

THE “SENSUOUS SIDE” OF DECADENT STYLE:  
PATER AND HOPKINS

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*A style or manner in art or literature can only be explained or reproduced  
through those special conditions of society and culture out of which it arose,  
and with which it forms one group of phenomena.*

– Walter Pater, “Winckelmann”

In the spring of 1866 Walter Pater was, among other things, working on his “Winckelmann” essay (published January 1867 in the *Westminster Review*) and tutoring Gerard Manley Hopkins, five years his junior and then an Oxford undergraduate already preparing for the final, “Greats” examinations scheduled for June 1867. How did that particular conjunction of people, ideas, and attitudes – what Pater would term those especial, exquisite “conditions”<sup>1</sup> – contribute to the development of a “decadent” poetics? As this essay demonstrates, Pater was using Winckelmann, an eighteenth-century art critic and archaeology devotee, to make an argument for “the sensuous side of art” and language – a lesson that not only inspired Pater’s commitment to an opulent, mannered prose style, but also encouraged the “kind of intoxication” of word-play and prosody that Hopkins would later pursue in his poetry. Pater begins his article by positioning Winckelmann as “the teacher” of Goethe and Hegel – a “strange pregnancy” through which Winckelmann’s writings “opened a new sense for the study of art” (80). Pater and his writings provided a similar “new sense” and new appreciation of sensuousness for Hopkins. One can also use the “Winckelmann” essay to define the particular burdens of “enthusiasm” (a privileged term in Pater’s essay) that “stain[ed]” Hopkins’s “thoughts with its bloom” even as he was finalizing his decision to convert to Catholicism.<sup>2</sup> (Hopkins decided to “go over” to Rome in July 1866, and was received into the Church by John Henry Newman that October. By the time

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Hopkins' program for the study of poetry is then quite original in respect to the official one supported by Mill, Arnold and other minor critics, which presupposes the impossibility of any scientific aesthetic. Even Pater, certainly original and innovative, does not reject this. Pater, however, also provided a basis to Hopkins' interest in the structural organization of poetry with his emphasis on the material, sensible aspects of the work of art and on its influence on the public: The aesthetic critic, then, regards all the subjects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations. Walter Pater's Conclusion to Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873) heavily influenced Aestheticism. Note his reference to "art for art's sake" in the last line. View images from this item (10). Yellow and green colours associated with bruising and decay were associated with decadent style, and The Yellow Book contributed to their startling new appeal. Large format, and beautifully produced, the volumes drew attention to their appeal as objects, like the works from Morris's Kelmscott press. Pater was much acclaimed for his prose style. He used to keep little squares of paper, each filled with its ideas, and then shuffled them to form a pattern and sequence. He was so conscious about the required modification or addition to his work that he always wrote on ruled paper and kept each alternate line blank. Then he prepared a fair copy of it and sometimes even got it printed to judge its effect. Pater needed the sentence, and this sentence in relation to the paragraph, and then the paragraph as the movement. Pater had skills to make the numerous parentheses in a quick flow of rhythm. At the height of Pater's writing power, he discussed broadly his style and principles of composition in the essay "Style", published in 1888. Pater: refused proctorship unnerving. Pater's writings as well as his letter to an out homosexual, he pulled the conclusion. Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? 5. i.—Decadence alarmed those, who were fond of traditional form and values, and they saw the decadents as cultural and moral threats i.—degeneration and dissident sexual desires i.—the artist's moral and spiritual depravity i.— Wilde was a leader of these two movements, with other English, French and much more writers. 8. i.— A pleasure-seeker i.— Algernon worries about absence of cucumber sandwiches more than being penniless, social dissimulations and class discriminations i.— Algernon's vagabondage is not merely laziness, but also the product of someone, who has cultivated an esteemed sense of aesthetic uselessness i.— Marriage institute is criticised, its futility is emphasised in many sections i.— "Divorces are made in heaven" - Algernon i.— He is completely.