

## The Sacred in Pater's Aesthetic Ambivalences and Tensions

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**Abstract** Walter Pater's aesthetic is shaped by the tension between the spiritual and the material, the pure and the impure. While his contemporaries appreciate the purity of his art, it should be understood that concerns with the material impure also inform, among other works, the two narratives *Denys l'Auxerrois* and *Gaudioso, the Second*. This analysis shows how Pater's dual aesthetic affects his understanding of the category of the sacred, in line with contemporary anthropological thought. The representations of Denys, a modern embodiment of the Greek god Dionysus, and of Gaudioso the saint subvert dominant ideologies of productivity and progress, suggesting a renewed experience of the sacred. The aesthetic and the sacred are thus positioned as interlinked spaces for the expression of the repressed and the displaced, while Pater's sense of the sacred is significantly re-oriented towards the human.

**Keywords** Anthropology. Impure. Sacred. Walter Pater.

In *Greek Studies*, Walter Pater discusses the «falsifying isolation» of Greek sculpture in modern galleries, which has led us to consider sculptures «as embodiments, in a sort of petrified language, of pure thoughts [rather] than as elements of a sequence in the material order» (Pater 1910b, pp. 188-189). Pater's approach, which places sculpture firmly in the sphere of the material, has a specific value in relation to the sacred that these pages will seek to elucidate.

The unresolved tension between the spiritual and the material, the pure and the impure, is a key element of Paterian aesthetics. Purity was an issue in responses to Pater in his own day, as reviews of his work in contemporary journals and criticism reveal. George Moore ranked Pater among the highest echelons of literary criticism, together with Algernon C. Swinburne and John Addington Symonds, for whom literary criticism was an art. They were ranked more highly than drama critics, since playwriting was considered to be more of a commercial trade (Moore 1891). There is undoubtedly

a prestigious and élitist aura surrounding Pater and his colleagues.<sup>1</sup> To give an example we may cite Oscar Wilde's review of *Appreciations*, the collection of essays Pater published in 1889. Wilde's text foreshadows his later view of the critic and of criticism itself, as expounded in «The Critic as Artist»,<sup>2</sup> especially when he argues: «the true critic is he who bears within himself the dreams and ideas and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure» (in Seiler 1980, p. 234). Pater's modernity is defined in terms of this inclusiveness, which is also reflected in the style of his essays, «some of them being almost Greek in their purity of outline and perfection of form, others medieval in their strangeness of colour and passionate suggestion» (p. 234). Wilde notes Pater's engagement with polarities with reference to contradiction and paradox: he describes the subject of Pater's essay *Style* first as too abstract and subsequently as «very real», since «behind the perfection of a man's style, must lie the passion of a man's soul» (p. 234). But the critic is unambiguous when he praises the purity of Pater's art, his «noble realization of things nobly conceived» and the perfection of his inimitable art (pp. 234, 236).

Similarly, Selwyn Image saw Pater as working between substance and mystery, communication and «'incommunicable' ability»; in reference to *Imaginary Portraits*, again in the appreciative tradition of the period, he stressed the first-rate quality of Pater's writing (pp. 182-183). In a note in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on the second edition of *The Renaissance*, Pater's language was defined as «carefully pure» (Anon. 1877, p. 13).

The idea of purity is stressed again in the first Italian translation of *The Renaissance*, published by Aldo De Rinaldis in 1912. De Rinaldis was an art critic who shared Benedetto Croce's neo-idealistic critical stance. The insistence on the notion of purity in art is evident in the selection of the lexical dominion of purity in the following two examples: the adverb in the sentence «Few artists work quite cleanly» (Pater 1893, p. xii) is translated with «con purezza» (Pater 1912, p. 5). Moreover, De Rinaldis adds the adjective «pura» to the translation of the well-known statement asserting the principle of art for art's sake in the work's *Conclusion*: «To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame [...] is success in life» (Pater 1893, p. 251) is rendered «Arder sempre con questa forte fiamma pura come una gemma [...] è il successo nella vita» (Pater 1912, p. 254; De Rinaldis 2013).

Purity was also an intrinsic theme in Pater's texts, for example in the

1 Pater was, however, criticised by Mrs. Oliphant precisely «for the 'abstract superiority', 'ultra-culture' and 'High Intellectualism'» associated with his privileged university life at Oxford (Court 1980, p. 20).

2 This essay, published in the collection *Intentions* (1891), is the revised version of «The True Function and Value of Criticism» which had already appeared in *The Nineteenth Century* (July and September 1890).

essay «Diaphaneitè» (1864), where he promotes his version of the ideal character. The «burning point» of our moral nature, he argues, is combined with evanescence, shades of light (Pater 1917, p. 248). The saint and the artist constitute two «unworldly types of character», yet they remain engaged with the world. However there is also a third type which intersects the world while keeping its distance from it, embodying a «colourless, unclassified purity of life» (pp. 247-248). This type, which is never overtly described as embodying the 'diaphaneitè' of the essay's title, is the fulfilment of intellect and culture «assumed by a happy instinct» (p. 250). Perfection, and thus purity, is achieved by reducing the barriers between outer and inner life, between the external (or factual) and the internal (or spiritual). This nature is simply given, and its intellectual power is latent within it, «like the reminiscence of a forgotten culture» (p. 250). It naturally incorporates past wisdom and layers of history, as it is «like a relic from the classical age, laid open by accident to our alien modern atmosphere» (p. 251). It is moreover life-giving and associated with change. Whereas our collective life is colourless and uninteresting, and we live as if neutralised, this crystal nature is, in contrast, heroic and sacrificial, restoring harmony. The essay concludes by focusing on ideas of social crisis, wounds and suffering, but only to insist on the fact that the violence inherent in any process of regeneration is softened by the diaphanous type.<sup>3</sup>

The aesthetic of detachment embodied in the notion of 'diaphaneitè' is also expressed in the essay «Aesthetic Poetry», where the spiritual is read in relation to the material. While on the one hand aesthetic poetry is placed in the realm of the ideal, on the other hand Pater's discussion of William Morris's medievalism shows the links between refined idealism and the dangerous world of the senses (Pater 1889, pp. 213-218).

Pater's concerns with material reality also shape his reflections in *Style*, as we are reminded of the «physiognomy» of words, of «the colour, the physical elements or particles in words like *absorb*, *consider*, *extract*», of the «elementary particles of language» (p. 17). Evolutionist thought had impacted on the ways of seeing reality and on the discourses surrounding it, and the material had already been absorbed within spiritualistic stances in the works of the Pre-Raphaelites. In Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the poetics of the spiritual had even become sensuous medievalism (Praz 1988, p. 194). Pater himself noted, in his essay on Rossetti, that he «knows no region of spirit which shall not be sensuous also, or material» (Pater 1889, p. 236). Moreover, the material is perceived as impure; with reference to Dante Alighieri, Pater argues that «if the spiritual attains the definite visibility of a crystal, what is material loses its earthiness and impurity» (p. 236).

3 For a discussion of «Diaphaneitè», see Varty (1991).

The duality of this aesthetic informs Pater's narratives of pagan divinities, sacred Madonnas, and other characters associated with religion and sanctity. The following discussion of the imaginary portraits of *Denys l'Auxerrois* and *Gaudioso, the Second* will seek to understand how this duality affects the category and significance of the sacred itself.<sup>4</sup> In *Denys l'Auxerrois*, one of Pater's imaginary portraits published in 1887, a «relic from a classical age» takes the shape of a new Dionysus, a medieval embodiment of the Greek god produced by the narrator's fantasy.<sup>5</sup> The juxtaposition of the classical and the medieval, of paganism and Christianity, here confirms Pater's fondness for ambivalence, which is encoded in his aesthetics.

In the French town of Auxerre, one rainy afternoon, the narrator browses a shop selling *bric-à-brac*, where he finds a fragment of painted glass representing «a figure not exactly conformable to any recognised ecclesiastical type» (Pater 1910a, p. 52). To decipher the type, he goes to see a priest who possesses a complete series of tapestries representing the same subject as the image on the glass. Seized by «a mad vehemence», the figure, an organ-builder, reappears in the tapestries in various forms, «a flaxen and flowery creature, sometimes wellnigh naked among the vine-leaves, sometimes muffled in skins against the cold, sometimes in the dress of a monk» (p. 54). The multifaceted character reveals suffering and beauty, the pagan beauty of a god who shares the melancholy of a later age. From these visual hints the story of *Denys l'Auxerrois* «shaped itself at last» (p. 54).

The subversive function of the character is explicit from the very beginning, as *Denys* is associated with a period of political revolution in Auxerre, the shift from a feudal to a «free communistic life» (p. 55). The change is interpreted as a return to past splendour, a re-enactment of a golden age, yet far from pure, as seen in the description of an old flask found in an unearthed Greek coffin, which is presented as an object of beauty in the midst of decay:

Within the coffin lay an object of a fresh and brilliant clearness among the ashes of the dead – a flask of lively green glass, like a great emerald. It might have been «the wondrous vessel of the Grail». Only, this object seemed to bring back no ineffable purity, but rather the riotous and earthy heat of old paganism itself. (p. 56)

4 On Pater and the imaginary portrait, see Lambert-Charbonnier (2004); Bizzotto (2001); Bini (1992).

5 On Pater's use of Greek mythology, see, among others, Cowan (2014); De Rinaldis (2010); Evangelista (2009); Bizzotto (2000); Connor (1983).

The adjectives «fresh», «brilliant», «lively» and «green» express vitality, in stark contrast with the sense of death surrounding the place: a vitality which eschews purity to embrace fire and earth. The reference to the Holy Grail also recalls the cycle of sacrifice and regeneration. The «new beauty» (p. 57) that has arisen in Auxerre has its centre in Denys, whose destiny is one of marginality and destruction.

At the very beginning of the narrator's story, Denys's central role is marked by his first appearance in the church on Easter Day, a crucial date for Christians, during the priests' traditional ball game. The location is itself another sign of the character's centrality, as the game takes place «in the very centre of the great church» (p. 57). After being referred to as «the figure» (p. 54) and «the singular being» (p. 57), the character is now identified with a name, «Denys - Denys l'Auxerrois, as he was afterwards called» (p. 58), which clearly expresses the sense of belonging to that community. The power he has over the people around him is immediately evident. As he makes «the thing really a game», the solemnity and «the decorum of an ecclesiastical ceremony» are shattered and people start to play not simply to perform but to amuse themselves:

The boys played like boys, the men almost like madmen, and all with a delightful glee which became contagious, first in the clerical body, and then among the spectators. (p. 58)

Old age is almost discarded and women feel attracted to Denys when they see him at his fruit stall in the market. His capacity to attract is, however, presented from the start as being suspect: «The men [...] suspected - who could tell what kind of powers? hidden under the white veil of that youthful form; and pausing to ponder the matter, found themselves also fallen into the snare» (p. 60).

Denys thus becomes a mystery one needs to understand, his charm a secret one wants to reveal. He represents a strong focus of attention which detracts from the whole religious scene. Clerics and monks serve to bring him to centre stage, to protect and keep him alive. He erupts as a disturbing presence which produces disorder in well-established systems. Victorian disenchantment with religious beliefs had already opened up new ideological spaces for encoding meanings. Giving further expression to anxieties arising from the loss of contact with religion, Pater's reading of the Dionysian suggests a renegotiation of contemporary notions of the sacred.

Since the 1860s, anthropology had been shifting towards an investigation of the primitive in classical culture. In his *History of Ancient Greek Literature* (1897), Gilbert Murray expresses a change in the perception of the Greek ideal:

The «serene and classical» Greek of Winckelmann and Goethe did good service to the world, in his day, though we now feel him to be mainly a phantom. [...] There is more flesh and blood in the Greek of the anthropologists, the foster-brother of Kaffirs and Hairy Ainos. He is at least human and simple and emotional, and free from irrelevant trappings. His fault, of course, is that he is not the man we want, but only the raw material out of which that man was formed: a Hellene without the beauty, without the spiritual life, without the Hellenism. (Murray in Bertelli 2005, p. 116)

In 1889 the Scottish scholar William Robertson Smith (the founder, together with E.B. Taylor and J.G. Frazer, of British scientific anthropology) published in London his influential study *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, which undermined nineteenth-century assumptions about the 'purity' of sacredness. He affirmed that, in contrast to usage in his own time, the word «holy» was not an ethical concept in ancient religion:

While it is not easy to fix the exact idea of holiness in ancient Semitic religion, it is quite certain it has nothing to do with morality and purity of life. Holy persons were such, not in virtue of their character but in virtue of their race, function or mere material consecration. And at the Caananite shrines the name of «holy» [...] was specially appropriated to a class of degraded wretches, devoted to the most shameful practices of a corrupt religion, whose lives, apart from its connection with the sanctuary, would have been disgraceful even from the standpoint of heathenism. (Smith 1889, pp. 132-133)

Sacred things are prohibited for human use, or they are things that can be used only under certain rules and restrictions. This idea of separateness, which concerns the inviolability of all that pertains to the gods and their worship, is embodied in the concept of taboo. However, alongside taboos that reflect rules of holiness, there is another kind of taboo which, for the Semites, relates to rules of uncleanness: «Women after child-birth, men who have touched a dead body and so forth are temporarily *taboo* and separated from human society, just as the same persons are unclean in Semitic religion» (p. 142). The 'taboo' person is associated with a somehow supernatural and hostile power (p. 143). The confluence of holiness and uncleanness in the structure of the taboo is again highlighted by Robertson Smith in an additional note to *Lectures* entitled *Holiness, Uncleanness and Taboo*, which states that «the two are in their origin indistinguishable» (p. 427) as «[t]he acts that cause uncleanness are exactly the same which among savage nations place a man under taboo, and [...] these acts are often involuntary, and often innocent, or even necessary to society» (p. 427). As uncleanness is contagious, it has to be controlled or even

physically eliminated, which is what the ban is for. Robertson Smith's approach encompassed sacramental theories of sacrifice and influenced the group of scholars known as the Cambridge Ritualists.<sup>6</sup>

About a decade later, in 1911, W. Warde Fowler published the essay «On the original meaning of the word *sacer*», which further asserted the ambivalence of the notion. Fowler discusses the figure of the *homo sacer* in Roman religious law, first recorded by Sextus Pompeius Festus and also referred to by Macrobius (Agamben 1995, p. 79).<sup>7</sup> A man who transgresses and challenges the alliance between god and the community is abandoned to the gods he has offended and loses both human and divine protection. Fowler writes: «*Sacer esto* is in fact a curse; and the *homo sacer* on whom this curse falls is an outcast, a banned man, tabooed, dangerous» (Fowler 1920, p. 17). As a result, the transgressor can be killed without this being considered a murder. Fowler then stresses the ambiguity inherent in the condition of being *sacer*, referring to Robertson Smith's discussion of the meaning of the verb 'to ban' which in the Old Testament is sometimes rendered as 'to consecrate'. Stressing similarity with forms of *devotio*, Fowler adds that «*sacer* must [...] be translated not 'sacred to' but 'accursed and devoted to'» (p. 21).

As Giorgio Agamben noted in his seminal study *Homo Sacer* (1995), the ambivalence of the sacred first established by Robertson Smith was to acquire more cogent theoretical form in Sigmund Freud's studies of totemism and taboo, and it also subsequently permeated twentieth-century linguistics (see Emile Benveniste's *Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*).

Pater's fantasy of a modern Dionysus surely reflects and projects confluences of the impure in the domain of sacredness, as he himself was working within a dualistic and ambivalent approach to antiquity and to the sacred, in line with contemporary anthropological research. Indeed, in *Denys l'Auxerrois*, the character of Denys shows his negative side in the second part of the narrative: «For in truth Denys at his stall was turning the grave, slow movement of politic heads into a wild social license, which for a while made life like a stage-play» (Pater 1910a, p. 61). The change is temporary, but its transitory nature is precisely what is required for it to happen, as Denys embodies the principle of continuous transformation and the cycle of death and rebirth. Red is the colour of «the new spirit» (p. 61): people «took fire» and «hot nights were noisy with swarming troops of dishevelled women and youths with red-stained limbs and

6 I am indebted to Giuliana Scalera for discussion of these anthropological issues, particularly in relation to the myth of Dionysus.

7 I would like to thank Aglaia McClintock for her interesting reflections on the significance of this form of punishment in Roman law.

faces», the planet Mars was «hanging in the low sky like a fiery red lamp» (p. 61). Denys is leading people towards an idle, non-structured natural life, a process in which nature itself is playing a role, as various natural phenomena testify. His going against or being disrespectful of social codes and accepted behaviour is a deviation which very soon turns against him. The movement towards impurity starts when he «taught people not to be afraid of the strange, ugly creatures which the light of the moving torches drew from their hiding-places» (pp. 62-63). Denys's dark side is animal-like: he tames a wolf,<sup>8</sup> is haunted by an owl and does not fear lions. Moreover, while playing the role of the God of Wine in a pageant, he wears an elephant-scalp. But his biggest transformation into savagery takes place when, having lived off spring water and fruit all his life, he starts to ask for and eat raw meat, «tearing the hot, red morsels with his delicate fingers in a kind of wild greed» (pp. 64-65).

Yet he still exerts great fascination and attracts artists who are taught «an art supplementary to their own, that gay magic, namely (art or trick) of his existence» (p. 65). As a reproduction of Dionysus, Denys is «like a double creature, of two natures, difficult or impossible to harmonise» (p. 66). His golden side fades away and corruption seeps in: people degenerate, opting for a carnivorous diet, and horrible crimes are committed; women are accused of drowning their babies, a girl of committing suicide and Denys himself of being a murderer. Going back to a glorious mythical past thus seems to be only an illusion, as the fascination ascribed to Denys himself is now attributed to witchcraft. This downward spiral is confirmed by the association of Denys/Dyonisus with hell. The final image of this unstable figure is one of abasement and suffering. The character is tabooed, as his powers appear to be those of a sorcerer, and he has to hide from those who want to kill him. The sense of ruin infects the landscape and the community as well. An act of violence against Denys could restore the previous state of things, but he is able to escape and find refuge in his old house. Living in a Hobbesian state between the human and the animal, the banished Denys, now a sort of *homo sacer*, experiences a relationship of inclusion and exclusion, a stranger, abandoned and excluded, but also free.

Through a strange inversion at this point, contact with what is material and impure is associated with regeneration. The clergy hope to find a remedy for social dissolution in the exhumation of the corpse of one of the patron saints. Sacred relics have the function of compensating for the unholy, but there is little sense of sacredness in Pater's narrative of their being unearthed:

8 English law under Edward the Confessor referred to a bandit as a wulfeshead, a wolf's head (Agamben 1995, p. 117).

The search for the Saint himself continued in vain all day and far into the night. At last from a little narrow chest, into which the remains had been almost crushed together, the bishop's red-gloved hands drew the dwindled body, shrunken inconceivably, but still with every feature of the face traceable in a sudden oblique ray of ghastly dawn. (p. 69)

Rather than curing Denys, this «shocking sight» seems to contaminate him with the very quality of death, as he devotes himself to «gloomy objects» and puts on «a ghastly shred from the common bones» (p. 69). Silent and melancholy, he is hosted by the monks in a cloister, and there, as if by mere unconscious acts, he creates new artistic fashions and ways of expression, which are associated with a different kind of sacredness: «It was as if the old pagan world had been *blessed* in some way» and Ovid's «old loves and sorrows seemed to come to life again in medieval costume» (p. 71). A different sacred music is sought after, one that is more inclusive and varied. A patron of the arts and of music in particular, Denys is now able to write his own story by building the first organ, an experience which «became like the book of his life: it expanded to the full compass of his nature, in its sorrow and delight» (p. 72). However, his «unmistakably new» music seems to be that of a madman (p. 72), reflecting certain negative views of music that were expressed in the Renaissance. For example, in his *Discorso sopra la musica* (1581), the Italian Francesco Bocchi described music as a vain pastime of the nobility, responsible for the decline of Italy. Denys's new music is no «innocuous pastime» (Gerbino 2014, p. 224), as it is disturbing and challenging.

The story of Denys is one of presence and disappearance, visibility and escape, memory and forgetfulness. During another public occasion for the blessing of the foundations of a new bridge built over an ancient Roman one, the disturbing presence of the old pagan world induces the community to expose the skeleton of a child so as to guarantee the safety of those passing over the bridge. In sight of onlookers, Denys flings himself into the water, but although many suppose him to be dead, he continues to work on his organ in the cloister. In his melancholy fits, «he would dig eagerly [...] digging, by choice, graves for the dead in the various churchyards of the town» (Pater 1910a, p. 74). The contradiction between his being outside the communal sphere and yet part of it is unresolved. His condition is an exceptional one:<sup>9</sup> mobile and beyond fixity, he constantly hovers between the holy and the unholy. He places himself on this boundary when he decides to exhume his mother's body, buried in unconsecrated ground, and to put it in the consecrated area of the cloister. The unresolved fracture is

9 Exceptionality is a category discussed by Agamben in relation to the *homo sacer* (Agamben 1995, pp. 90-95).

eventually exposed in the final public scene which dramatises his destruction. After a religious ceremony during which he performs on the organ, he once again becomes involved in acting, this time performing the figure of Winter hunted through the streets. While in the beginning Denys had transformed the ball game in the cathedral into something that was «really a game», now the situation is reversed, as the play, or rather the acting, comes true. While mechanically playing his role, Denys prompts the mad reaction of the community: «The pretended hunting of the unholy creature became a real one, which brought out, in rapid increase, men's evil passions» (p. 76). His body is torn into pieces and «[t]he men stuck little shreds of his flesh, or failing that, of his torn raiment, into their caps; the women lending their long hairpins for the purpose»; his soul, however, «was already at rest» (p. 76), and as a further sign of his dual nature his heart is found still intact and placed under a stone marked with a cross in a dark corner of the cathedral. Both holy (as the embodiment of a pagan God) and unholy, the sacrificed creature is thus consigned to a sacred place, and once more the sense of displacement and ambivalence is strong.

In dealing with the Dionysian, Pater aligns himself with Nietzsche's revaluation of vitalism, thus producing a sort of modern sacralization of the impure. The Paterian rewriting of the myth of Dionysus can also be read in the light of Georges Bataille's formulation of the modern experience of sacrifice. Further exploring the ambivalent sacred as codified in Robertson Smith, Bataille (1967) highlights the fact that societies are centred on production, rational consumption and conservation. These structures of social organization tend to preclude significant forms of waste (*dépense*), of non-productive behaviour, which put us in touch with our deeper emotions and hence with the sacred. Loss is exactly what gives this waste significance. Loss and destruction without compensation are, moreover, crucial to the idea of religious sacrifice, which is the process through which sacred things are produced. Bataille argues that today the experience of *dépense* has all but disappeared, as there is no acceptance of whatever is generous, unmeasured and orgiastic. However when systems are forced into crisis through the experience of uncompensated loss, man ceases to be isolated in the splendour of material things. Indeed, Bataille argues that the main redeeming feature of systems is precisely their vulnerability to crisis, something which allows access to the unsubordinated *dépense*.

Many examples can be found in Pater's works of systemic uncertainties and fractures, leading to contamination and impurity. The emphasis on loss in the sacrificial figure of Denys l'Auxerrois clearly shows that Pater proposes categories which are alternative to the dominant materialistic values of the Victorian period. Production was central in a society that was forming its own ideology of progress, but the Paterian images of dispersal and of the impure body express the distortions and inversions upon which this ideology was constructed as well as the need for a renewed experience of sacredness.

*Gaudioso, the Second*, an unfinished imaginary portrait written in the 1890s, is another Paterian example of a deviant image. Gerald M. Monsman has argued that the aesthetic hero proposed by Pater in this text should be read in relation to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The critical literature on the Paterian fragment analysed here is rather limited, and a number of recent publications on Pater do not even mention *Gaudioso*. This neglect is perhaps due to the fact that it was published, by Monsman, only in 2008. Monsman's thesis is that Pater noted a loss of «moral sense» in *Dorian Gray*, while he found an «ethical motive» in Plato's works (Monsman 2008, p. 97). Pater published *Plato and Platonism* in 1893, having previously created aesthetic and ethical heroes such as Gaudioso, Gaston de Latour and Marius the Epicurean. Monsman, however, stresses the fact that Pater did not complete either *Gaudioso* or *Gaston* but did finish his book on Plato, since, he suggests, the Greek philosopher offered a «safer aesthetic hero», and one less comparable to Wilde's characters (p. 97).<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Gaudioso the saint wrestles with a counter identity, which again reveals an interplay between differing systems, and an instability of significance. As Pater had stated in his preliminary notes on the work in «Art Notes in North Italy», Gaudioso embodies a fascinating combination of humanity and holiness:

The eloquent eyes are open upon some glorious vision. [...] Beauty and Holiness had «kissed each other», [...]. Here at least, by the skill of Romanino's hand, the obscure martyr of the crypts shines as a saint of the later Renaissance, with a sanctity of which the elegant world itself would hardly escape the fascination [...]. (Pater 1917, pp. 107-108)

The narrative originates from the portrait of Saint Gaudioso I, a work by the painter Girolamo Romanino (c.1484-c.1560) dated to about 1524. The figure on the canvas is, however, that of a second Gaudioso, whose name, before entering the Church, was Domenico Averoldi: «The good looks of Domenico Averoldi, under the title of Gaudioso the Second, Bishop of Brescia, who in Romanino's picture represents, with so deep an impress of sanctity, Gaudioso the First, Bishop and Saint, were in truth hereditary in his family» (Pater in Monsman 2008, p. 88).<sup>11</sup> The identity of the saint is falsified, and that of the sitter is somewhat dubious too, though he was perhaps «some distinguished churchman of Romanino's own day», as Pater reports (Pater 1917, p. 107). Indeed, an artist could paint a portrait even if he did not know what the person looked like, by presenting just an idea of his/her appearance or «by using a model of his own time». This practice

<sup>10</sup> On Pater's Platonism see Lee (2014).

<sup>11</sup> Manuscript copy at the Houghton Library, Harvard, MS Eng 1150 (8).

created a blend of sacred and profane and was a subject of much debate in Renaissance Italy (Lambert-Charbonnier 2002, p. 208).

The name Gaudioso itself is ambivalent, ironically suggesting worldly pleasure, but in fact Gaudioso's life alternated between religious and worldly ambition. On a different level this oscillation is also accentuated by the ambiguity of the genre of Pater's narrative itself, poised between the real and the imaginary. Dwelling from the beginning in the realm of beauty within the family line, Gaudioso is presented at first as the subject of an inanimate painting; a series of inanimate grammatical subjects is used to build up the discourse: «The good looks», «the family portrait gallery», «it had brought» (i.e., «that masculine charm»), «the masterful eyes», «Eloquent eyes», «The expression of high birth», «It is as if the facial apparatus» (Pater in Monsman 2008, p. 89). The effect is one of neutrality and distance. His beauty is composed and exempt of pathos:

Eloquent eyes, of the poetic rather than the philosophic temper, they are not searching for anything: – have something to tell rather. And one could hardly conceive a frown between them. The expression of high birth and breeding is due chiefly to an air of harmonious composure in the lines. It is as if the facial apparatus for any painful or mean irritation were non-existent there. (p. 89)

The world of beauty Gaudioso belongs to is one of harmony, and of the absence of pain or negative emotion. This same world is associated with non-existence. Yet, the remoteness associated with the aesthetic dimension Gaudioso embodies is reversed in the course of the narration as we witness a shift from art to nature, from the painting to the living creature:

[...] the lad of eighteen, already, seemingly, in some respects, its creature, had felt something rise in his throat, as certain words [...] floated all at once into his memory: *Manus tuae fecerunt me!* – «My Maker, Thy hands have made me and fashioned me»: and again, «'Tis Thou, hast fashioned me behind and before, Most excellent Artist! And laid Thine hand upon me!».<sup>12</sup> (p. 89)

The character is from now onwards referred to with personal pronouns: «A quaint story he never denied was sometimes told in his presence», «His friends indeed had destined him», «Had he made himself a diplomatist» (p. 89), «he figured as a brilliant young man of the world», «he met a young lady», «he turned once and for all to the clerical profession» (p. 90). Initially something of a dandy, having renounced his religious vocation for

12 Pater is here quoting the *Psalms*. See Monsman (2008, p. 98, n. 8).

the love of a young lady, when he is ready to embrace a religious life again, he needs testing. Gaudioso is thus assigned a task of a very unworldly kind, that is to exhume dead bodies and bones and bury them again after re-writing their inscriptions:

Behold him, then, submissively at work, day by day, in mouldering ossuaries, charnel-houses, and such places, in those many dark crypts of the old Brescian churches, crypt below crypt. (p. 91)

The aesthetic detachment initially suggested by the figure in the portrait gives way to a world of action and involvement.<sup>13</sup> The shift is signalled on the linguistic level through an inversion in perspective and gaze. Gaudioso's eyes were an instrument of worldly pleasure, very much emphasised in the first part of the story, but after his conversion, he is the one being looked at. From an emphasis on eyes as if they were autonomous agents, the text shifts to a transitive mode that makes the character the object of sight. He is now surrounded by the material impure, as his «dainty fingers grew used to the touch of those rotting discoloured bones» (p. 91). He is forced to accept familiarity with the subterranean world, «so distastefully in contrast to the gaiety of the world above» (p. 91). Yet, through his acquired familiarity with the «repulsive ashes of humanity» (p. 92), his instinctive relationship with the material world is corrected: «In his secret heart he had required of his religion, and duly found there, the justification, it might be, also the correction of a manner of taking things instinctive with him, which was, and must remain, after all, a part of himself» (p. 92). The doctrine of the Resurrection gives him access to «the entire circle of religious belief» (p. 92). His greater comprehension of spiritual life is associated with a greater comprehension of art, as he can now «frankly accept the world of sight» (p. 93). The physical world has been redeemed, and through the Incarnation «all visible beauty» has been sanctified, so that art does not speak to «errant eyes» (p. 93). Pater is affirming here, as he does throughout his work, the unity of spirit and matter, of sacred and profane:

Domenico was become, might one say, a spiritual, a religious, materialist; and by consequence a warmer lover than ever, as wealthy also an effective patron, of the living art of his day. Feeling as always that for his part he could never be moved at all by a wholly unsensuous world, he was glad to assure himself now that he need never again endeavour to detach religious considerations from the things which are seen. To know and love the visible world one need not go out of His presence. (p. 93)

13 On the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in Pater, see Hext (2013).

Paganism converges with Christianity, as God himself was «sane as those old Greeks» (p. 93). Beauty and horror are indistinguishable when the saint touches corpses, and so are Christian martyrs and pagan gods, who «might well arise together now in the new cathedral» (p. 94), where the images of the martyrs in their beautiful clothes reveal the legacy of a pagan worship of beauty. The assimilation of the two religions is the final note in the fragment.

The narrative shows a movement from idealization to inclusion and contamination. What is discarded, annulled, hidden, is given by Pater an intense visibility. Paradoxically the inert impure material gives solidity to the sanctity and purity of life. A beauty which is untouched by impurity is sterile, as dead as a painting, and needs correction. The living portrait itself becomes a metaphor for art that is touched from within by the real.

Pater offers his own story of duality and ambivalence; his works provide vertiginous examples of fractured golden worlds, dystopian visions of harmonic states, and attractions towards the impure. While in the above-mentioned essay on style he insists on the elementary particles of language, human life cannot discard its own elementariness either. Representations of pseudo-gods and saints include violence and impurity, and can be read in terms of contemporary codes, but Pater also seems to envisage more modern paradigms.

In his discussion of the *homo sacer*, Agamben explores the relationship between sacred and political structures, a nexus which late-Victorian and twentieth-century anthropology and culture ignored. Lying outside both the divine and the human sphere, the *homo sacer* lives in a condition of exceptionality which reflects the exceptional status of the sovereign in the political sphere. Agamben deconstructs the ambivalence of the sacred in order to read *sacratio* as an autonomous political category, outside the sphere of religion. *Sacratio* now consists of mere animal life, «nuda vita», which becomes dramatically insignificant when exposed to the power of sovereignty.

Agamben's concept of mere animal life, never far from death but somehow suspended and vicariously controlled, has become a paradigm of modernity. Pater's characters, themselves suspended between the real and the fictional, are perennially in a no man's land, belonging to a system but simultaneously eluding it. Unsure whether they want to belong, they can become a form of waste, an excluded residue, and need to be controlled and tested.

For Pater the aesthetic theorist, sacredness qualifies art, but art itself is enveloped by the materiality of life. His powerful statement in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance* is «To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life», and fire is an image that Theodor W. Adorno was to use in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970):

[Fireworks] appear empirically yet are liberated from the burden of the empirical, which is the obligation of duration; they are a sign of heaven yet artificial, an ominous warning, a script that flashes up, vanishes and indeed cannot be read for its meaning. The segregation of the aesthetic sphere by means of the complete afunctionality of what is thoroughly ephemeral is no formal definition of aesthetics. It is not through a higher perfection that artworks separate from the fallibly existent but rather by becoming actual, like fireworks, incandescently, in an expressive appearance. They are not only the other of the empirical world: Everything in them becomes other. (Adorno 2002, p. 81)

To burn always with aesthetic intensity is ecstasy, that is to be outside, suspended from life, abstracted, but this condition can never elude life. Pater's valuation of the impure affects the category of the sacred in that it is re-oriented towards the human. Guided by strategies of waste and instability, his spectral god and his ineffectual saint situate themselves within the category of ambivalence, confirming nineteenth-century assumptions about the impurity of the sacred. Pater was also, however, pushing the concept of the sacred in new directions. Indeed, his aesthetic prefigures spectral and divinised post-modernist identities, such as may be found in the world of spectacle and fashion, which are not tied to an invariable form but are instead flexible and ambiguous. Emptied of substance, purposely rendered superficial, they invite reflection on the confluence of the sacred and the aesthetic as interlinked spaces «for displaced, or repressed materials, both political and psychic» (Grady 2009, p. 30).

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