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British Decadence and Renaissance Italy

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Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) was a foundational text for British Decadence. For Pater, the works of Michelangelo, Botticelli, Leonardo Da Vinci and other artists and writers associated with the European Renaissance were vehicles for developing a radical aesthetic that elevated intensity of experience as the goal of life, and saw art as the most crystalized form of that experience. The book was immediately contentious. The Bishop of Oxford wanted to burn it; Oscar Wilde declared it the 'holy writ of beauty', his 'golden book'.[1] But then the Renaissance itself was contentious for the Victorians.[2] Long perceived to be the apogee of humanist creativity, it was nonetheless vilified by John Ruskin and other proponents of early Christian art at mid-century for its moral and aesthetic depravity.[3] The French art historian Alexis-François Rio, for one, condemned the Renaissance for 'introducing naturalism, that great element of decadence, into the domain of art'.[4] High Renaissance art, the very cornerstone of academic training in the fine arts, was the model *against* which the avant-garde Pre-Raphaelite movement defined itself by pursuing a different kind of naturalism, an unmediated truthfulness to nature that they associated, under Ruskin's influence, with medieval Italian painting.

Nevertheless the artistry of Renaissance Italy re-asserted its fascination for later writers, such as Algernon Charles Swinburne, John Addington Symonds and Vernon Lee. Even the Pre-Raphaelite painters Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones changed their view.[5] Now the Renaissance offered forms of sensual enjoyment that could transform and re-

enchant the experience of modernity. In this, Pater's controversial book was a pivotal text, bringing the Renaissance, in all its polyvalence, to a new generation and seemingly providing a manifesto for Decadence. The publication of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, and its appropriation by Wilde and his Decadent compatriots, meant that hereafter Renaissance Italy and Decadent Britain were inescapably connected.

It is not hard to see why the conflicted nineteenth-century vision of the Renaissance, with its compelling historical narratives of triumph and degeneration, death and re-birth, appealed to the Decadent imagination. Decadence was drawn to the very contradictions that troubled Ruskin, to all that was ambiguous, all that seemed decadent indeed, about the Renaissance. Pater and his followers were captivated by its paradoxical mix of purity and corruption, pleasure and pain; by its embrace equally of the spiritual and the carnal, the exquisite and the grotesque. Renaissance Italy offered a vocabulary for experience adequate to the complexity, perversity even, of their own tastes and desires. Its black and white contraries, as stark as the lines and spaces of a Beardsley illustration, provided a blueprint for these *fin-de-siècle* after-comers.

Vernon Lee described the Renaissance as a 'horrible anomaly of improvement and degradation'.[6] Decadence presented a similar conundrum, for it too was associated both with moral and artistic decline and with its opposite, rebirth through cultural renewal. Renaissance Italy, with its relentless questioning of the nature of the relationship between art, beauty, spirituality and experience, so piously observed in the Middle Ages, seemed to offer a cultural precedent for the Decadent movement's challenge to

Victorian ideals. By the same token, like all civilizations defined by a concept of progress, late-nineteenth-century Britain was haunted by the spectre of its opposite, regression, a fear that found new resonance in the context of debates about evolution and degeneration. (Wilde himself was a celebrity case study in Max Nordau's *Degeneration* [1892], first published in English in 1895, the year of his trial.) Renaissance Italy provided colourful examples of the intriguing coexistence of high culture with moral decay that fascinated later Victorian artists and writers, and offered darkly suggestive subjects for those of a Decadent turn to explore from a safe historical distance.

Such encounters with the past can be thought about as a dialectical process whereby, as Walter Benjamin proposes, 'what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation', attaining to 'legibility only at a particular time … each "now" … the now of a particular recognizability'.[7] So what was it that late-nineteenth-century Britain 'recognised' in the culture of Renaissance Italy? What became newly legible? This essay will argue that it was the aesthetic and moral ambiguousness of the Renaissance that Decadence responded to – its audacious blurring of the boundaries between apparently black-and-white categories of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, legitimate and illicit pleasures; its radical unsettling of conventional demarcations of gender, sexuality, place and historical period. For Pater and his generation, such ambiguities were intellectually and personally liberating. The Renaissance offered them a creative space in which to explore contemporary uncertainties and to mobilise a distinctively Decadent style to express their nineteenth-century experience of modernity.

I. 'The Sins of the Borgias'

Although it was Pater who reluctantly stole the headlines and was made the whipping boy for Decadence, Swinburne was arguably a better candidate for that role (and not just because of his interest in sado-masochism). It was Swinburne who first identified a strangely perverse beauty in the work of the Old Masters, and whose response to their drawings in the Uffizi acknowledged the allure of the *femme fatale* that was to become such a Decadent motif.[8] In his 'Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence', published in the *Fortnightly Review* in July 1868, he observed in Leonardo's drawings, for example, 'Fair strange faces of women full of dim doubt and faint scorn; touched by the shadow of an obscure fate; eager and weary as it seems at once, pale and fervent with patience or passion'. Such women 'allure and perplex the eyes and thoughts of men'.[9] This is art writing in a new key, and it palpably influenced Pater's account of the Renaissance, particularly his essay on Leonardo, first published in the same journal in November 1869.[10] Swinburne strikes a similar note in his meditation on a series of drawings by Michelangelo of a singular woman 'beautiful always beyond desire and cruel beyond words; fairer than heaven and more terrible than hell; pale with pride and weary with wrong-doing'. With 'her fatal nature, … her brand of beauty fresh from hell', she is 'the deadlier Venus incarnate …Lamia re-transformed … the Persian Amestris … Cleopatra'.[11] Her creator knows 'All mysteries of good and evil, all wonders of life and death'; he has 'known the causes of things', and is 'not too happy'.[12] This is a litany that foreshadows Pater's famous paean to Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, who for him encompasses 'All the thoughts and experience of the world' – 'the animalism

of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias … Leda … Saint Anne'.[13] Such writing offered Victorian readers a new kind of encounter with the art of the period, one that promised to challenge their own experience.

La Gioconda, whose mysterious smile encapsulates the multi-faceted enigma of the Renaissance, knew 'the sins of the Borgias', and the Renaissance woman most intimately acquainted with them was Lucrezia Borgia herself, the iconic embodiment of that dangerous marriage of beauty and corruption that excited so much interest. The Borgias, and Lucrezia in particular, had entered the popular imagination with Gaetano Donizetti's 1833 opera *Lucrezia Borgia,* based on Victor Hugo's play of the same name, in which the villainess is portrayed, according to Vernon Lee, as 'a superhuman fury of lust and cruelty'.[14] Swinburne was 13, when he read Hugo's *Lucrèce Borgia*, and its heroine left a deep impression. Over a decade later, he began writing a remarkable prose romance about Lucrezia, 'my blessedest pet' as he called her, entitled *The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei: Renaissance Period*.[15] The first-person narrator of this 'chronicle' is Lucrezia's young pageboy. Tebaldeo adores his mistress, whose vices only enhance her beauty in his eyes, and whose seduction of him, 'the joy whereof devours us like a fierce and ravenous disease', is compounded of intense pleasure and pain.[16] Swinburne never finished *The Chronicle* (it was anyway too scandalous an account of the Renaissance period to have been publishable in the Victorian period), but he shared his passion for Lucrezia with his friend

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose visual interpretations of her myth attained more mainstream circulation.

If Pater's *Renaissance* was the acknowledged literary catalyst for British Decadence, Rossetti's elaborate, morally ambiguous images of Renaissance-inspired *femmes fatales* can be considered its visual counterpart. The arc of Rossetti's oeuvre encapsulates the complexity of Victorian attitudes towards Renaissance Italy. The artist whose early reputation was defined by his professed allegiance to the pure style and spiritual themes of *quattrocento* Florentine art, and by his identification with his namesake Dante Alighieri, had, by the 1860s, come enthusiastically to embrace High Renaissance subjects and sumptuous Venetian style. Rossetti was fascinated and repelled by the Borgia family and its legendary crimes. Lucrezia especially became an obsession to rival his fixation upon the more ethereal figure of Dante's Beatrice.

Rossetti's interest in Lucrezia may be traced back to the early 1850s when he painted his first image of the Borgias. Executed in a dramatically different style from the 'primitive' mode of early Pre-Raphaelitism, one that anticipates his later High Renaissance manner, *Borgia* (1851) depicts Lucrezia, lusciously attired and erotically posed, playing a lute, to the music of which her brother Cesare beats time with a knife against a wine glass while two children dance. Her father, the bloated Pope Alexander VI, leers incestuously over her bare shoulder. Inscribed on the back of the gouache are the words 'To caper nimbly in a lady's chamber to the lascivious pleasing of a lute'. Rossetti kept returning to the Borgias, particularly Lucrezia, over the next two decades, and his art, influenced stylistically by *quattrocentro* and

cinquecento painters whose work was still not widely known in Britain, helped shape the idea of the Renaissance in the Victorian imagination. In 1858-59, he produced a pen-and-ink drawing that, by the time William Butler Yeats received it as a 70th birthday gift in 1935, had the title *Cat's Cradle*, but Yeats immediately identified its subject as Lucrezia. 'The Rossetti delights me', he wrote to J.J.C. Grierson, 'because of its beauty and because of its subject. Lucretia Borgia has always filled me with wonder. The woman of infamous reputation described by Bayard as his ideal woman'.[17]

Figure 3.1 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lucrezia Borgia*, 1860-61

In 1860, Rossetti began work on another watercolour that portrays the beautiful, allegedly murderous Lucrezia indifferently washing her hands after poisoning her husband, Alfonso, Duke of Bisceglie. In the mirror behind her we see reflected her accomplice, her father, not as we first think helping the dying Duke, but walking him around to ensure the poison circulates, an image that chillingly underlines the horror of the crime. As Rossetti himself described it, 'You see him in the mirror, going on crutches, and walked up and down the room by Pope Alexander VI, to settle the dose of poison well into his system. Behind these figures is the bed, as they walk the room, and Lucrezia looks calmly towards them, washing her hands after mixing the poisoned wine and smiling to herself'.[18]

Rossetti's interest in the Borgias continued unabated into the 1860s. He painted a replica of the Borgia watercolour, titled *The Borgia Family*, in 1863, and he reproduced *Lucrezia* several times. She is the prototype for numerous other cruel *femmes fatales*, both his own and as imagined by contemporaries, such as fellow Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne-Jones, whose

Sidonia Von Bork 1560, painted in the same year, is clearly from the same mould as *Lucrezia*. It is a line that leads a few decades later to Aubrey Beardsley, famed for his work for the *Yellow Book* and his illustrations of Wilde's *Salome*, a woman much painted by Renaissance artists translated into a Decadent *femme fatale*. It was Burne-Jones who encouraged Beardsley to become a professional artist, and Italian Renaissance artists such as Mantegna, Pollaiuolo and Botticelli who first inspired him. Beardsley's drawing of Botticelli in 1893 seems to capture the convergence of Renaissance, Pre-Raphaelite and Decadent in his work. His rendition places the painter in *quattrocento* dress against a conventional Renaissance background. But the portrait is of an androgynous figure with the exaggerated features and perplexed dreamy stare into the middle distance of a Pre-Raphaelite painting. Only here it is tinged with the melancholy, 'cadaverous' qualities that Pater finds in Botticelli's own works, infused by a 'peculiar sentiment', 'comely, … but with a sense of displacement or loss about [him]'. It shares with Botticelli's paintings his signature mood, 'the wistfulness of exiles conscious of a passion and energy greater than any known issue of them explains', an 'ineffable melancholy'.[19]

Figure 3.2 Aubrey Beardsley, *Sandro Botticelli*, 1893

The cultural legacy that may be traced in other ways. Rossetti's *Borgia* was bought by *fin-de-siècle* artist Charles Shannon in 1897, and Rossetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* was owned by Shannon's life partner and Wilde's other great illustrator, Charles Ricketts. Devotees of Rossetti, these Decadent artists saw themselves as part of artistic traditions stretching back to the Renaissance. Ricketts' erotic book designs were likened to Italian

Renaissance woodcuts, and he wrote a book on Titian, while Shannon painted a portrait pair of his partner and himself after the manner of the Old Master.[20]

Figure 3.3 Charles Haslewood Shannon, *Charles Ricketts*, 1898

Figure 3.4 Charles Haslewood Shannon, *Self Portrait*, 1897

Ricketts liked Shannon's 1898 portrait of him because it shows him 'turning away from the 20th century to think only of the 15th'.[21] Moreover, Ricketts presented *Lucrezia Borgia* to the Tate Gallery in 1916 in memory of Henry Michael Field. 'Henry' Michael Field was Edith Cooper who, with her aunt and devoted partner Katherine Bradley, published poetry and verse drama under the name Michael Field over several decades, including a volume on Renaissance paintings, among them a picture said to be of Lucrezia Borgia.[22] Ricketts and Shannon were their close friends and publishers, and sometimes collaborated with them. Ricketts, for example, produced a vignette for Michael Field's anonymously published *Borgia: A Period Play* (1905), their own contribution to the Decadent re-imagining of the Borgia reign, which opens with Alexander VI plunging his hand into a coffer of pearls, and letting the pearls stream through his fingers. His opening words are 'All are for her! Each an epitome/Of her - the very skin of them her own,/Our Pearl, above all others'.[23]

II. 'Burn always with this hard, gem-like flame'

In a provocative critique of the new phenomenon of literary Decadence, published in 1892, Richard Le Gallienne disapprovingly observed that what identifies a work as Decadent is not 'a question of theme', even though

Renaissance subjects such as the Borgias evidently lent themselves to Decadent sensibilities. 'It is', he declared, 'in the character of the treatment that we must seek it'.[24] And it is to the wholly new character of the treatment of Renaissance Italy by writers such as Swinburne, Pater, Symonds, Vernon Lee and Michael Field that we must look in order to understand its appeal to late-nineteenth-century British Decadents. Swinburne recognized Pater's essay on Leonardo as being 'in the same line' as his own, and so what is it about the character of their treatment of his art that is distinctly Decadent?[25] Both men were drawn, from their different orientations, to the sexual ambiguity of Leonardo's figures of course. Pater singles out 'a face of doubtful sex, set in the shadow of its own hair, the cheek-line in highlight against it, with something voluptuous and full in the eyelids and lips'.[26] But he finds more than a sexual frisson in Leonardo's subjects. Like Swinburne, he strives to identify Leonardo's 'type of womanly beauty', but he also attempts to articulate how and why he is moved by these figures, the nature of the encounter, and what his role is as a critic: 'Nervous, electric, always with some inexplicable faintness, these people seem to be subject to exceptional conditions, to feel powers at work in the common air unfelt by others, to become, as it were, the receptacle of them, and pass them on to us in a chain of secret influences'.[27]

The art critic, according to such an account, becomes a medium for this mysterious transmission of powers, a role that demands a distinctive critical language and style. Germain d'Hangest finds that in both Pater and Swinburne 'a similar attitude toward art, which consists in approaching the works through their imaginative content, in looking within them for the source

of an ecstasy, in making the dream above all the major instrument of criticism, engenders a community of language, the same search for slow, stifled cadences, for narcotic effects'.[28] In his landmark essay 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893), Arthur Symons had identified and celebrated what was new, and Decadent, about Pater's prose style, qualities similarly observable in Swinburne's prose: 'how far away from the classic ideals of style is this style in which words have their colour, their music, their perfume, in which there is "some strangeness in the proportion" of every beauty!' These Renaissance studies, Symons declares, echoing Wilde's audacious proposal in 'The Critic as Artist' (1891), 'have made of criticism a new art – have raised criticism almost to the act of creation.'[29] Yeats, indeed, himself a young poet in the 1890s, was later to extract and re-cast Pater's ecstatic encounter with *La Gioconda* into free verse in 1936 to open his edition of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*.

Swinburne and Pater clearly shared what came to be identified as a Decadent register in their vocabulary, timbre and mode of address. And both writers developed their Decadent sensibility and voice through the medium of Renaissance culture, a Renaissance bent to their own purposes. Pater's injunction to 'burn always with this hard, gem-like flame' chimed with Swinburne's, published in the same year, to 'feel his soul burn as an altar-fire / To the unknown God of unachieved desire'.[30] But it was Pater who formulated a philosophy, and developed a more systematic method, to authorise his smouldering aesthetic. It was he who spelt out the implications for his own times of his vision of the Renaissance, 'that movement in which, in various ways, the human mind wins for itself a new kingdom of feeling and

sensation and thought, not opposed to', he insisted, 'but only beyond and independent of the spiritual system then actually realised'.[31]

Like Decadence itself, the Renaissance was, for Pater and his followers, not a historical moment but an ontological category. As Vernon Lee explained it in her first book on the Renaissance, *Euphorion* (1882), which she dedicated to Pater, the Renaissance is 'not a period, but a condition'; and 'if we apply the word to any period in particular, it is because in it that condition was peculiarly marked'.[32] This made it easier to explore the parallels between past and present, the dialectical relationship, specifically, between the Renaissance and modern Decadence. For us, wrote Pater,

> the Renaissance is the name of a many-sided but yet united movement, in which the love of the things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake, the desire for a more liberal and comely way of conceiving life, make themselves felt, prompting those who experience this desire to seek first one and then another means of intellectual or imaginative enjoyment, and directing them not merely to the discovery of old and forgotten sources of this enjoyment, but to divine new sources of it, new experiences, new subjects of poetry, new forms of art.[33]

By this light, the Renaissance was seamlessly connected with the contemporary world. One of the complaints in contemporary reviews of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* was that it anachronistically attributed modern sensibilities to artists such as Botticelli which were 'as alien to the spirit of a medieval Italian, as [they are] perfectly consistent with that of

a delicate Oxford don in the latter half of the nineteenth century'.[34] But, to invoke Benjamin, such sensibilities had only now become legible. According to Pater, the Renaissance was responsible for 'the initiatory idea', to be accomplished in the Enlightenment, 'or in our own generation'.[35] For Lee, it 'possessed the germs of every modern thing'.[36]

This perspective on the Renaissance reflects both Pater's and Lee's commitment to Impressionism, and to the prioritisation of an individual's subjective response – to art, to history, to experience itself. Lee's approach is driven by her own 'curiosity' and 'fancy'; 'I have … studied of this Renaissance civilization only as much or as little as I cared', she wrote.[37] She explicitly announces her Impressionist method in her introduction to *Euphorion*:

> The following studies … are mere impressions developed by means of study: not merely currents of thought and feeling which I have singled out from the multifold life of the Renaissance; but currents of thought and feeling in myself, which have found and swept along with them certain items of Renaissance lore. For the Renaissance has been to me, in the small measure in which it has been anything, not so much a series of studies as a series of impressions.[38]

But when Pater had declared his own method a decade earlier and, more, had graphically spelled out its implications in a 'Conclusion', he caused a sensation. He began, at a stroke, by audaciously turning the tables on the High Victorian orthodoxies of Ruskin and Matthew Arnold. 'To see the object as in itself it really is,' he declares, invoking Arnold's confidently objectivist

dictum, ‘has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever’; and, as if it follows rather than undermines this principle, he adds, ‘in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly’. This new emphasis on the personality and the temperament of the critic was to become a defining feature of Decadence. The crucial question, for Pater, is:

> What is this song, or picture, … to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree or pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence and under its influence? The answer to these questions are the original facts with which the aesthetic critic has to do; and, as in the study of light, of morals, of number, one must realise such primary data for oneself or not at all.

As for abstract questions, such as the relation of beauty to truth or experience, ‘He may pass them all by as being, answerable or not, of no interest to him’.[39]

It is hard to imagine how shocking this must have been to a generation brought up on Ruskin’s moralised aesthetic. Art, declared Pater, ‘comes to you frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake’.[40] Beauty is about the production of ‘pleasurable sensations’:

> and the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a

> fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced.

The ‘temperament’ of the critic is key, ‘the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects’, and what is described is an intimate, indeed an erotic encounter, that the art of the Renaissance, especially that of Michelangelo and Leonardo, seems particularly to suggest.[41]

Amidst the flux of modern life, in which all is relative, Pater writes in the ‘Conclusion’ to his *Studies*, we have a duty to respond to ‘its more exquisite intervals’ with ‘a sharp and eager observation’; for ‘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’, and ‘success in life’ is measured by our capacity ‘To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy’.[42] Although he decided to withdraw the ‘Conclusion’ from the second edition of *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, as it was re-titled in 1877, because, as he later explained, he ‘conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall’, it was too late.[43] The work had already cast its spell on some young men, and also some young women, who had grasped its potential for their own generation. As Wilde was to show in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, such views could readily become, in a corrupted form, the basis of an education in Decadence that was altogether uglier and more perverse than anything Pater envisaged. He himself preferred to reflect on the sensuous experience of ‘works of art’, which he could

approach with greater equanimity than the more unsettling ‘fairer forms of … human life’.[44]

But there was nothing timid about the way Pater wrote about the work of Renaissance artists who responded to the beauty of the human form. It is in a certain ‘penetrative suggestion of life’, he argued, that the secret of Michelangelo’s ‘sweetness and strength’ is to be found.

> Beneath the Platonic calm of the sonnets there is latent a deep delight in carnal form and colour. There, and still more in the madrigals, he often falls into the language of less tranquil affections; while some of them have the colour of penitence …. He who spoke so decisively of the supremacy in the imaginative world of the unveiled human form had not been always a mere Platonic lover.[45]

Pater identifies a different quality in Leonardo’s work, ‘a certain mystery … and something enigmatical beyond the usual measure of great men, that … fascinates, or perhaps half repels’, foreshadowing the alignment of delight and disgust in the Decadent imagination.[46] Leonardo indeed, he finds, ‘anticipated modern ideas’, and appeals to critics of a Decadent temperament, for ‘a lover of strange souls may still analyse for himself the impression made on him by those works’, which display ‘some interfusion of the extremes of beauty and terror’, a perversely ‘curious beauty’.[47] Of *The Medusa* in the Uffizi, which he misattributes to Leonardo but which may have been based on a lost original by his hand, Pater observes how ‘the fascination of corruption penetrates in every touch its exquisitely finished beauty’. ‘Leonardo’s nature’, he writes, ‘had a kind of spell in it’, and Pater was clearly under it, enthralled by the

artist's 'fascination', by his 'curiosity' and the intensity of his 'desire of beauty'.[48] He describes Leonardo's life as one of 'exquisite amusements … and brilliant sins', the traces of which Pater finds even in his religious paintings, such as *John the Baptist* in the Louvre, 'one of the few naked figures Leonardo ever painted – whose delicate brown flesh and woman's hair no man would go out into the wilderness to seek, and whose treacherous smile would have us understand something far beyond the outward gesture or circumstance.' In fact, Pater concludes, 'though he handles sacred subjects continually, he is the most profane of painters'.[49] Placed at the end of a volume of essays such as this, it is not altogether surprising that Pater's urgent recommendation to the aesthetic critic in the 'Conclusion' to 'grasp at any exquisite passion … or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange flowers, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend'[50] had such an incendiary effect upon his admirers and detractors alike.

III. 'The continual stir and motion of a comely human life'

Pater's countenance of the convergence of the sacred and the profane in Renaissance culture, and his blurring of the boundaries between art and life – both the Renaissance artist's and the modern critic's – created a new space and a new language for an aesthetic inflected by homoerotic desire. Renaissance sexuality was recognized by the *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic critic, and was in turn made legible for a modern age. Where some, as John Addington Symonds observed, found the conjunction of the pagan and the Christian in the high Renaissance 'repellent, who shrink from it as from Hermaphroditus', others, including Symonds himself (the author of a seven-volume history of the *Renaissance in Italy* as well as a biography of

Michelangelo), were fascinated by the hybridity of the Renaissance, which gave imaginative, and legitimate, access to the sexually liberating art of the ancient world.[51] They could engage with Greek culture, Greek love not least, as it was mediated by the Renaissance. This was, after all, a time when, as Symonds said, 'The old world and the new shook hands', or more graphically when 'Christianity and Hellenism kissed each other'.[52] Renaissance art gave access to ancient ways of regarding and representing the human body, and of accommodating carnal pleasures and illicit desires.

Pater chose to devote the final chapter of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* to the eighteenth-century German art historian and Hellenist Johann Joachim Winckelmann. He is explicit about his subject's sexuality, and the nature of his affinity with the Greek culture he studied from boyhood. Albeit 'remote in time and place', Winckelmann 'feels after the Hellenic world, divines the veins of ancient art, in which its life still circulates, and, like Scyles in the beautiful story of Herodotus, is irresistibly attracted by it'. He 'apprehends the subtlest principles of the Hellenic manner not through the understanding, but by instinct or touch'. At once a Hellenist and an aesthetic critic *avant la lettre*, Winckelmann's 'temperament' – so significant a term in Pater's lexicon and aesthetic practice – draws him to all things Greek:

> 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. He has known, he says, many young men more beautiful than Guido's archangel. These friendships, bringing him in contact with the pride of human form, and staining his thoughts with its bloom, perfected his reconciliation with the

> spirit of Greek sculpture.[53]

Among philosophers, Winckelmann felt an affinity only with Plato, not, Pater insists, as mediated by Christianity, but rather that aspect 'which is wholly Greek, and alien from the Christian world, represented by that group of brilliant youths in the Lysis, still uninfected by any spiritual sickness, finding the end of all endeavor in the aspects of the human form, the continual stir and motion of a comely human life'. Winckelmann himself, also 'wholly Greek', only became a Catholic, Pater mischievously suggests, in order to facilitate his access to the art of antiquity, first at the Catholic court of Dresden, and then in the Holy of Holies, the Vatican itself. [54]

The humanist recovery of ancient pagan culture, realized most perfectly in Greek figurative sculpture and its celebration of the human body, was of course sited at the very heart of Christendom, and the piquancy of this coincidence was not lost on Renaissance artists or their nineteenth-century interpreters. Raphael's decoration of the Stanze in the Vatican, where *The Disputation concerning the Blessed Sacrament* confronts *The Parnassus*, brilliantly emblematises Renaissance Rome as the meeting place of Greek and Catholic art. For Ruskin, these companion frescoes demonstrate a fatal clash of cultures, representing the disastrous turning point between 'art employed for the display of religious facts' and 'religious facts employed for the display of art':

> On one wall of that chamber he placed a picture of the World or Kingdom of Theology, presided over by Christ. And on the side wall of that same chamber he placed the World or Kingdom of Poetry,

> presided over by Apollo. And from that spot, and from that hour, the intellect and art of Italy date their degeneration.[55]

But where for Ruskin Raphael's decoration of the Stanze signified all that was degenerate about the Renaissance, for Pater, Symonds and Lee, Raphael's juxtaposition of the kingdoms of Christ and Apollo triumphantly brought together the Catholic and Classical traditions. Symonds, for example, believed that the singular achievement of the greatest Renaissance artists was that, having been raised and nurtured in an environment in which classical and Christian cultures were equally valued, they developed brilliantly inventive formal means by which to reconcile the seemingly contradictory values and belief systems they embraced. He accordingly found in these frescoes by Raphael, 'that embrace the whole of human knowledge', that 'the cramping limits of ecclesiastical tradition are transcended … A new catholicity, a new orthodoxy of the beautiful, appears. The Renaissance in all its breadth and liberality of judgement takes ideal form'. Nor, he adds 'is there any sense of discord; for the genius of Raphael views both revelations, Christian and pagan, from a point of view of art above them'.[56]

The idea of the discord between Greek and Christian impulses evoked here gestures, in a pre-sexological age, toward the male homosexual predicament, about which Symonds also wrote.[57] The ability of artists such as Raphael to rise above and resolve such discord gave hope for the future, and established the Renaissance as a model for the modern world. In fact, he declared that the nineteenth century was actually still in 'mid-Renaissance', for the 'evolution' of art and spirit set in train in the fourteenth century in Italy was yet to be truly fulfilled.[58] Symonds yearned for this fulfillment, and a

second coming of Greek love. He was intrigued by the creative ambiguities of the art and sexuality of the Renaissance masters, their capacity to yoke together seemingly antithetical cultures. As an example of how painting ‘opened the new era of culture’ in the Renaissance, and ‘first manifested the freedom of the modern mind’, Symonds refers to Signorelli’s *Madonna and Child* in the Uffizi. ‘When Luca Signorelli drew naked young men for a background to his picture of Madonna and the infant Christ’, he remarks, ‘he created for the student a symbol of the attitude assumed by fine art in its liberty of outlook over the whole range of human interests.’ Symonds conjures the impression of the observer as he looks at the painting’s audacious juxtaposition of Madonna, naked Christ child, and naked men: ‘Standing before this picture in the Ufizzi’, he continues, ‘we feel that the Church, while hoping to adorn her cherished dogmas with aesthetic beauty, had encouraged a power that liberated the spirit she sought to enthral, restoring to mankind the earthly paradise from which monasticism had expelled it.’ However, ‘When the worshipper would fain ascend on wings of ecstasy to God, the infinite, ineffable, unrealised, how can he endure the contact of those splendid forms, in which the lust of the eye and the pride of life, professing to subserve devotion, remind him rudely of the goodliness of sensual existence?’[59]

Symonds’ interests in the connections between aestheticism and homosexuality, and in Renaissance Italy as a site of erotic encounter, were shared by other late-nineteenth-century writers, including women such as Vernon Lee and Michael Field, who were part of his queer aesthetic milieu. Michael Field, for example, wrote erotically charged ekphrastic poems in which Renaissance paintings were a vehicle for the expression of same-sex

desire. Their poem on '*La Gioconda*', whose title deliberately recalls Pater, dwells on its subject's 'Historic, side-long, implicating eyes', her lips, and her breast', 'Where twilight touches ripeness amorously'. They wrote several poems about paintings of St Sebastian, already a gay icon, and they wrote about the female nude.[60] In their poem on Giorgione's *The Sleeping Venus*, Venus's body is lovingly described in terms of 'the verdant swell/ Of a soft country flanked with mountain domes' that provides the *mise-en-scène* of the painting. The Goddess of Love and Mother Earth are depicted as lying in a same-sex embrace:

> There is a sympathy between
> Her and Earth of largest reach,
> For the sex that forms them each
> Is a bond, a holiness,
> That unconsciously must bless
> And unite them, as they lie
> Shameless underneath the sky
> A long, opal cloud
> Doth in noontide haze enshroud.

Figure 3.5 Giorgione, *Sleeping Venus,* 1508-10

Like the Fields themselves, indeed in the very bosom of the fields, they are united by the bond of their sex. The body of the Goddess of Love is appreciatively described by the poet-lovers. She has fallen asleep after pleasuring herself, 'Her hand the thigh's tense surface leaves,/Falling inward:

> … Not even sleep
> Dare invalidate the deep,

Universal pleasure sex

Must unto itself annex –

Even the stillest sleep; at peace,

More profound with rest's increase,

She enjoys the good

Of delicious womanhood.[61]

In 1864 Swinburne had written in a private letter to Monkton Milnes about Titian's *Venus of Urbino* in similar terms: 'Sappho and Anactoria in one – four lazy fingers buried dans les fleurs de son jardin', adding ''How any creature can be decently virtuous within thirty square miles of it passes my comprehension'.[62] In this later poem, Michael Field, as the single male persona of two lesbian spectator/poets, offers a queer Decadent model of visual consumption. Under this masculine signature, Venus is appropriated by the desiring lesbian gaze as a deity for same-sex love.

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In the final volume of *Modern Painters* (1860), Ruskin concedes that Venetian Renaissance painters such as Giorgione and Tiitian saw that 'sensual passion in man was … a divine fact'. However, he declared himself 'perfectly certain no untouched Venetian picture ever yet excited one base thought'.[63] But, as we have seen, at the very time that Ruskin was bringing his monumental study to a conclusion, others – painters, poets, historians and critics – recognizing something in Renaissance art that spoke to them anew, and enabled them to articulate hitherto unspeakable things not only about Old Master paintings but also about themselves. The lines they traced from the

ancient Greeks, through Renaissance Rome via Winckelmann and Goethe to the nineteenth century, the connections they made with Leonardo, Michelangelo and Botticelli, were not conceived as chronological histories, but rather moments of recognition, intuitions of sympathy, that cast new light on modern conundrums and predicaments, and made space for new identities. Engaging with the Renaissance was, for Swinburne, Pater, Symonds, Rossetti, Beardsley, Vernon Lee, Michael Field and many other writers and artists at the *fin*, a way of comprehending their own Decadent moment.

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[1] Oscar Wilde, Review of Walter Pater's *Appreciations* (1889) for the *Speaker* (1890) in R.M. Seiler (ed.), *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* (London:
[2] See J.B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) and Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).
[3] See, for example, E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols. (London: George Allen 1903-12), IV, p.xxxii; V, pp.57, 77, 82; XII, pp.148-50; XII, p.83.
[4] Alexis-François Rio, *The Poetry of Christian Art*, tr. by a Lady [Miss Wells] (London: T. Bosworth,1854), p.76.
[5] Ruskin also changed his views on Renaissance art. See Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, pp. 256-61. For the Pre-Raphaelites as a visual context for Pater's *Renaissance* see Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Modern Painters, Old Masters: The Art of Imitation from the Pre-Raphaelites to the First World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).
[6] Vernon Lee [Violet Paget], *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance*, 2 vols. (London: R. Fisher Unwin, 1884), 1, p.15.
[7] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, tr. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp.462-63.
[8] See Lene Østermark-Johansen, 'Swinburne's Serpentine Delights: The Aesthetic Critic and the Old Master Drawings in Florence', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 24:1 (2002), 49-72, and Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, pp. 265-70.
[9] Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence' in *Essays and Studies* (2nd edn, London: Chatto and Windus, 1876), pp.314-57, p. 316.
[10] As Swinburne and Rossetti both observed and Pater himself acknowledged. See *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 2, p. 58 (to D.G. Rossetti, November 28, 1869); and 2, pp. 240-41 (to John Morley, April 11, 1873).
[11] Swinburne, 'Notes on Designs', pp.319-20.

[12] Swinburne, 'Notes on Designs', p.317.
[13] Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 70.
[14] Lee, *Euphorion*, 1, p.99.
[15] *Swinburne Letters*, 1, p.39 (to Lady Trevelyan, January 1861). See Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, pp.255-56, 262-4.
[16] Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Lucretia Borgia: The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldi: Renaissance Period*, ed. Randolph Hughes (London, 1942), p.49.
[17] *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: 1954), p.837 (to J.J.C. Grierson, 7 July, 1935).
[18] *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William E. Fredeman, vol. 5 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), p.24, 71.20 (to Charles Augustus Howell, 3 February, 1871).
[19] Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp.33, 31-32.
[20] See J. W. Gleeson White, 'The Work of Charles Ricketts'. *The Pageant* (1896), 79-93; and 'At the Sign of the Dial: Mr. Ricketts As a Book Builder', *Magazine of Art* (April, 1897), 304-9; and Charles Ricketts, *Titian* (London: Methuen, 1910).
[21] Letters from Charles Ricketts to Michael Field, 16 and 30 Nov. 1898; quoted in Joseph Darracott, *The World of Charles Ricketts* (New York: Methuen, 1980), pp.22–3.
[22] Michael Field, *Sight and Song* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892). See 'A Portrait, by Bartolommeo Veneto', pp.27-30.
[23] [Michael Field], *Borgia: A Period Play* (London: A.H. Bullen, 1905), p. 1.
[24] Richard Le Gallienne, 'Considerations Suggested by Churton Collins' *Illustrations of Tennyson*' (*Century Guild Hobby Horse* 1892), reprinted in *Retrospective Reviews: A Literary Log*, 2 vols. (London: J. Lane, 1896) 1, pp.19-28, p.24.
[25] *Swinburne Letters*, 2, 241 (April 11, 1873, to John Morley).
[26] Pater, *The Renaissance*, p.65.
[27] Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp.65, 66.
[28] Germain d'Hangest, *Walter Pater: l'homme et l'oeuvre*, 2 vols. (Paris: Didier, 1961), 1, 356, n.57.
[29] Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harpers Monthly* (November, 1893), 858-68, pp. 866-67.
[30] Pater, *The Renaissance*, p.120; 'Sonnet (with a Copy of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*)', ll.10-11, in Algernon Charles Swinburne: Major Poems and Selected Prose, eds. Jerome J. McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 170.
[31] This passage is from 'Two Early French Stories', the enlarged and renamed version of 'Aucassin and Nicolette' that appeared in the 2nd (1877) and subsequent editions of *The Renaissance*. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry. The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p.5.
[32] Lee, *Euphorion*, vol. 1, p.30.
[33] Pater, *The Renaissance*, p.9.
[34] [Margaret Oliphant], unsigned review, *Blackwood's Magazine*, 114 (1873), 604-09.
[35] Pater, *The Renaissance*, p.19.

[36] Lee, *Euphorion*, 1, p. 46.
[37] Lee, *Euphorion,* 1, pp. 8-9.
[38] Lee, *Euphorion*, 1, p.16.
[39] Pater, *The Renaissance*, p.3.
[40] Pater, *The Renaissance*, p.121.
[41] Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 4.
[42] Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp. 119-20.
[43] Pater, *The Renaissance*, p.177.
[44] Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 4.
[45] Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp. 43, 41, 45.
[46] Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 56. See David Weir's discussion of the Decadent 'taste for the distasteful' in 'Afterword: Decadent Taste', *Decadence and the Senses*, eds. Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 219-28.
[47] Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp. 56, 57, 59.
[48] Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp. 60, 61, 62.
[49] Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp. 62, 67.
[50] Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 120.
[51] John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: The Fine Arts* (London: Smith, Elder, 1905), p.25.
[52] Symonds, *Fine Arts*, pp. 62, 78.
[53] Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp.97-98, 95, 93-94.
[54] Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp.88-89, 91-92.
[55] Ruskin, *Works*, 12, p.150.
[56] Symonds, *Fine Arts*, p. 243.
[57] See Hilary Fraser, '"Always reminding us of the body": J. A. Symonds on the Fine Arts', *English Studies* (2013), 1-18.
[58] John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: The Age of the Despots* (London: Smith, Elder, 1875), p.1.
[59] Symonds, *Fine Arts*, pp.17-19.
[60] Field, *Sight and Song*, pp. 8, 32-33, 69-74.
[61] Field, *Sight and Song*, pp.98-105.
[62] *Swinburne Letters*, 1, 99 (March 1864). Quoted in Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, pp.260-61.
[63] Ruskin, *Works*, 7, p.297. Quoted in Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance*, p. 260.