

# The Sense and Reference of Sound; or, Walter Pater's Kinky Literalism

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The first thing we have to learn is to pay heed  
to our individual sensations.

—Hermann von Helmholtz, *Treatise on  
Physiological Optics* (1867)

*T*O which of the senses does literature address itself? Is literature, with its origins in song, first and foremost an aural art form, like music? or is it, as the Victorian fascination with illuminated manuscripts indicates, a visual art akin to painting? Elaine Scarry suggests that literature addresses itself simultaneously to all the senses and almost none of them. Scarry argues that while literature “is almost bereft of any sensuous content,” it nonetheless gives us a set of instructions for “an act of perceptual mimesis,” in which we conjure up rich mental images of sounds, tastes, sights, and touches from the austere medium of print.<sup>1</sup> We can

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 5, 6.

only perform this magic trick, however, by turning our attention away from the actual sensuous presence of literature—the way we register the words themselves—in favor of the images it represents.

For all the brilliance of her analysis, Scarry's answer privileges the representational content of literature over its sensuous presence in a way that would have been unacceptable to the Aesthetic Movement, the group of Victorian artists and writers most invested in understanding how literature affects the senses. In the name of intensifying our sensory experience of the arts, the aesthetes launched stinging polemics against Victorian critics' habit of neglecting the form of artworks by paying too much attention to what the artworks represent. Walter Pater's essay "The School of Giorgione" (1877) provides the definitive statement of this formalist argument. The essay opens by decrying the tendency of popular art criticism to "read" paintings by focusing exclusively on the scenes they depict, a tendency Pater dryly describes as manifesting "a merely poetical, or what may be called literary interest," in paintings.<sup>2</sup> The problem for Pater here is only partly that such criticism applies an inappropriately literary mode of appraisal in evaluating visual art. There is also a problem with the literary itself, which Pater signals by defining literature's characteristic mode of reception as one that responds to artworks as if they were "addressed . . . to the pure intelligence" ("School of Giorgione," p. 103). Here, Pater is making a quiet allusion to Hippolyte Taine's *On Intelligence* (1870), which defines intelligence as the capacity to transform sensory impressions into the signs for abstract ideas.<sup>3</sup> Taine argues that intelligence is semiotic, and that signs turn sensations into abstractions. Made of signs, literature seems to lead our attention ineluctably away from a text's sensuous presence and toward the things it signifies.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Pater, "The School of Giorgione," in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1980), p. 103. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

<sup>3</sup> See Hippolyte Taine, *On Intelligence*, trans. T. D. Haye (London: L. Reeve and Co., 1871), pp. 15–20. Noting that Pater owned several copies of Taine's books, Billie Inman suggests that Pater derived most of his understanding of psychology from Taine (see Billie Andrew Inman, *Walter Pater's Reading: A Bibliography of His Library Borrowings and Literary References, 1858–1873* [New York: Garland, 1981], p. 230).

Pater therefore suggests that literature is a bad model for the arts. Instead, he contends, all art forms—literature included—should strive to be like music, because music has no straightforwardly representational content (when it is instrumental at least). Pater famously lays down this principle in the ringing declaration that “*all art constantly aspires towards the conditions of music*” (“School of Giorgione,” p. 106; emphasis in original).

In this essay I argue that music is crucial to how Pater understands the sensuous presence of literature because it profoundly shapes his conception of figurative language. Music in fact circulated widely in 1870s Britain as a figure for the aesthetic formalism Pater advocates in “The School of Giorgione.”<sup>4</sup> When Pater’s essay appeared, the painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler had already become notorious for employing music as a trope for uncompromising devotion to visual form. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, Whistler began drawing extensively from musical nomenclature to title (or in some cases retitle) his paintings as musical forms (symphonies, nocturnes, and so on) in colors rather than sound.<sup>5</sup> In an 1878 interview in *The World*, Whistler echoed Pater’s argument in “The School of Giorgione” to defend his practice of giving his paintings musical titles. Like Pater, Whistler decries the inability of “the vast majority of English folk . . . [to] consider a picture as a picture, apart from any story which it may be supposed to tell.”<sup>6</sup> Whistler chose his titles, he claims, in the same way as composers who “wrote music [as] simply music; symphony in this key, concerto or sonata in that.” In his visual symphonies, as in these musical ones, “the subject-matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour” (*Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, p. 127). In Whistler’s comment on his famous libel suit against the critic John Ruskin, his hostility to regarding paintings as stories intensified into

<sup>4</sup> The aestheticist elevation of music to the highest place among the arts began as early as Arthur Schopenhauer’s second volume of *The World as Will and Idea* (1844), where Schopenhauer argues that music alone among the arts bypasses the mediation of abstract ideas and lets us experience the surging life-force of the universe directly.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of Whistler’s titling practices, see Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2015), pp. 204–24.

<sup>6</sup> [James Abbott McNeill Whistler], *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, 3d ed. (London: William Heinemann, 1904), p. 126.

a polemical banishment of language altogether from the presence of artworks: “Let work, then, be received in silence” (p. 30).<sup>7</sup>

For aesthetes like Pater and Whistler, then, music functions as a metaphor for the aestheticist opposition to finding thematic or interpretive significance in art objects. Hence Rachel Teukolsky glosses Pater’s conditions of music as “indicat[ing] not actual music but a radical and even anarchic dispensing with agreed-upon meaning, telescoping aesthetic experience down into the body of the beholder.”<sup>8</sup> There is something paradoxical, though, in the aesthetes’ expression of their antipathy to interpretative significance.<sup>9</sup> The contradiction in play here—the fact that music serves as a figure for resistance to the figurative—should give us pause.

What if we took the aesthetes at their word by reading Pater’s conditions of music both as a figure *and* as indicating actual music? Here, I do just that, by situating Pater’s invocation of music in “The School of Giorgione” as part of the British response to the acoustics of Hermann von Helmholtz. While Pater never mentions Helmholtz directly in his published writings, Pater’s rise to fame as an apostle of the Aesthetic Movement in the 1870s coincided with an explosion of British interest in Helmholtz’s scientific work on music in particular.<sup>10</sup> An English translation of Helmholtz’s *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music* (1862) appeared in 1875 (his treatise on optics had to wait until 1924), and the vast majority of articles discussing Helmholtz in British periodicals of the 1870s took music as their focus.<sup>11</sup> Pater’s turn to music as the ideal art form in “The School of Giorgione” thus occurs at

<sup>7</sup> On Whistler’s libel suit against Ruskin, see Linda Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1996), pp. 41–49.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Teukolsky, *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), p. 118.

<sup>9</sup> Compare Ruth Bernard Yeazell on Whistler’s call for silence before art: “it would hardly require an Oscar Wilde to register the paradox that Whistler himself never ceased speaking” (*Picture Titles*, p. 220).

<sup>10</sup> Gillian Beer compares the prominence of Helmholtz by the end of the 1870s to that of Charles Darwin himself (see Beer, *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996], pp. 243–49).

<sup>11</sup> Out of the 370 articles the *British Periodicals* database returned when I searched for Helmholtz in the 1870s, a full 287 discussed music.

a moment when Helmholtz was celebrated in Britain as the preeminent scientific theorist of music.

Helmholtz's studies of music were only one part of his larger revolutionary work on sensory perception. During the two decades prior to the 1870s, Helmholtz had conducted a groundbreaking series of experiments in physics and neurophysiology, clocking the (surprisingly slow) speed of nervous transmission in 1849, inventing the first ophthalmoscope to peer inside the retina in 1851, and devising the Helmholtz resonator to analyze complex auditory sensations in the mid 1850s. Taken together, Helmholtz's experiments counterintuitively demonstrated that our perceptions—our conscious apprehension of the world around us—seem radically underdetermined by the sense data that appear to cause them.

Sensations, Helmholtz found, are belated, fragmentary, and interpolated by the memory traces of earlier experiences, but more than that they are ignored. The perceiving mind pays only enough attention to sensations to infer the presence of familiar objects likely to have triggered them. Helmholtz understood this act of inference as fundamentally semiotic: perception reflexively reads sensations as signs for objects. The first step in discriminating our sensations, he therefore suggests, is to bracket the perceptual meaning or reference we are usually only too quick to assign them. This turn away from meaning is a strategy likewise embraced by aesthetes like Pater, who declares in "The School of Giorgione" that "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" ("School of Giorgione," p. 104). Helmholtz and the aesthetes fretted that when it comes to both art and perception, we pay so much attention to the things being represented that we constantly lose sight of the *way* they are represented. In linguistic terms, reference overwhelms sense.<sup>12</sup>

In giving sense priority over reference in "The School of Giorgione," Pater seems to live down to aestheticism's reputation

<sup>12</sup> I take the liberty of using sense here differently from Gottlob Frege in his famous 1892 essay "Sense and Reference." Frege defines sense as the mode of presentation of a specifically linguistic sign, while he classifies sensory experience as ideas. See Gottlob Frege, "Sense and Reference," trans. Max Black, *Philosophical Review*, 57 (1948), 209–30.

for pursuing aesthetic effects to the point of indifference, if not outright hostility, to factual accuracy about the object world. In this view, his essay on Giorgione would thus take its place as simply one more moment in Pater's work when, as Denis Donoghue puts it, "ontology is displaced by psychology."<sup>13</sup> In this essay I contest this reading of Pater and the Aesthetic Movement as hedonistically pursuing subjective effects in defiance of facts; I suggest here that Pater's attention to sense has something to offer us in a moment when prevailing critical interests have shifted toward exploring the continuities between literary texts and material reality. Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt have suggested that those continuities can be best revealed by literal or nonfigural reading—meticulously following the path of denotative references from literary texts to technical and scientific manuals to the nontextual objects those manuals analyze, describe, and grapple with. Through such exacting attention to reference, this method seeks "to prolong the moment of interrupted sense" we often experience when encountering unfamiliar or highly precise descriptive or technical terms so as to grasp how "the sheer facticity of fictional worlds" can ultimately transform our understanding of a text's figurative or ideological dimensions.<sup>14</sup> Here, I want to suggest that Pater's aestheticism is not merely consonant with the aims and method of literal reading; it also expands its scope of application beyond denotative language to include the figurative. To do so, I make two claims: that, for Pater, sense rather than reference best reveals the facticity of the figurative; and that, paradoxically, Pater suggests that the best way to grasp the sense of a text is to read it literally.

By tracing Pater's response to Helmholtz's scientific theories of perception across Pater's work after *The Renaissance* (1873), I unpack here the rhetorical logic of what Pater identifies as literal metaphors—instances of figurative language or representation whose figurative significance can be grasped only by taking them literally. I identify and attend to several of Pater's literal metaphors—most extensively musical harmony— but

<sup>13</sup> Denis Donoghue, *Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), pp. 139–40.

<sup>14</sup> Cannon Schmitt, "Tidal Conrad (Literally)," *Victorian Studies*, 55 (2012), 19, 15.

their most emblematic form is the Paterian figure, at once human form and trope. Pater's figures, I suggest, reveal some of the erotic possibilities latent in nonfigural reading. For Schmitt, literal reading calls upon us to pay due attention to the way in which novels concerned with work and technical knowledge, for instance, insist on "love for and commitment to the extrafictional world in all its particularity and intractability."<sup>15</sup> Aestheticism has a well-known aversion to work, but it knows quite a bit about love. In Pater's writing, I argue, love for the figure and love for the nonfigural reciprocally make and motivate each other. Put another way, Pater's writing insists that reading literally is what you do when you are reading as a lover, more especially a kinky one.<sup>16</sup>



Love notwithstanding, Helmholtz's ear was his most famous organ, in Britain at least. Helmholtz envisioned the ear as a kind of massive keyboard. In his lecture "On the Physiological Causes of Harmony in Music" (1857) and his treatise *On the Sensations of Tone*, Helmholtz locates this keyboard inside the cochlea, where the organ of Corti teems with bristling, plate-like hair-cell receptors, each tuned to resonate sympathetically in response to one frequency across the spectrum of audible sounds. Each of these myriad receptors transmits its vibrations to one nerve, producing its own distinct tonal sensation.<sup>17</sup> This massive array of keys allows the ear to perform astonishing feats of analysis, which Helmholtz illustrates by invoking the kaleidoscopic spectacle of a ballroom traversed in every direction by the soundwaves pulsing outward

<sup>15</sup> Cannon Schmitt, "Technical Maturity in Robert Louis Stevenson," *Representations*, 125 (2014), 56.

<sup>16</sup> I draw here from Ellis Hanson's recent call for a critical turn to kink. See Ellis Hanson, "Kink in Time," *b20: an online journal*, 6 October 2016; available online at <[www.boundary2.org](http://www.boundary2.org)>.

<sup>17</sup> Helmholtz estimated the number of such resonators as around three thousand. See Gary Hatfield, "Helmholtz and Classicism: The Science of Aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Science," in *Hermann von Helmholtz and the Foundations of Nineteenth-Century Science*, ed. David Cahan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1993), p. 526.

from each instrument in the orchestra, each foot stepping on the dance floor, and each mouth speaking or singing. While the eye sees nothing as these waves pass through each other and bounce back and forth between surfaces, the ear “analyses the interdigitation of the waves, . . . separates the several tones which compose it, and distinguishes the voices of men and women—nay, even of individuals—the peculiar qualities of tone given out by each instrument, the rustling of the dresses, the footfalls of the walkers, and so on.”<sup>18</sup> Routinely faced with such protean complexity, the keyboard of the ear effortlessly breaks a veritable ocean of activity down into a recognizable soundscape populated by familiar figures.

The analytical power of the ear is rendered even more astonishing by the phenomenon that served as the cornerstone of Helmholtz’s theory of music: upper partials. With the exception of tones played by specially designed instruments such as tuning forks, what we take to be simple musical tones are actually compound waves comprised of a fundamental tone combined with upper partials—vibrations at frequencies that are integer multiples of the fundamental tone. Helmholtz’s image of “pendular vibrational curves,” taken from *On the Sensations of Tone*, illustrates this combination (see Figure 1).<sup>19</sup> In this illustration, wave A represents a simple tone as produced by a tuning fork, while wave B represents another simple tone an octave higher than the first, which therefore completes two vibrations (cresting, troughing, and returning to the baseline) in the same time it takes A to complete one (cresting and returning to the baseline). Together, these two simple waves form a compound wave with the same length as the longest simple wave (the fundamental tone), but also with an altered form. Waves C and D each represent versions of this compound wave, with the dotted lines indicating the form of the fundamental tone (wave A) so as to demonstrate the change in form in the compound

<sup>18</sup> Hermann von Helmholtz, “On the Physiological Causes of Harmony in Music” (1857), in his *Science and Culture: Popular and Philosophical Essays*, ed. David Cahan (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 57–58.

<sup>19</sup> Hermann L. F. Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music*, trans. Alexander J. Ellis (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1875), pp. 174, 175.

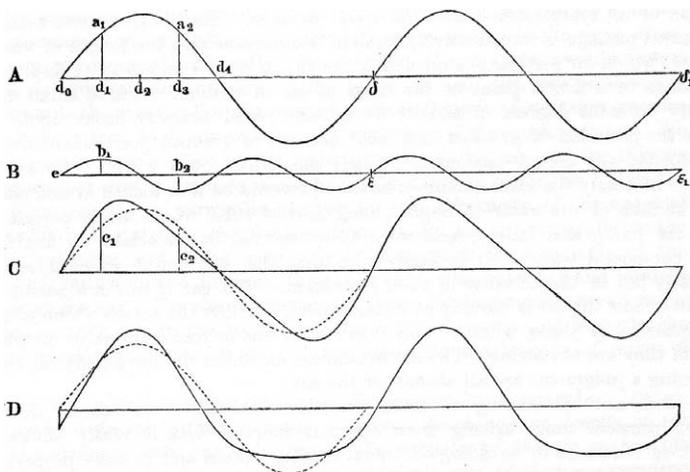


FIGURE 1. From Hermann L. F. Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music* (1875).

wave. These small alterations play an outsize role in music because the quality of a tone—its timbre as opposed to its pitch—depends on the form of the soundwave. It is therefore the distribution and intensity of upper partials in a given tone that allow us to recognize just what is producing it: whether it was “generated by the vibrating strings of a piano or violin, the vocal chords of the human larynx, the metal tongues of the harmonium, the reeds of the clarionet, oboe, and bassoon, the trembling lips of the trumpeter, or the air cut by a sharp edge in organ pipes and flutes” (Helmholtz, “Physiological Causes of Harmony,” p. 49). Musical tones we often take to be simple are thus, strictly speaking, harmonic.

Scientific acoustics in the nineteenth century is distinctive for its preoccupation with the exact analysis of such apparently simple tones. Earlier acoustic experiments relied on strings or pipes; careful empirical observations could always decompose tones produced that way into an approximate estimate of the component notes. Nineteenth-century scientists, however, began devising instruments, like sirens or Helmholtz’s resonator, to isolate simple tones. Just how such simple elements combined to produce complex tones became a central problem in

scientific acoustics. Helmholtz's acoustic studies followed on and attempted to resolve a dispute that played out between August Seebeck and Georg Ohm in the 1840s after Ohm applied Fourier analysis to soundwaves.<sup>20</sup> Seebeck mounted a particularly effective attack on Ohm, partly by pointing to the fact that Ohm's theory could not explain why we typically hear the fundamental tone as louder than the upper partials. It was just here that Helmholtz's semiotic account of perception proved indispensable. The relative difficulty in hearing upper partials, he argued, is just one more instance of the problem of unconscious sensations, not much different from *mouches volantes* (the fibrous deposits in the eye's vitreous humor that float across our vision) or the retinal blind spot—phenomena that must be constantly present as sensations and yet that we ignore so reflexively as to be utterly unaware of them:

Whether a violin or a flute, a man or a dog is close by us is a matter of interest for us to know, and our ear takes care to distinguish the peculiarities of their tones with accuracy. The *means* by which we can distinguish them, however, is a matter of perfect indifference.

Whether the cry of the dog contains the higher octave or the twelfth of the fundamental tone, has no practical interest for us, and never occupies our attention. The upper partials are consequently thrown into that unanalysed mass of peculiarities of a tone which we call its *quality*. (Helmholtz, "Physiological Causes of Harmony," p. 67; emphasis in original)

There are, Helmholtz suggests, two kinds of ears: "the material ear of the body and the spiritual ear of the mind" (p. 64). Armed with its keyboard of specially tuned receptors, the material ear of the body automatically unpacks each tone into its own distinct assortment of sensations. Meanwhile, the spiritual ear of the mind, concerned first and foremost with navigating the world around it, reflexively ignores those fine discriminations,

<sup>20</sup> For Helmholtz's intervention in the dispute between Ohm and Seebeck, see Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone*, pp. 93–94. For a more detailed discussion, see R. Steven Turner, "The Ohm-Seebeck Dispute, Hermann von Helmholtz, and the Origins of Physiological Acoustics," *British Journal for the History of Science*, 10 (1977), 1–24; and Stephen Vogel, "Sensations of Tone, Perceptions of Sound, and Empiricism," in *Helmholtz and the Foundations of Nineteenth-Century Science*, pp. 259–87.

regarding sensations as “mere symbols” of the type of objects likely to be causing them (p. 66). The split between sensation and perception reconfigures mind/body dualism as a doubling of sense organs.

Nevertheless, Helmholtz maintained a blithe confidence in the truth of perception that owed much to what Gary Hatfield terms Helmholtz’s classical aesthetics of science. The vocation of the scientist, Helmholtz believed, shares its fundamental aim with perception itself: to edit out the contingent variations of phenomena so as to accomplish “the imaging of the lawlike in the processes of the real world.”<sup>21</sup> Classical art offers us the accomplishment of this aim in its most visually striking form by “giv[ing us] a vivid perception of all the features of an ideal type, whose separate fragments lie scattered in our imagination and overgrown by the wild chaos of accident.”<sup>22</sup> Music, however, is an exception to Helmholtz’s classicism in two key ways. First, we do not listen to music to discern the objects that might be in our environment. Consequently, “music has a more immediate connection with pure sensation than any other of the fine arts, and . . . the theory of the sensations of hearing is [therefore] destined to play a much more important part in musical esthetics, than, for example, the theory of *chiaroscuro* or of perspective in painting” (Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone*, p. 4). But more surprisingly, given the objections to Ohm’s theory he had to overcome, Helmholtz insists that the spiritual ear of the mind really can discriminate upper partials. Helmholtz designed his special resonator to aid the ear in breaking down harmonic tones into their sensory components, but he claims such devices were not really necessary. All one really needs is to redirect the ear’s attention from perceiving “external objects” to “attentively observing itself”—just the kind of redirection of attention, in other words, that occurs in listening to music (*On the Sensations of Tone*, p. 104). The ear’s capacity to focalize distinct sensations, Helmholtz argues, is unique among the senses. The eye, he notes in contrast,

<sup>21</sup> Hermann von Helmholtz, “The Facts in Perception” (1878), in *Science and Culture*, p. 348.

<sup>22</sup> Hermann von Helmholtz, “On the Relation of Optics to Painting” (1871), in *Science and Culture*, p. 308.

“is unable to decompose compound systems of luminous waves, that is, to distinguish compound colours from one another. . . . The eye has no sense of harmony in the same meaning as the ear. There is no music to the eye” (Helmholtz, “Physiological Causes of Harmony,” p. 74).



Walter Pater’s aesthetic criticism aims at just the kind of music that the eye lacks; it is built on a drive to decompose and analyze impressions. The 1873 “Preface” to *The Renaissance* characterizes the basic working method of aesthetic criticism as “analysing and reducing [the influence of each art object] to its elements.”<sup>23</sup> For this very reason, moreover, Pater’s aesthetics share with Helmholtz’s ear a vexed relationship to classicism. Classical thought, Pater writes in “Coleridge” (1866), “sought to arrest every object in an eternal outline”; for modern thought like his own, in contrast, “experience gives us, not the truth of eternal outlines ascertained once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change—and bids us, by a constant clearing of the organs of observation and perfecting of analysis, to make what we can of these.”<sup>24</sup> Paterian aestheticism, I suggest, is fundamentally musical in Helmholtz’s sense.

But let’s begin with reference. Pater’s essays on myth in the 1870s, later collected in *Greek Studies* (1895), develop an idiosyncratic theory of reference that engages with Helmholtz by way of Hippolyte Taine and Max Müller. Taine’s *On Intelligence* takes Helmholtz’s theory of musical tone as a model for its sustained analysis of the chemistry of mental life, breaking our most general ideas down into their most elemental components, where the smallest microsensations swarm like atoms. Taine follows Helmholtz in arguing for a rigorously semiotic conception of mental life; not only are the smallest sensations themselves signs, but thought itself is made up fundamentally of language:

<sup>23</sup> Walter Pater, “Preface,” in *The Renaissance*, p. xx.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Pater, “Coleridge,” in *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1900), pp. 65, 67.

What . . . we call a general idea . . . is only a name; not the simple sound that vibrates in the air and strikes our ear, or the collection of letters which blacken the paper and attract the eye, not even these letters perceived mentally, or this sound pronounced mentally, but this sound or these letters endued . . . with a double property, that of arousing in us images of individuals belonging to a certain class . . . and the property of reviving when, and only when, an individual of this same class is present to our memory or experience. (Taine, *On Intelligence*, p. 13)

Taine insists here on the physical embodiment of names—the letters or sounds making them up—as well as the signifying function that defines them partly because their presence in thought is so easy to ignore. Names emerge just like perceptions from repeated experience: “we experience spontaneously, after having come in contact with a series of similar objects, . . . a tendency which corresponds to what there is in common to these objects; that is to say, to some general character, to some abstract quality, to an extract from the objects, and this tendency results in a gesture, in some mimicry, in some distinct sign, which in maturity becomes a name” (*On Intelligence*, p. 19). But by a quirk in the logic of perception, the repeated experiences that develop names also make them invisible to us. Just as “when an impression . . . is many times repeated, our attention ends by fixing itself entirely on the interesting and useful part” and neglecting the rest, so when we reflect on our general ideas we tend to ignore the sign itself—the simple sound that vibrates in the air or the collection of letters that blacken the paper—for the sake of the images it calls up (p. 32).

Pater takes up the problem of Taine’s names in “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone” (1875) and “A Study of Dionysus” (1876), two essays he composed just before the appearance of “The School of Giorgione.” It is by now an established critical fact that Pater borrows his approach to his mythic subjects from the comparative mythology of Edward Tylor, Ludwig Preller, and Max Müller.<sup>25</sup> Victorian comparative mythologists

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Robert Crawford, “Pater’s *Renaissance*, Andrew Lang, and Anthropological Romanticism,” *ELH*, 53 (1986), 849–79; Steven Connor, “Myth as Multiplicity in Walter Pater’s *Greek Studies* and ‘Denys L’Auxerrois,’” *Review of English*

held that mythic figures emerged out of folk experience with natural phenomena. So in *The Queen of the Air* (1869), John Ruskin, who preceded Pater in trying his hand at comparative mythology, meticulously unpacks the goddess Athena into the atmospheric elements from which the ancient Greeks created her. This comparative framework treats mythic figures as, essentially, names as Taine understood them: spontaneously emerging signs abstracted from repeated experiences.

In "A Study of Dionysus," Pater traces the god Dionysus back to the experience of Greek peasants toiling in Mediterranean vineyards. Appearing first as "the soul of the individual vine," Dionysus is next transformed by "the higher intelligence" into "the soul of the whole species," before ultimately becoming "not merely . . . the soul of the vine, but of all that life in flowing things of which the vine is the symbol, because its most emphatic example," and only then, at last, being named for "the brightness of the sky and the moisture of the earth" that he has come to stand for.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the naming of Dionysus does not adhere faithfully to the trajectory that Taine describes, since the name in this case does not denotatively refer to a class of objects. Unlike, say, the word "vines," the name Dionysus is a proper name. It therefore "weld[s] into something like the identity of a human personality the whole range of man's experiences of a given object, or series of objects" ("Study of Dionysus," p. 29). Denotative reference, in this case, operates figuratively as it gathers up fugitive impressions into myths.

Pater's Dionysus is a figure in both senses of the word: a human form and a trope. As Carolyn Williams notes, this double notion of figure is integral to Pater's work, allowing him to embody complex social and material histories in representative individual persons—Leonardo, Johann Winckelmann, Marius.<sup>27</sup> In "A Study of Dionysus," Pater thus draws a parallel between names and the art of sculpture. Like names, classical

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*Studies*, 34 (1983), 28–42; and John Coates, "Pater and the Myth of Dionysus," *English*, 56 (2007) 265–82.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Pater, "A Study of Dionysus," in *Greek Studies* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1901), p. 13. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

<sup>27</sup> See Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 6–7.

sculpture strives “to condense the impressions of natural things into human form; to retain that early mystical sense of water, or wind, or light, in the moulding of eye and brow; to arrest it, or rather, perhaps, to set it free, there, as human expression” (“Study of Dionysus,” pp. 32–33). This passage evokes “Coleridge” and its definition of classical thought as seeking to arrest every object in an eternal outline, only to revise it, paradoxically finding something like freedom in the arrest of experience.

The figural logic at work in Pater’s account of mythopoetic development draws substantially from Max Müller’s *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1862), which likewise identifies the figurative work of naming with the emergence of myth.<sup>28</sup> Metaphor, for Müller, is fundamental to the growth of language, since its transference of a name from one object to another with similar qualities is what allowed the first language users to generate new words from a limited stock of roots. The power of metaphor thus drives the first mythic effort to give a name to every object in the world, a labor that is then done over again in the scientific work of classification—which, much like Adam, aims to throw “a simple tissue of names . . . over the garden of nature” (Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, I, 25).

For both Pater and Müller, metaphor governs the intermediate phase of a three-stage process of development shared by myth and science. In “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone,” Pater describes this process as consisting of a mystic phase when primitive impressions of natural phenomena give rise to folk traditions, a literary phase when poets simplify and fix the outlines of those traditions into narratives, and an ethical phase when those narratives are read as “abstract symbols . . . of moral or spiritual conditions.”<sup>29</sup> Steven Connor traces the origins of Pater’s tripartite model of mythic development with Ruskin’s *Queen of the Air*, which likewise identifies three structural parts of mythic figures, or, as Ruskin calls them, “the root and the

<sup>28</sup> Volume 2 of Müller’s lectures, which Pater borrowed from Brasenose College Library in 1874, in fact contains a discussion of Helmholtz’s theory of upper partials and his account of them as the foundations of vowel sounds. See Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1890), II, 101–14.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Pater, “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone,” in *Greek Studies*, p. 91. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

two branches:—the root, in physical existence, sun, or sky, or cloud, or sea; then the personal incarnation of that; becoming a trusted and companionable deity . . . ; and, lastly, the moral significance of the image.”<sup>30</sup> But both of these models of mythic development in fact recapitulate Müller’s three stages of scientific development, which include an empirical stage of observing facts, followed by a classificatory stage of arranging those facts under names, and culminating in a theoretical phase elucidating the laws that underlie those arrangements. For Müller, however, the metaphorical logic of naming simultaneously drives and disrupts this developmental process. Müller’s names, whether mythic or scientific, were subject to the same problem that Ian Duncan has recently described as haunting Victorian science more broadly: “knowledge . . . obliterates the imaginative as well as cognitive labor of its production. . . . Signs become natural, fitted to the world, . . . [and] we become unconscious of . . . their original, figural strangeness.”<sup>31</sup> In Müller’s argument, a name is generated by metaphor, but it degenerates into a mythology as soon as it becomes so familiar that we forget its figurative nature and thus confound one thing with another—as soon, that is, as we take it literally.

Pater’s names, though, avoid this danger by inverting Müller’s narrative of the decadent slide from metaphor into literalism. The figures of the gods, Pater observes, were always liable to revert back into natural phenomena—as they do over and over again in classical myths. Plato, Pater points out in “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone,” expelled from his Republic just those kinds of stories—“stories in which, the hard material outline breaking up, the gods lay aside their visible form like a garment, yet remain essentially themselves” (“Myth of Demeter and Persephone,” p. 119). By forbidding these stories, Plato aims to ensure that his republicans read myths in agreement with what Pater describes as their third, ethical phase, during which mythic figures are interpreted as abstract symbols of moral and spiritual conditions. Turning Müller on his head, Pater suggests that it is

<sup>30</sup> John Ruskin, *The Queen of the Air* (London: George Allen, 1874), pp. 8–9. See also Connor, “Myth as Multiplicity,” p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> Ian Duncan, “George Eliot’s Science Fiction,” *Representations*, no. 125 (2014), 19.

this highest phase of myth that collapses into mythology—its abstract, symbolical mode of reading disavows the origins of myths in folk impressions of the natural world and disdains the condensed experiences gathered up in them.<sup>32</sup> Before the abstract eye of the ethicist, myths remain arrested, frozen into “mere transparent allegory” (“Myth of Demeter and Persephone,” p. 98). To access the richness of arrested experience in myths, “the more delicately trained eye” of the “modern reader” must break them down by putting them back in motion (p. 119). Like Giotto and William Blake did in their handling of myth, the modern reader must unite “a certain simplicity, taking all things literally, *au pied de la lettre* . . . to a vivid pre-occupation with the aesthetic beauty of the image itself, the *figured* side of figurative expression, the *form* of the metaphor” (pp. 98–99; emphasis in original). Rather than serving as an alternative to figural reading here, the literal creates its possibility—taking names literally ensures attention to them *as* figures.



Names were still on Pater’s mind when he published “The School of Giorgione” in *The Fortnightly Review* in 1877, the year after his essay on Dionysus appeared. But in moving from the name of Dionysus to that of Giorgione, Pater turned from the making of a myth to the imploding of one: J. A. Crowe and Giovanni Cavalcaselle’s *A History of Painting in Northern Italy* (1871) had eviscerated the legend of Giorgione by drastically reducing the number of paintings attributed to him.<sup>33</sup> As Pater put it, Giorgione’s “great traditional reputation, woven

<sup>32</sup> Connor identifies a similar ambivalence in Pater’s attitude toward the way mythic development arrests experience: “On the one hand, [Pater] sees the growing refinement of a myth as involving a movement towards an ever more fixed and definite form which will concentrate and complete the myth; but on the other, he sees that form itself as by definition limiting, since it reduces the range and variety of significance in the myth” (Steven Connor, “Conclusion: Myth and Meta-myth in Max Müller and Walter Pater,” in *The Sun Is God: Painting, Literature and Mythology in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. J. B. Bullen [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989], p. 211).

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of Pater’s response to Crowe and Cavalcaselle, see Rachel Teukolsky, “The Politics of Formalist Art Criticism: Pater’s ‘School of Giorgione,’” in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, ed. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins, and Carolyn Williams (Greensboro, N.C.: ELT Press, 2002), pp. 151–69.

with so profuse demand on men's admiration, has been scrutinised thread by thread; and what remains of the most vivid and stimulating of Venetian masters, a live flame, as it seemed, in those old shadowy times, has been reduced almost to a name by his most recent critics" ("School of Giorgione," p. 113). If the name of Dionysus emerges out of a plenitude of folk experiences, then Giorgione's name, in contrast, emerges as a remainder—it is all that is left after the threads have unraveled and the flame has burned out. "The School of Giorgione" aims to restore the plenitude of Giorgione's name by arguing for the historical and social significance of the fact that so many paintings were misattributed to him. As Jonah Siegel cannily observes, the revelation that so many of Giorgione's supposed paintings were actually painted by his followers, far from diminishing his significance, in fact only underscores his continuing importance; his school demonstrates "a kind of force of personality" much more clearly than authenticated paintings by themselves could.<sup>34</sup> Hence, Pater writes, "all is not done when the real and the traditional elements in what concerns [Giorgione] have been discriminated; for, in what is connected with a great name, much that is not real is often very stimulating" ("School of Giorgione," p. 116). The name "Giorgione" comprises not just authenticated works but also what Pater famously calls the *vraie vérité*, a complex and ongoing social history of representation that exists over and above the real.

"Giorgione," in short, is not just a name; he is a figure, an "impersonation" of *cinquecento* Venice itself ("School of Giorgione," p. 116).<sup>35</sup> In this regard, "The School of Giorgione" instantiates one of the most fundamental critical principles and figurative techniques of Pater's work more broadly: the essay makes knowing *things* into a matter of knowing *persons*.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Jonah Siegel, "Schooling Leonardo: Collaboration, Desire, and the Challenge of Attribution in Pater," in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, p. 141; see pp. 133–50.

<sup>35</sup> A self-reflectively second-order figuration of a figure representing the historical conditions of the Venetian Renaissance, Pater's "Giorgione" is a signal instance of what Carolyn Williams in *Transfigured World* calls his aesthetic historicism.

<sup>36</sup> James Eli Adams thus observes that, for Pater, "aesthetic understanding comes to be understood on the model of intimate knowledge of another person" (Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995], p. 185).

“Giorgione” is one in a long line of what Pater in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) calls “sensible exponent[s]”—persons rendering visible historical processes that in themselves cannot be made concretely present to sensory experience.<sup>37</sup> Figures in this sense make possible Pater’s historicism, which, as Stephen Arata puts it, aims “to track the movement of the world’s energy by assigning it a series of proper names.”<sup>38</sup> This figurative historicism, however, seems utterly at odds with the aesthetic principle that Pater has laid down just pages earlier in the same essay—that a painting has no more definite message for us than the accidental shimmering of sunlight on the floor. His account of “Giorgione” interpolates this play of light with historical meaning—with the artist’s biography, with *cinquecento* Venetian society, with the development of the *Weltgeist*. The two contradictory arguments of “The School of Giorgione” dramatize the split between two Paters: Pater the apostle of aesthetic democracy, who advocated a direct, sensuous, and individual art experience; and Pater the conservative historicist, who in the late 1870s and 1880s became increasingly interested in the way collective social traditions and practices suffuse individual experience.<sup>39</sup> This apparently irresolvable tension between the real and the historical in Pater’s work disappears, however, if we take Pater’s figures literally.

Pater notably practices this reading method in *Plato and Platonism* (1893), where he takes figures literally in order to read Plato himself as of the aesthetes’ party without knowing it. Pater recuperates the aesthetic Plato by contrasting his diverse world of forms with the undifferentiated Absolute of Parmenides. Comparing Plato’s forms to the return of the gods in a climate of frigid monotheism, Pater reads those abstract forms the same way that he reads Dionysius—as figures capable

<sup>37</sup> Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* (Kansas City: Valancourt, 2008), p. 192. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Arata, “The Impersonal Intimacy of *Marius the Epicurean*,” in *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience and Victorian Literature*, ed. Rachel Ablow (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 145.

<sup>39</sup> On Pater as apostle of aesthetic democracy, see Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art*, pp. 75–89. On the historicist Pater, see Sebastian Lecourt, “‘To surrender himself, in perfectly liberal inquiry’: Walter Pater, Many-Sidedness, and the Conversion Novel,” *Victorian Studies*, 53 (2011), 231–53.

of reverting back to their origins in sensory experience. Plato, Pater writes, “breaks . . . visible colour into the very texture of his work: his vocabulary, the very stuff he manipulates, has its delightful aesthetic qualities; almost every word, one might say, its figurative value.”<sup>40</sup> Typically, Pater means “figurative value” here literally, as useful in making a figure:

for a lover [like Plato], the entire visible world, its hues and outline, its attractiveness, its power and bloom, must have associated themselves pre-eminently with the power and bloom of visible living persons. With these, as they made themselves known by word and glance and touch, through the medium of the senses, lay the forces, which, in that inexplicable tyranny of one person over another, shaped the soul. (*Plato and Platonism*, pp. 134–35)

In their primary aspect, persons are just as fundamentally a matter of sensation as art objects—they too seem to be “receptacles of so many powers or forces” (“Preface,” in *The Renaissance*, p. xix)—but here sensory physics’ metaphorical language of forces is also made literal: the physical forces registered by the senses *really are* powers, exercising a tyranny that shapes the soul of the perceiver. At the same time, Pater eroticizes that tyranny, sublimating its power-dynamics into a form of love akin to pederasty.

Pederastic love was a lifelong preoccupation for Pater, who was keenly aware that love’s tyranny over the lover depends, perversely, on the lover’s agency. To know his beloved or anyone else, the lover must first of all perform the constructive work of imagining him. As Pater reflects in *Marius the Epicurean*, “one builds up from act and word and expression of the friend actually visible at one’s side, an ideal of the spirit within him” (*Marius the Epicurean*, p. 203). We typically build up our ideas of others unconsciously, just as we typically build perceptions out of our sensations unconsciously. But loving someone means lingering on the little things we know our beloved by—word or glance or touch—and it is in these, Pater suggests, that the force of the beloved resides.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures* (London: Macmillan, 1901), p. 140. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

If Pater makes knowing things a matter of knowing persons, then loving persons requires us to attend to the things through which we come to know them. Arata calls this dynamic “impersonal intimacy,” an effect Pater achieves in his writing by insisting “that we see [his] fictional characters . . . as aesthetic objects made from words” (“Impersonal Intimacy,” p. 132). For Arata, Pater makes us feel at once intimate and alienated from his characters and from himself, somewhat in the way an extreme close-up photograph distances us from its subject by bringing us unwontedly close to it. Heather Love similarly comments on the “dual movement of solicitation and self-effacement [that] occurs throughout Pater’s writing. In his approach to the reader, Pater somehow manages to be both forward and shrinking, both suggestive and withdrawn.”<sup>41</sup> In Love’s argument, Pater’s curiously forward restraint is emblematic of his queerness, but it seems equally plausible to me to identify Pater’s idiosyncratic style with his kinkiness. As Ellis Hanson has recently proposed, shifting our critical focus from queerness to kink in this way promises, among its other advantages, to let us take pleasure more seriously—even when that pleasure is painful. Building on these readings, I want to reframe our understanding of the idiosyncratic Paterian style that Arata calls impersonal intimacy and that Love calls backwards modernism. Pater’s style, it seems to me, reflects the traffic of the lover’s attention from the figure to the nonfigural and back. This traffic is motivated by the kinky fetishizing of the things through which one comes to know one’s beloved—the very things, in other words, that tyrannize over us so forcefully. For Pater, that is to say, reading literally is a form of kink, a fetishistic domination of the lover by the sensory elements of a beloved figure.

Pater offers us a model in his reading of Plato: “to trace [the] thread of physical colour, entwined throughout, and multiplied sometimes into large tapestried figures, is the business, the enjoyment, of the student of the Dialogues, as he reads them” (*Plato and Platonism*, p. 141). The reader of the Dialogues does two things to Plato’s figures at once, both of which are

<sup>41</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), p. 59.

distilled in the verb, “trace.” By tracing Plato’s figures, the reader outlines them but also unravels them, picking apart the tapestried figures so as to discriminate and trace threads back to their origins in sense experience. In *Plato and Platonism*, Pater reads Plato as a lover, which is to say that he reads him by simultaneously weaving and unweaving the literal and the figurative, sense and reference.



A lover of Pater myself, in the remainder of this essay I trace his strategy of reading as a lover back to the sensory-perceptual experience of harmony. My claim here is that Pater learned to read as a lover partly from Helmholtz’s harmonic theory of musical tones. Helmholtz, as we have seen, singled out musical tones as the paradigmatic instance of our perceptual powers of synthesis and analysis: when we listen to a musical tone, the ear mechanically unpacks a compound soundwave into several distinct tonal sensations that the mind, in turn, synthesizes into a simple tone with a recognizable quality. When we listen harmonically, Helmholtz claims, we can thus at once give our attention to the figural quality of a tone, as it were—to whether it sounds like a cello or an oboe or a voice that we know intimately—and to the discrete elements giving it that quality. For Pater, who encountered Helmholtz while reading Taine and Müller and very likely also in the discussions of Helmholtz’s work that were prevalent in music theory in the 1870s, harmony served as a model figure for the kinky literalism of erotic reading.

The figure of harmony appears frequently in Pater’s work following his elevation of music to the pinnacle of the arts in “The School of Giorgione,” beginning with the first of his *Imaginary Portraits*, “The Child in the House” (1878). Recounting its imagined sitter Florian’s dream about his childhood home, this portrait “trac[es] back the threads of his complex spiritual habit” to his first “material habitation.”<sup>42</sup> Such tracing hinges

<sup>42</sup> Walter Pater, “The Child in the House,” in *Imaginary Portraits* (New York: Allworth, 1997), pp. 5, 6. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

on three related meanings of habit: as dress or attire, as mental constitution or custom, and as material constitution or habitation, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The threads of Florian's spiritual habit thus modulate into nerves as he traces the developmental process of "brain-building" that takes place through his interactions with his early sensory environment ("Child in the House," p. 4). Florian's brain-building here is fundamentally a perceptual education; he acquires what Pater calls "a system of visible symbolism" from his childhood home by building up a repertoire of perceptual concepts and gradually learning to make "a constant substitution of the typical for the actual . . . in his thoughts" (pp. 6, 16). Florian's habitation thus seems to teach him to do just what Pater warned against five years earlier in the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* when he declared that habits lead us to confuse the actual, present objects of our experience with their stereotypes.

Pater's reconsideration of habits in "The Child in the House" stems, in part, from his growing interest in music. His pronouncement in *The Renaissance* that to form habits is to fail in life was in fact a frontal assault on the broad Victorian consensus, shared by Oxford dons and *Self-Help* devotees alike, that habits were the foundation of ethics.<sup>43</sup> As Pater revised his positions in the wake of the scandalized critical attacks on *The Renaissance*, he used music to account for the ethical dimensions of aestheticism. In "The Child in the House," Florian uses music as a figure to imagine the pain of others. After caging a starling away from her nestlings overnight and hearing her anguished cries, he remorsefully marvels at "that great machine in things, constructed so ingeniously to play pain-fugues on the delicate nerve-work of living creatures" ("Child in the House," p. 10). This ethical epiphany in fact precedes his aesthetic one; it is only after this episode instructs him in the

<sup>43</sup> The identification of virtue and habit survives etymologically in "ethics", from *ethos*, which in Ancient Greek denotes both character and habit. Discussing this passage in *De Profundis* (1897), Oscar Wilde confirms that "the dull Oxford people thought the phrase a mere wilful inversion of the somewhat wearisome text of Aristotelian *Ethics*" (Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, in *"De Profundis" and Other Prison Writings*, ed. Colm Tóibín [New York: Penguin, 2013], p. 53). On the popular Victorian understanding of habits, see Athena Vrettos, "Defining Habits: Dickens and the Psychology of Repetition," *Victorian Studies*, 42 (2000), 399-426.

moral urgency of sensory experience that Florian determines to “yield . . . himself to [sensible] things, to be played upon by them like a musical instrument” (p. 12).

But crucially, Pater also has recourse to musical figures to describe Florian’s ethical relationship with cultural and religious customs. Florian has the “good fortune” of living in a home that is “typically home-like” for an Englishman and thus facilitates his acculturation within the wider space of the nation itself, with the effect that “the sense of harmony between his soul and its physical environment became, for a time at least, like perfectly played music” (“Child in the House,” p. 7). Pater then employs the same figure to recount Florian’s turn to religion, which likewise proceeds through his acquiring a system of visible symbolism, one that allows him to make “the habitual recognition, beside every circumstance and event of life, of its celestial correspondent” (p. 16). Florian figures these celestial correspondents as a “complimentary strain or burden, applied to our every-day existence, whereby the stray snatches of music in it re-set themselves, and fall into the scheme of some higher and more consistent harmony” (p. 15). The aesthetic education of “The Child in the House” culminates in a sense of harmony.

This sense of harmony reappears insistently throughout Pater’s novel *Marius the Epicurean*, where it again functions to reconcile a thinly disguised version of Paterian aestheticism with the historicized forms of cultural and religious custom. Cornelius Fronto’s public speech on the nature of morals develops the trope extensively in order to defend “right conduct [as] a deference, an ‘assent,’ entire, habitual, unconscious, to custom[,] to the actual habit . . . of others” from an Epicureanism (like Marius’s) so insistent on the primacy of “realised consciousness in the present” that it can imagine such deference as, at best, ironic (*Marius the Epicurean*, pp. 164, 99). “Preferences from of old,” Fronto proclaims, “become now a weighty tradition as to the way in which things should or should not be done, are like a music, to which the intercourse of life proceeds—such a music as no one who had once caught its harmonies would willingly jar” (p. 165). Fronto here puts the accent on volition—the *willingness* to defer or not to a harmony once caught—but catching is a funny kind of action that can be as passively

receptive (I have caught a virus) as it can actively aggressive (the police have caught the suspect), and catching a music's harmonies could thus suggest the careful discernment of a tune's sonic structure or its insidious burrowing into the ear so that it conforms all stray snatches of music to itself.

Tellingly, Fronto himself seems to have caught this figure from Heraclitus, who in Pater's telling uses harmony to conceive of an order that persists even within the ceaseless flickering of the all-consuming fire. Even amidst the perpetual flux of things, Pater writes, Heraclitus identifies "a continuance, if not of their material or spiritual elements, yet of orderly intelligible relationships, like the harmony of musical notes, wrought out in and through the series of their mutations . . . and this harmony in their mutation and opposition, was a principle of sanity and reality in things" (*Marius the Epicurean*, p. 88). Here as elsewhere, the novel seeks to imagine continuity by turning to harmony as the paradigmatic example of a stable configuration of unstable elements—a set of notes that might change (going up or down an octave, being played by a piano or a bassoon) and still be recognized as the same tune as long as their mathematical relations to each other persist. Harmony itself serves as just such a portable configuration, employed now by Heraclitus to figure ontological duration, now by Fronto to figure historical duration. In short, Pater finds in harmony a model for understanding the conditions of possibility for forms.

Harmonic form in "The School of Giorgione" underwrites both Pater's uncompromising insistence on painting as a radically meaningless sensory event—an accidental play of light—and his reading of Giorgionesque painting as a representation of Venetian history. The signature of the Giorgionesque, in fact, is a sense of harmony. The school of Giorgione arrests "exquisite pauses in time" from the feverish world of Venice, presenting in their work "profoundly significant and animated instants, a mere gesture, a look, a smile, perhaps—some brief and wholly concrete moment—into which, however, all the motives, all the interests and effects of a long history, have condensed themselves, and which seem to absorb past and future in an intense consciousness of the present" ("School of Giorgione," p. 118). Giorgione's school identifies such exquisite pauses with the

moments when Venetians played or listened to music, “the musical intervals in our existence, [when] life itself is conceived as a sort of listening” (p. 119). For Giorgione’s contemporaries, these musical intervals were moments of play, snatched in between bouts of labor, that permitted them to relax the “servile, everyday attentiveness” demanded by instrumental reason (p. 119). Giorgione’s musical intervals thus very prosaically denote *cinquecento* Venetians’ recreational breaks devoted to music.

But a musical interval also denotes the difference between two musical tones. During the intervals when life itself becomes a kind of listening, the Venetians painted by Giorgione and his school are listening for intervals; particularly in *The Concert* (c. 1509), which Pater takes as the key example of the Giorgionesque, the painting’s subjects display “intent faces, as if listening . . . to detect the smallest interval of musical sound” (“School of Giorgione,” p. 119). Giorgione’s auditors in these musical intervals are, like Helmholtz, striving to apprehend the minute and almost unnoticeable harmonic complexity that gives these exquisite moments their quality, which is to say that they are striving to decompose a formal configuration back into its elements. The Giorgionesque sense of harmony, then, brings into view the peculiar double movement of Paterian aestheticism: the gathering up of reference and the breaking down into sense, the arrest of classical outlines and the modern’s analytic flux.

This sense of harmony shapes Pater’s description of *The Concert*. For Pater, *The Concert* offers us a musical interval both figuratively (it depicts a recreational moment of play with music) and literally (its three musicians are finding the “true interval,” which is to say, the tonic, the harmonic center of the piece they are about to play):

The *Concert* in the *Pitti* Palace, in which a monk, with cowl and tonsure, touches the keys of a harpsichord, while a clerk, placed behind him, grasps the handle of a viol, and a third, with cap and plume, seems to wait upon the true interval for beginning to sing, is undoubtedly Giorgione’s. The outline of the lifted finger, the trace of the plume, the very threads of the fine linen, which fasten themselves on the memory, in the moment before they are

lost altogether in that calm unearthly glow, the skill which has caught the waves of wandering sound, and fixed them for ever on the lips and hands—these are indeed the master's own. ("School of Giorgione," p. 113)

Giorgione's skillful effort to catch the waves of wandering sound doubles that of the musicians, who are likewise trying to arrange those waves by reconfiguring their wandering into an orderly harmonic development. At the same time, Pater is busy breaking that arrangement back down as his attention wanders along the analytical axis of three key Paterian tropes: the stability of an "outline," even if one of a finger rather than a full figure, gives way to the more insubstantial "trace," which then in turn leads the eye through sheer metonymic force to the "very threads" out of which the larger figures are woven. This fixation of elements, however, then gets "lost," subsumed by a calm, unearthly glow. Should we read this loss only as an uncannily prophetic anticipation of the effects of Giovanni Morelli's later thread-by-thread scrutiny of *The Concert*, which led him to the conclusion that it was painted not by Giorgione but by Titian during his Giorgionesque period?<sup>44</sup> Let us say, rather, that the unearthly glow is the momentary ecstatic forgetfulness that gratified desire can elicit in even the most rigorous critics when you love what you read.

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ABSTRACT

David Sweeney Coombs, "The Sense and Reference of Sound; or, Walter Pater's Kinky Literalism" (pp. 487–514)

This essay explores the erotic possibilities of literal reading by strategically fetishizing the recurring figure of harmony in Walter Pater's essay "The School of Giorgione" (1877) and his other post-*Renaissance* writings. I read Pater's invocations of harmony

<sup>44</sup> Morelli published his argument for reattributing the painting to Titian in 1883, just five years after the appearance of Pater's essay, and it steadily gained ground over the ensuing decades. See Giovanni Morelli, *Italian Masters in German Galleries*, trans. Louise Richter (London: George Bell, 1883), p. 157. For an overview of the ensuing controversy over *The Concert's* attribution, see David Alan Brown, "Portraits of Men," in David Alan Brown, Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, et al., *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 264–67.

literally with help from the scientific acoustics of the German physicist Hermann von Helmholtz, which achieved immense popularity in Britain at just the moment that Pater made his famous declaration that all art aspires to the conditions of music. Both Pater and Helmholtz understood perception as an act of reading bodily sensations in which reference—our attention to the objects we infer to be present in the world around us—constantly threatens to overwhelm our awareness of the sensations themselves. In his work on acoustics, however, Helmholtz singled out musical harmony as an experience uniquely susceptible to the mental effort to distinguish discrete sensations during the act of perception. Oscillating between sense and reference, harmony exemplifies the rhetorical logic of what Pater calls literal metaphors—figures whose figurative significance can be fully accessed only by taking them literally. The most emblematic of Pater’s literal metaphors is the Paterian figure itself, at once human form and trope. To take Paterian figures literally, this essay suggests, is to reimagine literal reading as a form of kink—a fetishizing of the sensory forces through which a figure affects and dominates us.

**Keywords:** Walter Pater; Hermann von Helmholtz; sound; literal reading; kink