, the worship of the body, the breaking down of those limits which the religious system of the middle ages imposed on the heart and the imagination." Thus it is that although Winckelmann (who had long been one of Pater's culture heroes) was born in 1717, Pater concludes that he "really belongs in spirit to an earlier age" by virtue of "his enthusiasm for the things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake, by his Hellenism, his life-long struggle to attain to the Greek spirit." For Pater, "Renaissance" was shorthand for a certain species of aesthetic vibrancy.

It was not necessarily a wholesome vibrancy. Part of what made Pater's debut scandalous was the hothouse atmosphere that he reveled in: the ripe, over-ripe sensorium that was so distant from the brisk admonitions of such pragmatic partisans of culture as Matthew

Arnold. Pater's fascination with violence and death, with the interpenetration of death and beauty, was part of that ripeness. In his essay on Michelangelo, for example, Pater tells us that that great artist, like "all the nobler souls of Italy," "is much occupied with thoughts of the grave, and his true mistress is death—death at first as the worst of all sorrows and disgraces; . . . afterwards, death in its high distinction, its detachment from vulgar needs, the angry stains of life and action escaping fast." For Pater every genuine love was a kind of *Liebestod*.

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But it was not only the atmosphere of Pater's book that shocked readers. Even more important was the blithe, aesthetic paganism that was implicit throughout *The Renaissance* and that Pater explicitly set forth in his conclusion. Dilating on "the splendour of our experience and its awful brevity," he recommended seizing the moment, regardless of the consequences: "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end." Since "a counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life," "our one chance" lay in "expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time." Neither morality nor religion figured in Pater's equation. What mattered was the intensity, the ecstasy of experience. Consequently, we must grasp "at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend." For Pater, the measure of life was not its adherence to an ideal but the perfection of self-satisfaction. "To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." Pleasure, not duty, was the cardinal imperative. Life was not a continuously unfolding whole but a series of lyric moments: "In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits."

Aesthetes embraced Pater's expostulation. The young Oscar Wilde declared that *The Renaissance* was "the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty." Others were not so enthusiastic. The Rev. John Wordsworth, a colleague of Pater's at Brasenose, acknowledged the book's "beauty of style" and "felicity of thought." But he objected that the fundamental message of the book was immoral: "I cannot disguise from myself," he wrote in a letter to Pater,

that the concluding pages adequately sum up the philosophy of the whole; and that that philosophy is an assertion that no fixed principles either of religion or morality can be regarded as certain, that the only thing worth living for is momentary enjoyment and that probably or certainly the soul dissolves at death into elements which are destined never to reunite.

Nor were Christian clergymen the only critics of Pater's hedonism. The book was widely regarded as an invitation to moral frivolity. George Eliot spoke for many when she wrote that it was "quite poisonous in its false principles of criticism and false conceptions of life."

No one was more shocked by the scandal that *The Renaissance* precipitated than Pater himself. He did not abandon his aestheticism. But he did attempt to modulate it. In the second edition of *The Renaissance* he dropped the conclusion altogether. Later, he restored it, but with cosmetic modifications and a note informing readers that he had worried that "it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall." When *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published, Pater took the opportunity to distinguish his version of Epicureanism from Wilde's:

A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness, as [does] Mr. Wilde's hero—his heroes are bent on doing as speedily, as completely as they can—is to lose, or lower, organisation, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development. . . . Lord Henry, and even more the, from the first, suicidal hero, loses too much in life to be a true Epicurean.

Pater attempted to provide a portrait of the "true Epicurean" in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), an overwrought, somewhat ponderous autobiographical novel that describes the spiritual journey of its hero from paganism to the threshold of Christianity. (Pater much preferred hovering on the threshold of commitment to actually embracing any definite faith.) According to Donoghue, "the main reason [for writing the book] was to refute the charge, levelled against *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, that he was a hedonist, an epicurean and—the implication was clear—that he instructed his undergraduates at Brasenose to live for pleasure alone." In fact, Pater did believe in living for pleasure alone. But he thought that careful discrimination among pleasures redeemed his aestheticism from vulgar hedonism or immorality.

Did it? In part. Pater would certainly have recoiled in horror from the crude narcissism and decadence that his work helped to inspire. But it is not at all clear that George Eliot was mistaken in castigating his "false principles of criticism and false conceptions of life." Donoghue wishes to resuscitate Pater partly because he thinks that a Pateresque aestheticism encourages readers to deal with art on its own terms, as affording an experience valuable in itself. "There are," he writes, "some experiences which are best approached on the assumption that their value is intrinsic." This is certainly true. And it may be that Pater's view of art, as Donoghue claims, can help to immunize art from ideology. Because he held that art "has no moral design upon us," Pater would have had no patience with efforts to subject aesthetic experience to politics—or any other "external" value. "In its primary aspect," he wrote in *The Renaissance*, "a great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a few moments on the wall or floor."

Yet this is not the whole story. Donoghue writes that “the purpose of art is to offer the distressed soul release, however temporary.” This is not a new theme for him. In his book *The Arts Without Mystery* (1984), for example, Donoghue worried that our commitment to scientific rationality had drained the arts of their power to enchant and to kindle the imagination. He sought to “reinstate mystery” into the arts while at the same time distinguishing mystery “from mere bewilderment or mystification.” For Donoghue, the artist is most truly himself when he stands in an antagonistic or (one of his favorite words) “antinomian” attitude toward society. Yet this Romanticism is sharply qualified by prudence, the most un-Romantic of virtues. He understands that the main business of society cannot countenance the extravagances that the artistic imagination furnishes.

The arts are on the margin, and it doesn’t bother me to say they are marginal. What bothers me are the absurd claims we make for them. I want to say the margin is the place for those feelings and intuitions which daily life doesn’t have a place for, and mostly seems to suppress. . . . With the arts, people can make a space for themselves, and fill it with intimations of freedom and presence.

Pater would have agreed. “What modern art has to do in the service of culture,” he wrote in his essay on Winckelmann,

is so to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit. And what does the spirit need in the face of modern life? The sense of freedom. . . . The chief factor in the thoughts of the modern mind concerning itself is the intricacy, the universality of natural law, even in the moral order. For us, necessity is . . . a magic web woven through and through us, like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks, penetrating us with a network, subtler than our subtlest nerves, yet bearing in it the central forces of the world. Can art represent men and women in these bewildering toils so as to give the spirit at least the equivalent for the sense of freedom?

The real question, for Donoghue as well as for Pater, is whether that “equivalent for the sense of freedom” is anything more than illusion. Does Pater’s philosophy—does any thoroughgoing aestheticism—really leave room for “intrinsic value” as Donoghue claims?

In his preface to *The Renaissance*, Pater begins by *seeming* to agree with Matthew Arnold’s famous definition of criticism, but he then slyly inverts Arnold’s meaning:

“To see the object as in itself it really is,” has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly. . . . What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me? . . . [T]he picture, the landscape, the engaging personality in life or in a book . . . are valuable for their virtues, as we say, in speaking of an herb, a wine, a gem; for the property each has of affecting one with a special, a unique, impression of pleasure.

For Pater, “one’s own impression” trumps meaning. And it is a curious irony, as the critic Adam Phillips has observed, that although Pater insists on the value of discrimination and accurate identification of the critic’s “impressions,” his vocabulary is “notably vague.” Thus it is that he “exploited the invitation of inexact words: ‘sweet,’ ‘peculiar,’ ‘delicate,’ and above all ‘strange.’ ”

Donoghue rightly notes that Pater “looked at an object under the sign of pleasure, not of truth.” He approvingly quotes another critic who spoke of “the disjunction of sensation from judgment” in Pater’s work. The “Paterian imagination,” he writes, seeks “relations” instead of “duties.” “It follows that Pater practised consciousness not as a mode of knowledge but as an alternative to knowledge. . . . One of the ways in which Pater was antinomian was in his being ready to think that understanding wasn’t everything.” Indeed, his chief concern was “his pleasure in feeling alive.” “Aesthetic criticism” in Pater’s sense deals “not with objects, works of art, but with the types of feeling they embodied. . . . Ontology is displaced by psychology.”

“Ontology is displaced by psychology”: in other words, what matters for Pater are states of feeling, not truth. At the end of his book, Donoghue acknowledges the “risks” of aestheticism: “triviality, exquisiteness, solipsism.” An additional risk is losing the weight or reality of one’s experience. T. S. Eliot criticized Pater for propounding “a theory of ethics” in the guise of a theory of art. What he meant was that Pater’s conception of “aesthetic criticism” offered not a principle of criticism but a way of life. At the center of that way of life is the imperative to regard all experience as an occasion for aesthetic delectation: a seemingly attractive proposition, perhaps, until one realizes that it depends upon a narcissistic self-absorption that renders every moral demand negotiable. “The sense of freedom” is indeed the essence of aestheticism; but it is the cold and lonely freedom of the isolated individual. This was something that Kierkegaard exposed with great clarity in his anatomy of “the aesthetic mode of life” in *Either/Or*. Donoghue tells us that “the part of Aestheticism which should now be recovered . . . is its concern for the particularity of form in every work of art.” The problem is that although aestheticism begins by emphasizing form, it ends by dissolving form into the “pleasurable sensations” and “pulsations” that Pater so valued. In this sense, aestheticism is the enemy of the intrinsic. Donoghue criticized Eliot’s essay on Pater as “extravagant” and “cruel.” But Eliot was right: the theory of “art for art’s sake” is “valid in so far as it can be taken as an exhortation to the artist to stick to his job; it never was and never can be valid for the spectator, reader or auditor.”

Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. *Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls*, by Denis Donoghue; Knopf, 361 pages, \$27.50. [Go back to the text.](#)
 2. See my review of the book in *The New Criterion* for September 1984. [Go back to the text.](#)
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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 13 Number 9 , on page 11

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