

**THE IDEA OF DEVELOPMENT: DECADENCE,
AESTHETICISM AND SEXUAL IDENTITY IN PATER'S
MARIUS THE EPICUREAN (1885)**

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The publications of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), and his *The Descent of Man* (1871) created one of the most influential new concepts in Victorian thinking: the idea of humankind's constant evolution. Cultural commentators would soon link the idea of development with a fear of decline, producing one of the most powerful binaries in the cultural, social and political discourses of the *fin de siècle*. The progression/regression binary informed a multitude of spheres ranging from imperial expansion politics (including both military interventions such as the Boer War, but also philanthropic movements such as Christian missionary societies), to the improvement of transport through the new railways. At the same time notions of development and decline played a central role in intellectual and artistic debates, most (in)famously in degeneration theory. These debates inform new nineteenth century discourses of sexuality, which found their apotheosis in the emergence of the discipline of sexology. Whilst the links between sexuality and ideas of progress have been acknowledged, they have been largely examined within the more scientific contexts of nineteenth century birth control debates, ranging from "family limitation" to eugenics (Bland; Burdett). However, the notion of development and advancement plays an equally significant role in sexual discourses outside the scientific and sexological spheres. Here, ideas about forward movement versus degeneracy function either to undermine or to corroborate specific sexual identities. Whereas in the scientific realm these roles were often static, the literary realm, in particular decadent and aesthetic writings, offered a space for alternative explorations of sexuality which challenged traditional assumptions about sexuality and development. Whilst critics have explored the links between decadence, aestheticism and same-sex sexual discourses, nineteenth century associations between sexual deviance, retrogression and advancement have not yet been fully explored. The concept of human progress and decline was not a mere prescriptive model used to regulate sexual behaviour. Instead, it was also integral to diverse decadent and aesthetic theories, where it could be used to affirm, rather than to denounce, a sexual identity. This is evident in Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, which presents an original study of development and male same-sex sexuality. It provides an alternative model of homosexuality to that put forward in the works of

influential sexologists and writers such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs or John Addington Symonds. Unlike the sexologists, who first of all engaged with questions of the “naturalness” of homosexuality, in the sense of whether or not it is congenital or acquired occurrence, Pater put forward the notion of an advanced “culture” of homosexuality. This was based on what he termed “the idea of development,” which comprises an intricate mix of observations on aestheticism, Darwinism, and history. *Marius* illustrates how scientific and philosophical ideas about progress and decline informed a distinct theory of male same-sex identity, which both reflects and enriches Victorian discourses on the subject, offering new insights into a history of homosexuality.

Decadence and Victorian culture

In order to fully examine how Pater’s understanding of male same-sex sexuality is dependent on notions of progress and decline, a reassessment of these ideas within the context of decadence theory is vital. While today we understand decadence first of all as a term denoting a *fin de siècle* artistic movement, at the turn of the last century it was used to denote broader theories of culture. In 1908, Arthur James Balfour delivered a lecture on “Decadence” to the female students of Newnham College, Cambridge, in which he emphasised that his lecture did not refer to “the sort of decadence often attributed to certain phases of artistic and literary development, in which an overwrought technique, straining to express sentiments too subtle or too morbid, is deemed to have supplanted the direct inspiration of an earlier and simpler age” (Balfour 6). Balfour’s evaluation of artistic decadence is low. His choice of words when describing the “overwrought” decadent style is reminiscent of contemporary medical discourses, particularly discourses about female mental health. Women were frequently considered to suffer from “overwrought nerves” caused by intellectual over-stimulation. Balfour implicitly genders artistic decadence as feminine. Moreover, he appears to consider it “unnatural” in that it aims to replace the “direct inspiration” that characterised Romanticism. However, Balfour’s main interest in the subject lies elsewhere. He explains:

The decadence respecting which I wish to put questions is not literary or artistic, it is political and national. It is the decadence which attacks, or is alleged to attack great communities and historic civilizations; which is to societies of men what senility is to man, and often, like senility, the precursor and the cause of final dissolution. (Balfour 6-7)

Here then we have a dramatic shift in focus from decadence as an artistic concern to decadence as a matter of national importance. In a sense Balfour gives the term a

new masculinist meaning, as he applies it to the male-dominated political sphere. More interestingly, Balfour uses decadence to describe the concept that Max Nordau called degeneration. Like Nordau, Balfour claims that decadence “attacks” society, likening it to debilitating “senility” and claiming that it would bring about the “final dissolution.” In other words, for Balfour decadence is a concept of decline, related to old age and death. This stands in clear contrast to the prominence assigned to ideas of youth in artistic decadence, such as *Marius*, which links decadence and youth to the ideas of innovation.

The contested usage of decadence can be broadly summed up as the divide between decadence as a process of decline, and decadence as a form of progress. Within artistic decadence youth was related to ideas of novelty, advance and originality. This has implications for the understanding of decadence, as the words of the French critic Remy de Gourmont succinctly illustrate. De Gourmont wrote in 1921 that “the idea of decadence has been assimilated to its exact opposite – the idea of innovation” (de Gourmont 145). Unlike Balfour, de Gourmont considers decadence to be a force of progress. Gourmont acknowledges that the positive concept of decadence is linguistically somewhat ambivalent. Balfour also indicates that he is aware of the contestation of meaning regarding decadence: “If its use is to be justified at all, the justification must depend not on the fact that it supplies an explanation, but on the fact that it rules out explanations which are obvious but inadequate” (Balfour 33). In other words, while for de Gourmont decadence means innovation, Balfour uses the term exclusively to denote anything but innovation: that is he uses it to describe wider forms of decline. The opposing views characterise the competing usages of decadence. The discussions of the subject, particularly Balfour’s, reveal the leaky boundaries between different spheres, here literature and politics, art and national concerns, and show how similar ideas may emerge in different discourses. Balfour claims that decadence originated in the artistic sphere, which echoes Nordau’s view on degeneration. The links between decadence and degeneration designate a process of cultural transformation which is characterised by the fact that certain ideas seemed to be “in the air,” informing different writings. This is resonated in *Marius* by the underlying references to development, which seem to capture a particular cultural moment.

The critic and poet Arthur Symons, one of the leading proponents of the decadent movement in England, defined decadent writing in an article published in 1893 thus:

For its very disease of form, this literature is certainly typical of a civilisation grown over-luxurious, over-inquiring, too languid for the relief of action, too uncertain for any emphasis in opinion or in conduct. It reflects all the moods, all the manners of a sophisticated society: its very artificiality is a way of being true to nature: simplicity, sanity, proportion – the classic qualities – how

much do we possess them in our life, our surroundings, that we should look to find them in literature – so evidently the literature of a decadence? (Symonds 859)

Symons's choice of words strikingly echoes that of Nordau's *Degeneration*. However, unlike Nordau, who had considered the "disease" of degeneration horrific, Symons calls the literature of decadence a "disease of form," which he praises. He considers it to be the result of a "sophisticated society" which has become "over-luxurious," indolent and too indecisive to have morals. For this reason, it deliberately turns to literature in search for "the classic qualities" of "simplicity, sanity, proportion." The seeming contradiction in this argument and the question of whether society is decadent and this is reflected in literature or vice versa, is resolved by Symons's assertion that "artificiality" is in fact "a way of being true to nature." In other words, for Symons it is not an actual material state of being that is of interest. Rather he is fascinated by the ways the material reality is artificially reconstructed and represented because this in itself has a certain authenticity. From this position it is impossible to determine if literature influences life or if it is merely its mirror, because according to Symons life and literature are at the same time producer and reflection of one another. The new decadent aesthetics presents a radical break with Romantic naturalism, where "nature" – that is the natural world, in particular its botany and geological formation – is considered a central part of the artist's inspiration. In this context "disease" is understood as an aesthetic concern, reflecting the fact that contemporary civilisation has reached a decadent apex. For Symons, in the literature of decadence "disease" is a positive, even seductive notion – an idea which is reflected in many decadent texts of the day, famously Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where homosexuality is associated with "maladies so strange that one had to pass through them if one sought to understand their nature" (Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 84).

Symons's ideas offer some insights into the links between notions of decadence and aestheticism. In fact, the terms were used almost interchangeably. Both were characterised by the idea of artificiality as a governing principle in art. As early as 1835, the French writer Théophile Gautier in his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* claimed that art cannot have a moral function, nor does it serve any utilitarian purpose. The idea of *l'art pour l'art* – or art for art's sake, as it was to become known in English – formed a key principle of the decadent and aesthetic movements. At the same time, it was a concern in cultural degeneration theory, especially Nordau's writings, which is evident when Nordau quotes Gautier on the subject of decadence. Gautier claims that the style of decadence

is nothing else than art arrived at that extreme point of maturity produced by those civilisations which are growing old with their oblique sins – a style that is ingenious, complicated, learned, full

of shades of meaning and research, always pushing further the limits of language, borrowing from all the technical vocabularies, taking colours from all palettes, notes from all keyboards. (quoted in Nordau 299)

Like Nordau, Gautier's starting point is the idea of a societal zenith. However, unlike Nordau who believes that the apex, which he called a "word-wash [symptomatic for] the mystically degenerate mind," was to be followed by societal decline, Gautier thinks it is the pinnacle of learning and knowledge (Nordau 300). Gautier believes that the "sins" of civilization "growing old" produce a particular artistic "maturity." This stands in contrast to that strand of theorists of decadence such as Balfour, or even Nordau, who equate society's maturity with senility, old age and decline. However, it is also opposed to the ideas of those thinkers – including Symons and Wilde – who believe that decadence is aligned to youth and innovation. Instead Gautier praises the new artistic "maturity." He succinctly summarises some of the main characteristics of the decadent style: its deliberate, convoluted, anti-Romanticist points of reference that favour the "artificial" over the "natural," and its use of imagery taken from painting and music. In other words, while he agrees with Nordau that the unique "condition" of modern society has produced a particular, "decadent" form of art, he evaluates this development in a radically different way: for Nordau decadence is a fatal degenerate disease, for Gautier, as for many of his literary-artistic contemporaries, it represents an innovative aesthetic expression. Crucially, however, he links innovation to old age, which separates his ideas from many other pro-decadence thinkers.

Divergent evaluations of old age versus youth within aesthetics and degenerate theories complicate the understanding of decadence. Symptomatic for this difficulty is Joris-Karl Huysmans's *A rebours* (1884), one of the most influential decadent texts, which describes the life of the degenerate duke Jean des Esseintes, "a frail young man of thirty who was anaemic and highly strung" (Huysmans 17). Des Esseintes retires to a country house in order to pursue his aim to create a totally artificial, aesthetically perfect environment governed by his own "taste." He withdraws into this house and away from all society. However, the highly sensual isolated experience causes a continuous deterioration of des Esseintes's health, which proceeds until the doctors orders his return to Paris and thus to society. In other words, the decadent aesthetic experience appears to age des Esseintes physically. Interestingly, Huysmans here turns around the conventional notion that urban surrounds reinforce degeneration, as des Esseintes is to return to the metropolis "to lead a normal life again, above all to try and enjoy the same pleasures as other people" (Huysmans 211). For him "a normal life" means despair and he exclaims: "it's all over now. Like a tide-race, the waves of human mediocrity are rising to the heavens and will engulf this refuge, for I am opening the flood-gates myself, against my will" (Huysmans 219). Huysmans compares what he calls the

“mediocre” existence of the urban masses to an uncontrollable force of nature from which he cannot escape. Rather than reverting to Romantic imagery, the “sea” here functions as an image of contagion. In other words, Huysmans implies that contact with “mediocrity” will forever taint his own existence. In a turn against conventional morality, des Esseintes prefers his own extreme degeneration and its resultant loss of youth caused by purely aesthetic environs to the relative “normality” of urban “mediocrity.” Huysmans’s connections between aestheticism and degeneration, including his for-the-time outrageous ideas on pleasure, aesthetics and degeneration, which were overtly set against middle-class values, had considerable influence on British aestheticism and decadence. Within discourses of sexuality, the intricate, often seemingly antagonistic references to progress and decline played a key role in validating a particular sexual identity.

Progress and a culture of homosexuality: *Marius the Epicurean*

Critics tend to foreground the omissions and silences in Pater’s engagement with homosexuality, often measuring Pater against Wilde’s apparent explicitness. Considering the vast quantity of Pater scholarship, there has been relatively little critical advance since Michael Levey’s memorable assertion that “Wilde had boldly and publicly trumpeted what Pater whispered” (Levey 21). Yet Pater’s aestheticism and intrinsic homoeroticism have received much critical attention, especially in relation to their debts to classical sources (Brake, 1994; Dellamora, 1983; Denisoff, 2002). He followed a particular literary-philosophical genealogy that was also favoured by sexologists such as Ulrichs in Germany and Symonds in Britain. However, unlike the sexologists who were first of all concerned with asserting that homosexuality is a congenital – or “natural” – occurrence, Pater focused primarily on ideas about male same-sex history and education. He was interested in what one might call the manifestations of a culture of male same sex-sexuality, particularly its aesthetics rather than its political significance. For Pater, the idea of culture is closely tied in to the notion of progress, which he bases on Darwinian theories of evolution. He explores these notions in *Marius the Epicurean*, which examines the aesthetic education of its eponymous protagonist in close correlation to Marius’s sexual development. Both aesthetics and sexuality are dictated by Hellenistic ideals of sensuality, male friendship and intellectual advancement. At the same time they reflect recent Darwinist ideas about development and degeneration. The cultural-scientific framework of the text mirrors the points of reference for the late-Victorian sexological studies of homosexuality, especially those of Pater’s contemporary Symonds. Whilst Pater’s and Symonds’s critical scholarship has often been compared – they both worked on studies of the Renaissance – the fact that they were both concerned with male homosexuality has not yet been fully explored. Unlike Symonds, who, in his *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, directly addressed “the student of sexual inversion,” Pater’s engagement with male same-sex issues is dominated by

allusion (Symonds 1).¹ This may account for his marginal role in critical histories of sexuality, despite the fact that the subtle examination of male love in *Marius* offers a cultural theory of homosexuality. The work puts forward Pater's interpretation of the philosophy of Epicureanism, a "vision of perfect men and things" (Pater, *Marius* 1: 148).² In search of this perfection, Marius journeys outwards into new geographical, sexual, and spiritual spheres in a pattern of development that mirrors Pater's own understanding of aestheticism.

Pater's work is deeply influenced by his belief in intellectual-aesthetic progress, which echoes social Darwinist ideas of development. Darwinism and its relevance to intellectual production fascinated Pater. In a lecture on "Plato and the Doctrine of Motion" (1893), Pater explains:

And the Darwinian theory – that "species," the identifying forms of animal and vegetable life, immitable [sic] though they seem now, as of old in the Garden of Eden, are fashioned by slow development, while perhaps millions of years go by: well! every month is adding to its evidence. Nay, the idea of development (that, too, a thing of growth, developed in the progress of reflexion) is at last invading one by one, as the secret of their explanation, all the products of mind, the very mind itself, the abstract reason, or certainty, for instance, that two and two make four. (Pater, *Plato* 10-11)

Pater argues that the new Darwinian theory of evolution – which he calls the "idea of development" – impacts on every aspect of life. He is not merely concerned with its biological manifestations, but his interest lies specifically in the connection between evolutionary theory and "all the products of the mind"; in other words he is interested in the cultural aspects of evolution. This is reinforced when he juxtaposes the "millions of years" of evolutionary development with the powers of the intellect which "every month" produce evidence in favour of evolution theory. Whilst part of larger evolutionary developments, the human mind is capable of rapid change and

¹ *A Problem in Greek Ethics* was written in 1873 and first published in 1883, when Symonds printed ten private copies. I consulted the copy held by the Wellcome Library, London. It is a first generation photographic reprint of the surreptitious edition of 1901. The range of possible dates of publication is due to the presence of another copy of the edition, which is thought to be a photographic reprint of the above edition. The second reprint bears the following inscription: "Jan 5, 1920." This suggests that the above cited first generation reprint could have been reprinted any time between the 1901 edition's publication and the date of the second generation reprint. This shows that Symonds's treatise was continually privately reprinted and circulated.

² This is a facsimile reprint of the original 1885 edition, which consists of two volumes. Each volume, despite being part of the same book, is paginated separately. All subsequent references refer to this edition and will be inserted into the text.

constant forward movement, based on the “reflexion” of one’s cultural circumstance. The process of reflection – tied in to ideas about learning, knowledge, and education – transforms the biological theory of evolution into the cultural concept of development.

In *Marius* Pater further explores the intersections between nature and culture by looking at ideas of sexuality. Set during the reign of Marcus Aurelius in second century Italy, the book describes the aesthetic development and Hellenic philosophy of the emblematic character Marius. Despite the fact that *Marius* is not an easily accessible work, its reception was, in the words of an early critic, “both respectful and enthusiastic” (Benson 118). The publishing house Macmillan paid Pater £50 for the publication of the work plus fifty percent of its profit (Letter to Macmillan, 14 September 1884). The work was a success for Pater: *Marius* sold 6000 copies in six years, which was a successful figure at the time, and which may reflect a particular interest in its classical-Hellenic subject matter (Wright 72). Nevertheless, the categorization of the work caused some difficulty. The early twentieth century literary critic and barrister Algernon Cecil commented that *Marius* “escapes every classification. It is neither novel, nor biography, nor romance, and his [Pater’s] own name (selected for some later efforts of the same kind) ‘an imaginary portrait’ is the best that can be found for it” (Cecil 238). Oscar Wilde in a different context called Pater “an intellectual impressionist” (Wilde, 1887). The impressionist style of the work is nevertheless embedded into a progressive structure. *Marius* evolves from an uneducated pagan youth into a true Epicurean. At the same time, Pater diverges from evolutionary theory as he implies that *Marius*’s development is a regenerative process in that it restores him from a naturalistic pagan state to culture. Crucially, the transformation from a naturalistic pagan state into a state of culture is symbolised by *Marius*’s sexual initiation; in other words, homosexuality functions as a “civilizing” force. The anti-Romantic idea of human existence, where culture is more important than nature, distinguishes Pater from Symonds who had believed in a “natural” human (and sexual) state.

Arguably one of the defining features of *Marius* is its debt to classical sources and to Renaissance scholarship. This links philosophic concerns with issues of sexuality and contemporary scientific thinking while at the same time emphasising the evolutionary nature of a history of ideas. The imitation and the invention of classical sources are central to the production of Pater’s aesthetic experiment, which is also partly indebted to his own scholarship. Pater believed that while one cannot conceive the age of Antiquity “one can conceive the element it has contributed to our culture” (Pater, 1919: 16). This reveals both a concern with appearance – a cultural genealogy that can be traced – and also the belief in cumulative cultural growth, whereby one culture developed from another. Pater considered Antiquity the origin of civilisation and emphasised the importance for a writer to study this cultural lineage: “The modern poet or artist who treats in this way a classical story comes very near, if not to the Hellenism of Homer, yet to the Hellenism of Chaucer”

(Pater, *Sketches and Reviews* 16-17). Chaucer's Hellenism was of course largely a fabrication (for instance he attributed the story for his *Troilus and Criseyde* to a classical writer he called "Lollius." The source is false: "Lollius" is a Chaucerian creation, rather than a historical figure). This reinforces Pater's own literary model. He denounces the Romantic, Coleridgean idea of the original creative genius, which was still prevalent at the time. Instead he promotes a learned, scholarly approach where classical sources are translated and transformed into new writings, thus producing the seeming paradox of a literary experiment that is steeped in a particular cultural history. This mode of production is partly explained in the "Conclusion" to the *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Here Pater remarks that:

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of actions. But when reflection begins to act upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force is suspended like a trick of magic; each object is loosened into a group of impressions – colour, odour, texture – in the mind of the observer. (Pater, *Renaissance*, 209)

In other words, while we cannot escape "experience," we constantly transform what we know "into a group of impressions." This explains Pater's fragmented literary style, but also in part his turn to Hellenism, which offered him a set of exciting "impressions."

Pater's turn to Hellenism is crucial in two intricately linked ways: on the one hand the notion played an important role for same-sex discourses, both within decadence, where it served as a coded reference to love between men, and within sexology, where it influenced the writings of Ulrichs and Symonds. On the other hand, Pater's Hellenism expresses a particular understanding of history, as it is situated within the new Darwinian frame of historical development. This in turn supports the idea that Pater was concerned with the progressive development of ideas. A substantial number of passages in the text are translations from or adaptations of classical writers such as Homer, Horace, Virgil and Plato. However, Pater here moves beyond the humanist model of *imitatio* and pursues the older Chaucerian approach of inventing sources, and even making false attributions (Tuell xv). These deliberate modifications signal that Pater's concern was not first of all the translating into English of certain Latin and Greek passages. Instead Pater engages with a specific homosocial history of ideas, borrowing, reshaping and inventing sources to put together his own homoerotic aesthetic theory.

Whilst sexuality seems explicitly written out of the narrative, it is implicit in the work's imagery. The young Marius's awakening sexuality is characterised by a dislike of snakes which arises after he has chanced upon two snakes "breeding": "for

there was something in the incident which made food distasteful and his sleep uneasy for many days afterwards" (1: 23). The serpent *bête-noir* is given a symbolic function for it

was something like a fear of the supernatural, or perhaps rather a moral feeling, for the face of a serpent, with no grace of fur or feathers, so different from quadruped or bird, has a sort of humanity of aspect in its spotted and clouded nakedness. There was a humanity, dusty and sordid and as if far gone in corruption, in the sluggish coil, as it awoke suddenly into one metallic spring of pure enmity against him. (1: 24)

This passage alludes to the Ovidian story of the seer Tiresias who interrupted snakes breeding and was turned into a woman. Here it is tied in to pubescent fears of awakening sexuality. The mechanisms of pubescent biology, represented in the image of the naked snake, are given a "supernatural" attribute. The apparently uncontrollable force of the sexual drive alludes to Tiresias's radical anatomical transformation. It is likened to the "supernatural" not because Marius does not *know* the biological functions, but because he fears their influence. In other words, Pater here comments on the existence of an inherent sexual drive, while at the same time suggesting its cultural regulation. Marius describes how the phallic "sluggish coil" may "suddenly" harden and turn against him. This seems to refer to the penis hardening in his hand, and may allude to a fear of masturbation. The dangers of masturbatory practices were a prevalent theme in contemporary sexual discourses, and linked to degeneration anxieties. Here the imagery reveals a fear of sexuality as "dusty," "sordid" and corrupt; in other words, Marius's dread of his awakening sexuality is expressed in language that anticipates Nordau's *Degeneration*. Yet at the same time, whilst the danger of being corrupted through masturbation is emphasised, Pater takes care to point out that Marius can withstand this danger with the help of his "moral feeling." Marius's moral integrity is further asserted with the observation that his boyhood was on the whole "more given to contemplation than to action" (1: 24), thus counteracting the image of masturbation suggested by the description of the awakening "sluggish coil." Whilst Pater does not disentangle masturbation from degeneration, he emphasises Marius's health, and, crucially, in so doing he depicts how a biological drive is controlled and regulated by the cultural force of morality.

The early-boyhood fear of sexuality is framed within wider aesthetic theory when the adolescent Marius visits the temple of Aesculapius, god of the medical cult. During the visit to the temple Marius is mentally and physically initiated, suggesting that the release of sexual energy functions as a purification ritual from paganism. Sexuality here is a tool of "enlightenment" in the sense that the actual sexual act drives out superstitious fears, reinforcing that sexuality is a cultural

phenomenon. This idea is combined with the Platonic concept of male friendship where an experienced older man initiates his younger companion into the secrets of life. That this is a positive process is underlined by the fact that upon arrival in Aesculapius's temple "Marius became alive to a singular purity in the air" (1: 30). The image of the pure air stands in contrast to Victorian fears of pollution, which linked environmental contamination to moral and sexual degeneration. Similar to the Victorian idea of the benefits of a stay in the clean air of a seaside resort, the clear air here suggests the beginning of a regenerative process.

Initially, Marius's experience is strained by his fear of snakes, as he fears the god will appear to him in the form of a serpent. Nevertheless, in accordance with Aesculapius's beliefs that dreams offer the "cause and cure of a malady" (1: 29) (which anticipates Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*) Marius duly falls asleep:

After an hour's feverish dreaming he awoke – with a cry, it would seem for someone had entered the room bearing a light. The footsteps of the youthful figure which approached and sat by his bedside were certainly real. Ever afterwards, when the thought arose in his mind of some unhoped-for but entire relief from distress, like blue sky in a storm at sea, would come back the memory of that gracious countenance which, amid all the kindness of its gaze, had yet a certain air of predominance over him, so that he seemed now for the first time to have found a master of his spirit. It would have been sweet to be the servant of him who now sat beside him speaking. (1: 31)

Here the classical idea of the male teacher-friend is introduced in erotic terms. Marius is seduced by "the kindness" of the "gaze" of the graceful young man who exercises a particular power over him. He imagines the sweetness of being the man's servant, as the young man provides him with "entire relief from distress." This distress denotes Marius's fear of snakes, or, in other words the unknown sexual side to his personality. Implicitly, the young man relieves these fears by sexually initiating Marius. Through this physical fulfilment Marius also finds his first "master of spirit"; in other words Pater suggests Marius's growing intellectual development.

Marius's first sexual experience follows Platonic models of male friendship. The young man reads to Marius from Plato's *Phaedrus* (1: 32), which supports the idea that Pater deliberately draws on a homoerotic tradition. In *Phaedrus* Plato posits that our souls are immortal and reborn into different bodies. The Platonic idea is echoed in Ulrichs's influential theory of homosexuality, which claims that a male homosexual has a female soul trapped in his body. Symonds in his *Memoirs* notes the night he read Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* as his own initiation to Hellenic love. Here *Phaedrus* introduces Marius's sexual awakening, which at the same time opens up new intellectual spheres. In his chapter on "Winckelmann" in the *Studies*,

Pater writes about enthusiasm “in the broad Platonic sense of the *Phaedrus*” as the key to Winckelmann’s success “over the Hellenic world” (Pater, *Renaissance*, 161). He continues to point out “that his affinity with Hellenism was not merely intellectual, that the subtler threads of temperament were interwoven in it, is proved by his romantic, fervid friendships with young men” (Pater, *Renaissance*, 161). Pater is clearly aware about the links between Hellenism and homosexuality. Here *Phaedrus* suggests the regenerative power of (same-sex) sexuality, as Marius now loses the fear of sexuality he had developed during puberty. At the same time, the reading reconfirms that same-sex sexuality is not a mere biological instinct but a form of cultural expression and part of a larger, constantly evolving history.

The suggestive homoeroticism of the scene is heightened by a reference to the senses, which links Marius’s sexuality and his aesthetic ideals. In the first stages of the encounter, sight is the key sense, as the “gaze” of the young man indicates. It inspires the formulation of Marius’s own aesthetic theory. He vows:

To keep the eye clear by a sort of exquisite personal alacrity and cleanliness, extending even to his dwelling-place; to discriminate, ever more and more fastidiously, select form and colour in things from what was less select; to meditate much on beautiful visible objects, more especially connected with the period of youth. (1: 33)

In other words, the sexual experience produces Marius’s aesthetic awareness. Sight is the first sense that Marius wants to cultivate, which follows the Platonic hierarchy of the senses. Plato situates sight at the top because it allows us to appreciate geometry and beauty. Pater emphasises the visual and its links to Hellenistic ideals of beauty and youth. Marius’s goal is to be so discriminating in taste that he can find perfection in “a single choice of flower” (1: 33). Inspired by *Phaedrus*, which he calls the “new formula of life,” he vows “to avoid jealousy, in his way through the world, [and] everything repugnant to sight” (1: 33). The vow is of twofold importance. Firstly, by choosing the word “jealousy,” rather than for example “envy,” Pater suggests a sexual dimension to the proposed way of life. Secondly, the eye, seeing and sight are identified as central to Marius’s aesthetic development, underlying its sensual qualities and Platonic influence.

Pater’s focus on “form” and “colour” is reminiscent of Huysmans’s aesthetics. In *A rebours*, when des Esseintes’s “literary tastes and artistic preferences had become more refined” this impacts on his love for flowers which “had rid itself of its residuum, its lees, had been clarified, so to speak, and purified” (Huysmans). As with des Esseintes, the development of Marius’s taste is seen as a process of purification; sexuality is now no longer “dusty” and “sordid,” but linked to “alacrity” and cleanliness. However, des Esseintes developed his intellectual taste first, while Marius develops his senses before his mind. Pater puts physical

development before literary-artistic education. In so doing he suggests that Marius's body is central to his aesthetics, which reinforces Hellenistic influences.

Marius later reminisces about the relationship that "the fascination experienced by him had been a sentimental one, dependent on the concession to himself of an intimacy, a certain tolerance of his company, granted to none beside" (1: 50-51). If Marius thought he found perfection in Flavian, in retrospect their relationship appears oddly lacking. Flavian – "[t]he brilliant youth who loved dress, and dainty food, and flowers, and seemed to have a natural alliance with, and claim upon, everything else which was physically select and bright" (1: 51) – dazzles with his physicality only. The mere physical thrill does not suffice for Marius. He is looking for a type of perfection, which is both physical and spiritual, in accordance with Pater's own view, that "A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism" (Pater, *Sketches and Reviews*, 127). In other words, Marius appears to be specifically searching for a cultured, in the sense of educated, companion, rather than a mere beautiful one.

Marius finds intellectual inspiration in the soldier Cornelius. When he hears Cornelius deliver a "discourse on the *Nature of Morals*" (2: 3), Marius falls for the soldier's "ethical charm" (2: 6). The fact that Cornelius is a soldier also suggests his physical fitness. At the same time it echoes writings by Ulrichs and Symonds who both discussed sexual encounters with soldiers in their work. Marius foregrounds the intellectual qualities of his relationship with Cornelius, emphasising that "their intimacy had grown very close" by the time Marius nears his death (2: 210). However, in his dying hours Marius comes to realise that intellectual satisfaction alone does not suffice. Separated from Cornelius by war, he is again drawn to sensuality. Here it is administered by the Christian peasants who look after him. At the same time this incident celebrates Marius's turn to spirituality, upon which he comments: "There had been a permanent protest established in the world, a plea, a perpetual after-thought, which humanity henceforth would ever possess in reserve, against any wholly mechanical and disheartening theory of itself and its condition" (2: 221). Marius finds hope in the fact that the spiritual "plea" has established a form of "permanent protest." Furthermore, this idea is linked to the idea of future progress. He finds solace in thinking of "the generations to come after him" (2: 222), in other words in the fact that development and progress will continue. Rather than being tied to desires of procreation, Marius's heritage is linked to creativity and sensuality. Pater emphasises that Marius's spirituality is not Christian, but that he is drawn to the sensual aspects of Christianity as the Christian peasants look after him: "Gentle fingers had applied to hands and feet, to all those old passage-ways of the senses, through which the whole world had come and gone for him, now so dim and obstructed, a medicinal oil" (2: 223). The scene identifies the last Christian sacrament given to a dying person, yet for Marius the sensual pleasure is more important than any religious belief. The renewed stimulation of the "old passage-ways of the senses," which had been somewhat neglected in his relationship with

Cornelius, make Marius for the first time realise his body as “that dear sister and companion of his soul” (2: 222). The ending of *Marius* to some extent reconciles the divide between nature and culture that has informed the narrative throughout. It focuses on the completion of Marius’s own development, which takes place in the aesthetic, rather than the material sphere.

Marius presents a unique theory of homosexuality that modifies Victorian ideas about progress and sexuality. Unlike the rigid classifications of the sexologists, Pater’s model of homosexuality is fluid, advancing the constant development of the subject, rather than taking the *status quo* as basis for a static categorisation of a particular sexual identity. Pater’s ideas on sexuality are part of an aesthetic theory, which draws on a range of philosophical and scientific discourses. He creates a fictional character whose development is a constant regenerative process despite and because of being based on male same-sex relationships. In other words, Pater’s view of male same-sex sexuality is not just affirmative, but he considers it the basis for “civilisation.” Whilst the politics of this view conforms to misogynist Victorian stereotyping and Imperialist beliefs, its implications for the understanding of homosexuality are more radical. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Pater does not condemn male same-sex sexuality, but he considers it the cornerstone of “culture.” Moreover, he clearly identifies sexuality as a cultural phenomenon, which distinguishes Pater’s ideas from the dominant essentialist currents of late-Victorian discourses of sexuality. Progress and decline form the basis of most cultural theories in the late-nineteenth century. Pater engages with these notions to create an “alternative” case study outside the governing sexological-scientific realm. “The idea of development” underlies his investigations into what is arguably one of the first positive Victorian “imaginary portraits” of homosexual identity.

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