

# WHITMAN, PATER, AND "AN ENGLISH POET"

ERNEST FONTANA

---

THIS ESSAY ADDRESSES TWO apparently unrelated textual phenomena in Walter Pater's *oeuvre*: 1) his erasure of his reference to Walt Whitman from his 1876 *Macmillan's* essay "Romanticism" for its 1889 publication as the "Postscript" for *Appreciations*; 2) the incomplete status of his imaginary portrait "An English Poet," begun in 1878 and terminated in mid-sentence. Both the erasure and the textual suspension demonstrate Pater's anxiety about revealing any knowledge of Whitman, whom John Addington Symonds had referred to, in 1873, as "more truly Greek than any man of modern times."<sup>1</sup> These two textual phenomena also reveal the hitherto unacknowledged impact of Whitman on Pater's imagination.<sup>2</sup>

## I

As Denis Donoghue has observed,<sup>3</sup> Pater's single reference to Whitman occurs in his 1876 essay "Romanticism:"

And when one's curiosity is in excess, when it overbalances the desire of beauty, then one is liable to value in works of art what is inartistic in them, to be satisfied with what is exaggerated in art, with productions like some of those of the romantic school in Germany, not to distinguish enough between what is admirably done and what is done not quite so well, in the writings of Jean Paul or Whitman.<sup>4</sup>

The sentence is puzzling. The "one" first referred to is the critic or reader of romantic disposition. If he is excessively curious, he may overestimate both what is "inartistic" in subject matter and what is exaggerated in style and not distinguish "what is admirably done" from "what is not done so well." The works of both Jean Paul, who survives into the 1889 "Postscript," and of Whitman, who does not, are likely to mislead the romantic reader. Pater concedes that Whitman does some things "admirably," even if he also does things not so well, though he does not specify these things. He then cites Balzac as an artist, not critic, who like Whitman's romantic reader and Whitman himself had "an excess of curiosity not duly tempered with the desire of beauty."

Pater's 1876 essay on "Romanticism" was a reply to W. J. Courthrope's review essay "Modern Culture," published in the *Quarterly Review* 137 (October 1874).<sup>5</sup> Courthrope attempts to trace the em-

phasis on “private perceptions” or “religion based on self-worship” in the criticism of Carlyle, Arnold, J. A. Symonds, and Pater. Courthrope argues that these “liberal” critics depart from both “the natural standard of common sense” and “Christian Revelation.”<sup>6</sup> He especially focuses upon Pater’s “epicene style,” quoting Pater’s notorious fantasia on Leonardo’s *La Gioconda*, from *The Renaissance*,<sup>7</sup> as an example of public criticism become private poetry. Courthrope also sees parallels between Pater’s self-expressive criticism and both Winckelmann’s overvaluation of the eighteenth century painter Raphael Mengs and J. A. Symonds’s enthusiastic response to Whitman in *Studies of the Greek Poets*. “For instance, by an error precisely resembling Winckelmann’s absurd overestimate of Raphael Mengs, a critic of such natural good sense and sound judgment as Mr. Symonds, whose book we have classed with Mr. Pater’s at the head of our article, has been induced to assert that an execrable scribbler, one Walt Whitman, is the true representative of Greek life in the nineteenth century.”<sup>8</sup> What is significant here is Courthrope’s association, in one paragraph, of Pater, Winckelmann (one of Pater’s cultural heroes in *The Renaissance*), Symonds, and Whitman, an association which would certainly have called Whitman to Pater’s attention and provoked his tempered, but, nevertheless, distantly admiring evaluation of Whitman in his *Macmillan’s* response two years later.

Pater thus knew enough of Whitman’s work to establish a judgment that is more tempered than Symonds’s but less shrilly negative than Courthrope’s. It would appear that Pater read a sufficient amount of Whitman’s poetry to come to this independent judgment. Although Billie Andrew Inman does not cite any evidence of Whitman in Pater’s library borrowings, it is likely he had access to William Michael Rossetti’s 1868 abridged edition of Whitman’s *Poems*. The edition, which is preceded by Rossetti’s long and celebratory “Prefatory Notice,” emphasizes Whitman’s “daring and originality.”<sup>9</sup> Rossetti selected poems from the 1867 fourth American edition of *Leaves of Grass*,<sup>10</sup> including eight of the forty-two *Calamus* poems in that edition.<sup>11</sup> Seven of these poems are printed under the heading of “Walt Whitman,” indicative of the perceived personal nature of these poems in contrast to the categories “Chants Democratic (poems of democracy),” “Drum Taps (war songs),” “Leaves of Grass (unclassified),” and “Songs of Partings (missives).” It is within the last grouping that Rossetti includes Whitman’s apostrophic “A Song” as “Love of Comrades.”<sup>12</sup>

Given Pater’s literary and personal relationship with both Swinburne<sup>13</sup> and Symonds in the late 1860s and 1870s,<sup>14</sup> it is likely that Pater read W. M. Rossetti’s edition of Whitman’s *Poems* at the time he was writing the essays to be included in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). What is significant is that Pater’s own homoerotic emphasis on male friendship, particularly in the 1867 essay on

“Winckelmann” and the 1871 essay on “Pico della Mirandola,” found a correspondence in the *Calamus* poems included in the 1868 Rossetti edition of Whitman’s poems. It is this telling association of Whitman with the “Love of Comrades” that may have motivated Pater to erase his earlier, ambiguous reference to Whitman in “Romanticism” as he edited it for inclusion as the “Postscript” to *Appreciations* in 1889.

## II

Published posthumously (April, 1931) in an unfinished state in the *Fortnightly Review* by May Ottley, a pupil of Pater’s sister Clara, “An English Poet” was begun, according to Gerald Monsman, in 1878 and conceived of as a companion piece to “A Child in the House.”<sup>15</sup> Arthur Symons recalled that Pater as late as 1889 “spoke of finishing it,” but he was conscious that he could never continue it in the same style, and that it would not be satisfying to rewrite it in his “severer, later manner.”<sup>16</sup> Monsman feels “its abrupt termination in mid-sentence suggests the loss, destruction, or cannibalizing of its final pages rather than the fragmentary trailing off of an unfinished work.”<sup>17</sup> Yet the text may be seen as a “true fragment,”<sup>18</sup> its sudden termination suggestive of a plot whose textual fulfillment is somehow prohibited. This prohibition, the text’s “refusal” to complete itself, becomes a signifying absence, a deliberated mutilation that may be seen as a formal property of the text.<sup>19</sup>

Symons’s phrase, “severer, later manner” may give us a valuable clue. Pater’s fervid, homoeroticized earlier style is what Symons is differentiating from Pater’s later work, such as *Marius, the Epicurean*. Moreover, if we look at the content and plot of “An English Poet,” this assumption is validated. The protagonist is the unnamed son of a young Norman farmer and an English girl. After her death in Normandy from consumption, the child is sent to be raised by English relations “among the stern Cumberland mountains.”<sup>20</sup> Yet he is temperamentally estranged from this bleak environment and afflicted with “a spiritual *Wanderjahr*” (37), a longing for an exotic beauty not native to the Cumberland valley. The beauty he imaginatively conceives is symbolized by a red French honeysuckle “over the gateway of the grange” and “a range of metal screenwork, twisted with fantastic grace into wreaths of flames and flowers” (39) to be found in his parish church.

Pater communicates the intense longing of the English poet’s adolescence, “a dim brooding divination of a great far-off world, the focus of all power and passion, where all precious things might be plenteous” (40), aroused by objects and persons of great “visible beauty” (41). When he is sent away to school, his keen sense of beauty is directed toward literature, the texts of which become for him physical locations, exercising a palpable influence on the formation of his soul.

It is at this point the protagonist's "intellectual voluptuousness" (45) is transferred to a friend who becomes the literary confidant of "the strange boy" who then desires "in earliest manhood to depart southwards, and visit, at his own humour, those foreign lands, so much longed after, in the company of his chosen friend" (46). The protagonist's own emotional and sexual incompleteness is expressed in the art of the fragment, as Pater, in an act of self-referentiality, seems to be commenting on his own text as he describes that of the young English poet. "An English Poet" is also a "fragment of writing" that expresses a subtle, elusive "inward pattern or ideal" that weighs heavily upon the soul "like a burden." This weighty burden is hermetically revealed in the English poet's fragment, "a literary morsel lying among the books, though for the eyes of one reader only, like a woman's ornament or a child's toy or a sea-shell lying safe in the casket" (46). Only the friend of the English poet and a privileged reader of Pater's text can read these corresponding fragments aright and identify the weighty "burden" of their unexercised sexuality. A comparable fragment is the "golden Roman coin," discovered in Normandy by the English poet's mother. The "image of immortal youth" that had come to haunt her daydreams is disapproved of by the local Curé because it celebrates "the perishable beauty of the body" (35). The coin, a fragment from the Roman past, anticipates the male beauty which will become the English poet's muse and prefigures the "inward pattern or ideal" of his own literary fragments.

"An English Poet" moves to its resolution as its protagonist, his intellectual life "ripe and full," visits Normandy and "tarries awhile for the coming of his friend, at a place where he sees the sea for the first time" (47). The resolution of "An English Poet," "the inward pattern or ideal" evoked by Pater in this "so poetical a situation" (47), would appear to involve the anticipated but unnarrated meeting of the English poet and his friend in the poet's paternal, ancestral home in the proximity of the sea which the poet beholds for the first time.

It is at this point in the narration that the textual fragment resolves lyrically what its plot swerves from resolving in literal action. As the nameless English poet waits for his friend, he experiences both "physical exhilaration" and a "renewed life" of the spirit that releases him from "that strange malady," "that long tension of spirit to which the distinction of his intellectual quality was due" (47). The anticipated arrival of his friend and "the sparkling light" and color of the sea awaken the English poet's long repressed and sublimated erotic energy.

Appropriately, the repressed influence on Pater of Whitman's *Calamus* poems, which Pater knew of, partially, from the 1868 Rossetti edition of Whitman's *Poems*, here surfaces to intensify the narrative and to point to the resolution that Pater is diffident to inscribe. In particular it is Whitman's "When I Heard at the Close of Day," published by

Rossetti as “Meeting Again,” that Pater’s “An English Poet” (the title thus is suggestively ironic) evokes:

When I heard at the close of the day how my name had been received with plaudits in  
the capitol, still it was not a happy night for me that followed;  
And else, when I caroused, or when my plans were accomplished, still I was not happy.  
But the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health, refreshed, singing,  
inhaling the ripe breath of autumn,  
When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and disappear in the morning light,  
When I wandered alone over the beach, and undressing bathed, laughing with the cool  
waters, and saw the sun rise,  
And when I thought how my dear friend, my lover, was on his way coming, O then I was  
happy;  
O then each breath tasted sweeter—and all that day my food nourished me more and  
the beautiful day passed well,  
And the next came with equal joy—and with the next, at evening, came my friend;  
And that night, while all was still, I heard the waters roll slowly continually up the  
shores,  
I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands, as directed to me, whispering, to  
congratulate me;  
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,  
In the stillness, in the autumn moonbeams, his face was inclined toward me,  
And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was happy.<sup>21</sup>

Both texts foreground the situation of a male “protagonist” or speaker, waiting in the proximity of the sea for the coming of his friend or male lover. In Whitman’s poem the speaker rises “at dawn, from the bed of perfect health, refreshed, singing, inhaling the ripe breath of autumn” and wanders “alone on the beach,” bathing and “laughing with the cool waters” on the day prior to the arrival of his friend. In “The English Poet,” the unnamed protagonist “tarrys awhile for the coming of his friend at a place where he sees the sea for the first time” (47). The healthy vigor of Whitman’s speaker corresponds to the “physical exhilaration” and sense of “renewed life” that the “smooth winds from the sea” elicit from “the over-wrought sensibility” of the English poet. While the time of anticipation in Whitman’s poem is sunrise and in Pater’s text midday, both texts associate the wind, as a form of cosmic breath or spirit, with the anticipated arrival of the friend. In Whitman, the speaker inhales “the ripe breath of autumn,” while in Pater the English poet enjoys “the quickening impulse of the air, the breath of the sea” (47). Variations of the verb *wander* also occur in both texts. In Whitman, the speaker on the morning of the day prior to his friend’s arrival “wandered alone on the beach.” In Pater, the protagonist “waited for his friend that they might start on their wanderings together” (47). *Wandering* in both texts appears to signify, metaphorically, forms of same-sex desire.

Nevertheless, in Whitman's poem the "dear friend" comes and the speaker hears as they sleep together "the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands," an external correlative of their own bodily exchanges as lovers, whereas in Pater's "An English Poet" the friend is expected but does not arrive. Yet his arrival and its significance are identified not only by the evocation of Whitman's "When I Heard at the Close of Day," but by the description of the unidentified Norman tidal river as it carries "the strong pulse of the invisible sea rising so subtly along its windings" "far inland" (48). The merging of salt and fresh water, the penetration of the land by the sea, may be read as a metaphor for sexual penetration, a strong lyrical and figurative substitution for the literal events Pater's text swerves from naming as it also swerves from naming the poet himself. The amatory exchanges of the two male lovers as the mingled water of a tidal river is here prefigured in a trope, possibly borrowed from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, where it is explicitly used to figure the strong emotional bond between two males.<sup>22</sup>

"An English Poet" breaks off abruptly in mid-sentence. "The variety and expansiveness of the peculiar scene witnessed thus for the first time in mature manhood seemed to unseal his sense of the actual life of man as passionate and graceful. Fancies, divinations of a real experience as a thing that might be refulgent with ideal light and, satisfy a poetic soul, germinating rapidly in him a warmth, a *souffle*, almost like love towards the friend who was coming to him, as the strong air from the waves and the scent of the beanfield met about him" (49). The English poet is on the threshold of "the actual life of men," as his soul germinates within itself "a warmth," "almost like love towards his friend," whose coming is anticipated by "the strong air from the sea and the scent of the beanfield," an anticipation evocative of the amatory anticipation of Whitman's "When I Heard at the Close of Day," the poem that appears to have inspired Pater's deeply resonant terminal evasiveness.

Thus Pater's suppression in 1889 of his 1876 reference to Whitman and his reluctance/unwillingness to complete "An English Poet," begun in 1878, converge as textual events. The erasure indicates Pater's anxious interest in Whitman (one he shared with his former pupil Hopkins),<sup>23</sup> an interest he chose to hide from future readers of his work by his erasure of Whitman from the "Postscript" of *Appreciations*. The interest in Whitman, however, suddenly resurfaces in his use, in his fragment of "An English Poet," of the trope of the ardent seashore-situated male, anticipating the arrival of his male lover, developed by Whitman in "When I Heard at the Close of Day." This intrusion of Whitman explicitly into Pater's imagination and into a Paterian text is again a source of anxiety for Pater as he swerves from the literal narrative realization of

the plot of Whitman's poem. Instead he suggests, through the expressive indirection of metaphor (the penetration inland of the tidal river), the sexual intensities—associated with Whitman—which he fears to name.<sup>24</sup>

Xavier University

## NOTES

- 1 John Addington Symonds, *Studies in the Greek Poets* (London: Smith, Elder, 1873), 422.
- 2 Richard Dellamora, though he discusses the impact of Whitman on Hopkins and Swinburne, does not acknowledge his possible influence on Pater (*Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1990]).
- 3 Denis Donoghue, *Walter Pater, Lover of Strange Souls* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 245.
- 4 Walter Pater, "Romanticism," *Macmillan's* magazine 44 (1876), 66.
- 5 Courthrope is identified as the author by Billie Andrew Inman, in *Walter Pater and His Reading, 1874-1877* (New York: Garland, 1990), 309.
- 6 "Modern Culture," *Quarterly Review* 137 (1874), 412-413.
- 7 "Modern Culture," 411.
- 8 "Modern Culture," 412.
- 9 *Poems by Walt Whitman*, ed. W. M. Rossetti (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868), 9.
- 10 Writing to Whitman in 1867 Rossetti identifies "your last complete edition" as his source. He also informs Whitman that he will provide titles for poems for which Whitman gave merely "the words of the opening lines." *Selected Letters of William Michael Rossetti*, ed. Roger W. Peattie (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 185. Dellamora overstates the matter in writing that this edition "entailed the deletion of some of the more outspoken poems, and in particular of nearly the whole of *Calamus*" (90).
- 11 Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Francis Murphy (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 799.
- 12 Rossetti lists these categories on p. 24. I give here a list of the 1867 *Calamus* poems included in Rossetti's 1868 *Poems* with the page numbers for the latter.

Titles of *Calamus* poems from 1867 American edition (4th) selected by Rossetti:

- 1) "Recorders Ages Hence"
- 2) "When I Heard at the Close of Day"
- 3) "Of Him I Love Day and Night"
- 4) "What Think You I Take My Pen in Hand?"
- 5) "To A Stranger"
- 6) "I Dream'd in A Dream"
- 7) "Among the Multitude"
- 8) "A Song"



Corresponding titles in Rossetti's 1868 edition of Whitman's *Poems*:

- 1) "The Friend" (289-290)
- 2) "Meeting Again" (290-291)
- 3) "A Dream" (292-293)
- 4) "Parting Friends" (293)
- 5) "To A Stranger" (293-294)
- 6) "The City of Friends" (296)
- 7) "Among the Multitude" (297)
- 8) "Love of Comrades" (308)

13 Swinburne had "rhapsodized about Whitman's affinities with Blake" in his *William Blake: A Critical Essay* 1868. In 1871 he had addressed Whitman in his "To Walt Whitman in America" from *Songs Before Sunrise*. Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman, A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 326. See also Dellamora, 91-92.

14 Donoghue, 36-42.

15 Gerald Monsman, *Walter Pater's Art of Autobiography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 11.

16 Arthur Symons, "Introduction," *The Renaissance* (New York: Modern Library, 1919), xxii.

17 Monsman, 11.

18 See Marjorie Levinson, who sees the true fragment's incompleteness and apparent irresolution as "a determinant or shaped absence" (*The Romantic Fragment Poem* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986], 25). See also my "Fragment and Disease: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Bride's Prelude*," *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 2:2 (1993), 5-11. Pater, in his essay "Luca Della Robbia," sees in the sculpture of Michelangelo "a puzzling sort of incompleteness which suggests rather than realises actual form." (*Renaissance*, ed. Adam Phillips [New York: Oxford University Press, 1986], 44).

19 There is some question as to whether "An English Poet" was left a fragment by Pater. Billie Inman has reported that when Canon Robert Ottley offered "An English Poet" to Macmillan in January, 1924, he said the portrait appeared "quite complete" (*Pater Newsletter* 32 [1995], 4). Nevertheless, this hearsay manuscript has not surfaced since the 1931 *Fortnightly* publication of the fragment. This suggests that if Pater did not himself terminate "An English Poet" in mid-sentence the editors of the *Fortnightly* did. In the absence of a complete manuscript, we can only assume that the manuscript was incomplete.

20 *The Imaginary Portraits by Walter Pater, A New Collection*, ed. Eugene J. Brzenk (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 36. Hereafter cited in the text.

21 *Poems by Walt Whitman*, 293-294.

22 In Tennyson, the silencing of the babbling Wye by the influx of sea-water up Bristol channel, the Severn, and its tributaries, like the Wye, by which Hallam was buried, becomes a metaphor for the temporary silencing of the speaker's grief which will sound again as the tide recedes:

There twice a day the Severn fills;  
And salt-sea-water passes by,  
And hushes half the babbling Wye,  
And makes a silence in the hills.



23 Writing to Robert Bridges (October 18, 1882), Hopkins confesses that “I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman’s mind to be more like my own than any man’s living. As he is a very great scoundrel this is not a pleasant confession. And this makes me the more desirous to read him and the more determined that I will not.” *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. Claude Colleer Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 1:155. See my “Working Speakers in Whitman and Hopkins,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 7 (1990), 105-115.

24 Pater’s fear of explicitness and his decision to terminate the anticipated resolution of “The English Poet” in 1878 may have its source in the scandal involving his indiscreet correspondence with “The Balliol Bugger,” William Money Hardinge, in 1874. After Pater’s 1874 interview with Benjamin Jowett, Gosse reports that he “became old, crushed, despairing—this dreadful weight lasted for years” (quoted in Donoghue, 60). See also Billie Andrew Inman, “Estrangement and Connection: Walter Pater, Benjamin Jowett, and William M. Hardinge,” in *Pater in the 1990’s*, ed. Laurel Brake and Ian Small (Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 1991).