

“Stirring a long “brain-wave” behind it of perhaps quite alien associations”: The paradoxical afterlife of Walter Pater’s “consummate” words

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For to the grave reader words too are grave; and the ornamental word, the figure, the accessory form or colour or reference, is rarely content to die to thought precisely at the right moment, but will inevitably linger awhile, stirring a long “brain-wave” behind it of perhaps quite alien association. (Pater, “Style”, 1910, 18)

In his essay “Style” of 1887, Pater exposes the function of his poetics by insisting on a sculptural metaphor that recurs in his writings: the adjective “grave” evokes a multifariousness of associations, and among them the idea of carving, sculpting, engraving or impressing. Carving the word amounts to elaborating the language that could best express thought indissolubly linked with style, content allied with form. Pater recurrently envisages writing as a carving process and sculpture as “a metaphor for literary style”¹. In her latest monograph on Pater, Østermark-Johansen has associated the process of carving the word to the relief or *rilievo* as it best expresses the idea of the unity between form and content.² The carefully wrought-out word is indeed relieved and protrudes from the sentence.

Wavering between the linear and the fragmented, his writing is often remarked for the attention he gives to the carefully wrought-out unit – be it the page, the sentence, or the word. The unit is given much attention so as to provide maximum unity:

“The one word for the one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words, terms, that might just do: the problem of style was there! – the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay, or song, absolutely proper to the single mental presentation or vision within.” (Pater 1910, 29)

In the multitude of his words and terms, a number of them seem particularly notable for their poetical resonances and their semantic potential. This perhaps explains why they came to have lives of their own and to re-emerge in contemporary texts. For there is a “life” in Pater’s words, to use the terms used by Hilary Edwards in her article on “the ‘life’ of Pater’s

¹ Østermark-Johansen, 10. For the metaphor of writing as carving in Pater, see her chapter on “Style and the Language of Sculpture” in her *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture*, 277-331.

² “Pater is concerned with unity at several levels: with the unity of the mind, of the individual word – the Flaubertian *mot juste* – with the unity between form and content, and with the unity of composition. Through a figurative language derived from the art of sculpting [...] Pater creates an image of his scholar-writer whose ideal is ‘the sentence, born with the integrity of a single word, relieving the sort of sentence in which, if you look closely, you can see much contrivance, much adjustment, to bring a highly qualified matter into compass at one view.’” Østermark-Johansen 104; she quotes from Pater’s “Style,” Pater 1910, 23.

sentences” (Edwards 11). Pater’s mode of writing is characterized by a dialectic between, on the one hand, the attention given to highly evocative words, as he paid particular attention to sound, form, meaning and denotative or connotative value; and on the other hand, the careful consideration with which he constructed his elaborate, complex and flowing sentences. Pater is thus poised between two dynamics – building an effective syntax that reflects flux, and chiselling words that are arresting.

This essay aims at showing how one such word, “consummate,” came to have an afterlife of its own. That word is indeed replete with meaning. It refers to perfection and beauty, which to Pater mostly signifies masculine beauty; and it also evokes the idea of consumption, such as the seizing of the moment, physical and sensual consuming, while having the sense of spending and ending. Pater himself gives prominence to the word by (repeatedly) circulating it in his own texts, which are therefore characterised by a structure of internal echoes. Yet, beyond this internal circulation, another process is at work, in which Pater’s word “consummate” is absorbed by other discourses. It resurfaces in contemporary parodies of the Aesthetic Movement, which Pater influenced, especially through the mediating role played by Oscar Wilde, whose writings are sometimes pastiches of Pater’s prose style. But what is paradoxical is that, in the afterlife of the word “consummate,” Pater was often forgotten as the originator for its popularity. The word which perfectly crystallizes not only Pater’s ideas and style and which came to epitomize a whole cultural movement in the nineteenth century became more associated with Pater’s disciples than with Pater himself.

In “Style,” Pater claims that “the true artist” has to be fully aware of the power of words, and he gives much importance to them, both for semantic and aesthetic reasons:

A lover of words for their own sake, to whom nothing about them is unimportant, a minute and constant observer of their physiognomy, he will be on the alert not only for obviously mixed metaphors of course, but for the metaphor that is mixed in all our speech, though a rapid use may involve no cognition of it. Currently recognising the incident, the colour, the physical elements or particles in words like *absorb*, *consider*, *extract*, to take the first that occur, he will avail himself of them, as further adding to the resources of expression. (Pater 1910, 20)

Pater, then, particularly insists on the metaphoric dimension of words. The allusion to their “colour” and their “physical elements” evokes pictorial as well as corporeal dimensions. But his reference to the “particles in words” is striking in that it seems to announce the afterlife of his own words, which act like floating particles that other authors were to *consider*, *extract* and *absorb*, to use his italicized trio, precisely because they evoke “mixed metaphors” and are replete with the associations he highly values. Following a process that is similar to the “brain-wave” Pater alludes to in “Style,” some typically “Paterian” words do indeed “linger”

and circulate, mostly because they perfectly encapsulated his ideas in such a stylistic manner. Pater carefully chooses terms that best express his poetics of intensity, words that display an “ornamental” quality that carries the potential of “alien associations.” Most prominent in his works are words like “precious,” “perfect,” “utter” or “consummate,” which are part of a whole lexical network that points to beauty, perfection, and the ideal moment. Among of Pater’s choicest words, the highly poetical term “consummate” denotes perfection and most fittingly expresses Pater’s “gem-like flame” rhetoric. Indeed, it connotes ideas of consummation or consumption since it is close in sound to the verbs “consummate” and “consume.” The word, therefore, reverberates with associations like perfecting, but also spending, completing, or even being consumed or burnt up.

In the *Renaissance* volume, the adjective “consummate” is thus recurrently used to evoke the poetics of the perfect moment. It is used to describe a particularly accomplished form of art, or the artist’s skill, or the prominent cultural role played by a historical figure. In his “Winckelmann” essay for example, Winckelmann is described in terms of personal and intellectual accomplishment, as he is characterized as “an abstract type of culture, consummate, tranquil, withdrawn already into the region of ideals” (Pater 1980, 141). Pater then reinforces this point by drawing on Goethe’s discourse on Winckelmann, and he again uses the same word: Winckelmann “appears before us consummate and entire, complete in the ancient sense.” (Pater 1980, 148) Pater’s accumulation of complementary adjectives shows that he meticulously weighed the perfect word, aggregating synonyms to it for rhetorical reasons, so as to reinforce the semantic import. But he also plays on the connotations of the adjective: “[t]o the criticism of that consummate Greek modelling he brought not only his culture but his temperament.” (Pater 1980, 175) The word encapsulates the perfection of Greek culture and yet it also resonates with evocations of physical appreciation and even of consummation – with all the sexual as well as tragic connotations that the term implies. Pater recurrently claims that Winckelmann’s new mode of criticism is largely founded on the sense of sight and touch (he is described as fingering the Greek statues of male athletes). Besides, he refers to Winckelmann’s personal and aesthetic quest in terms of an inner fire as “his enthusiasm burns like lava” (Pater 1980, 148), which seems to exemplify Pater’s injunction in the Conclusion to “burn always with this hard, gem-like flame” (Pater 1980, 189). However, his feverish quest for the Greek ideal embodied in the beautiful male body – sculpted or living – ends up tragically, and Winckelmann’s life is to be consumed: he is throttled by a man with an angelic name (Arcangeli) and Pater suggests that

his death is the logical fate for a man who was animated by a forbidden ideal and who was heartened by an intense platonic fever³.

In another essay, “The School of Giorgione” (1877), Pater again makes a lavish use of the adjective “consummate,” mostly to refer to the idea of artistic completion. It recurs in one of his oft-quoted pronouncements on music: “all the arts in common aspiring towards the principle of music; music being the typical, or ideally consummate art” (Pater 1980, 105-6). The adjective also repeatedly expresses the idea of perfect art:

It is the art of music which most completely realises this artistic ideal, this perfect identification of matter and form. In its ideal, consummate moments, the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter, the subject from the expression [...]. In music, then, rather than poetry, is to be found the true type or measure of consummate art.”⁴

The word then reappears to epitomize the poetics of the epiphanic moment: “[s]uch ideal instants the school of Giorgione selects [...] – exquisite pauses in time, [...] which are like some consummate extract or quintessence of life” (Pater 1980, 118) Pater conflates the theme of chemistry with the poetics of the instant: the word “consummate” is here associated both with quintessence and with elementary or alchemical completion – an idea that is in keeping with the “gem-like flame” rhetoric of the Conclusion (Pater 1980, 189). Pater’s predilection for that term, then, really makes it one of those “grave” words that, as he claims it in “Style,” were so important. For it is introduced in the “Preface”, wherein it refers to a general cultural, intellectual and artistic moment, those “ethical qualities of which [the fifteenth century] is a consummate type” (Pater 1980, xxiii). Here Pater points to the central position of the body and [physical] senses in culture, and when he repeats this idea in his chapter on Michelangelo, he again uses the adjective to describe Michelangelo as “the consummate representative of the form that sentiment took in the fifteenth century with men like Luca Signorelli and Mino da Fiesole” (Pater 1980, 71). That word, therefore, perfectly synthesizes his ideas and crystallizes a whole cluster of meaningful particles.

The aesthetic and ethical discourse woven in *The Renaissance* finds an afterlife in later Victorian texts. Words are extracted from his complex syntax and are circulated in other contemporary discourses. Pater’s influence is evident in Frederic Leighton’s *Address delivered to the students of the Royal Academy* of December 1879. Leighton, who was then President of the Royal Academy, rouses those doubting students who “have not been burnt up like idle straw in the flame of their youthful energies” (Leighton 32) to muster their energies

³ Pater indeed adds: “It seemed as if the gods, in reward for his devotion to them, had given him a death which, for its swiftness and its opportunity, he might well have desired.” Pater 1980, 156.

⁴ This is the 1877 version, which Hill provides in his textual notes; see Pater 1980, 109 and note, 238.

and study the works of the great artists. Deploying a rhetoric which draws on Pater's Conclusion, though bending it to his own viewpoint, Leighton exhorts his students: "have faith that the stirrings which you feel within you are not the last spent waves of a retreating tide, but the pulses of a living force, now indeed fuller and now more feeble [...] catch what you may of the fire that was in them; walk in their light, enrich and enlarge your powers by the knowledge and understanding of the means by which they move us." (Leighton 32-33) Leighton then uses the word "consummate" several times in his addresses, retaining some of the same connotations Pater confers to the word. More precisely, what is central is the blending of perfection and passion, as when Leighton describes Correggio, who combines "a true artistic passion with the most consummate knowledge" (Leighton 50). On the other hand, French sculptors never "reached those summits in which the loftiest imaginative quality is married to consummate artistic power" (Leighton 220). Leighton's prose is an example among others of the "brainwaves" created by Pater's words. "Consummate" is a particularly important word for its conflating notions of physical and sensual beauty as well as of artistic and intellectual perfection. In the general Aesthetic movement in which Pater was to play an important role, these ideas were prominent.

The most prominent figure who contributed to replicate the Paterian "brain-wave" that was to merge in the general current of Aestheticism was Oscar Wilde. Wilde often inserted isolated or whole passages extracted from Pater in his early notebooks, his lectures on art, or his later literary works. Wilde, in fact, acted as a sort of mediator between Pater and the later satirists who humorously exploited the adjective "consummate." Wilde was sensitive to the superlative mode of Pater's rhetoric of intensity, which he took up with much fascination, humour, or irony. A telling example is the 1890 essay on "The true function and value of criticism" of 1890, in which Wilde quotes entire excerpts from Pater's description of the *Mona Lisa* in his chapter on Leonardo da Vinci. That such long quotations placed in inverted commas should be interspersed within his own sentences testify to his wish to emulate his mentor, albeit with irony. Indeed, that process becomes even more obvious in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with its numerous paradigmatic examples of Wilde's Lord Henry uttering entire passages imitated from Pater's Conclusion. However, his dandyish witticisms are highly paradoxical as their real import may be questioned. This is probably why Pater himself wondered whether Lord Henry might not be "a satirical sketch" when he reviewed Wilde's novel (Pater 1891, 59). For Pater's calls to intensify experience in the Conclusion are almost faithfully replicated in Lord Henry's aphorisms and yet they sound like hedonistic catchphrases as well as commercial slogans, as when he exclaims: "The aim of life is self-

development. To realize one's nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for.” (Wilde 2006, 18) These injunctions, which yet find an ambivalent commentary in the ending of the novel, are echoed by another passionate call to Dorian: “Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations.” (Wilde 2006, 22) Having absorbed Pater's style and words, Wilde publicized the aesthetic discourse and its rhetoric of intensity that had been largely shaped up by the retiring Pater. Most satires of Aestheticism of the late 1870s and early 1880s, therefore, logically took Wilde as their main target and, in so doing, a curious twist is that they chose the term “consummate” as the term that could best typify not only Wilde's personality but also the whole cultural trend that was associated with him.

For the word “consummate” recurs in many contemporary satirical writings or iconotexts, becoming the arch-adjective of Aestheticism. Fully aware of its echoes, satirists poke fun at the polarized notions, on the one hand, of preposterously seizing the intense moment within the ephemeral Heraclitean flux and, on the other hand, of subsiding too soon to a life of enervation and exhaustion. This polarity is present in George Du Maurier's famous caricature “The Six-Mark Teapot” published for *Punch* in 1880. It depicts an *Aesthetic Bridegroom* who clearly has Wilde's features and who raptures over a teapot: “It is quite consummate, is it not?” His “Intense Bride” answers: “It is, indeed! Oh, Algernon, let us live up to it!”⁵ The recuperation is both visual and textual: both characters evoke well-known images of the time (photographs of Wilde and iconic paintings of Jane Morris) and the exchange is an echo of Wilde's well-known remark when still an undergraduate at Oxford – “Oh, would that I could live up to my blue china!”⁶ Wilde's sentence already conflated Pater's exhortations to seize pulsations with the aesthetic taste for *japonaiseries*. But Du Maurier extends the satire by drawing upon a word that had been particularly meaningful in Pater's work.

Du Maurier's cartoon literally triggered a proliferation of parodies focusing on the word “consummate.” It became a favourite word in *Punch*. Du Maurier provides an adverbial variant to the word in another cartoon in 1880, in which a lady asks if the party which Sopley, an anaemic and feminized aesthete, attended was “pleasant” – to which he answers “Most consummately so!” (“Nincompooniana” 243). Du Maurier contributed to another series of highly gendered caricatures of Wilde, among which “Fleurs des Alpes, or, Postlethwaite's last

⁵ George Du Maurier (1834-1896), “The Six-Mark Teapot,” *Punch*, October 30, 1880, 194: <http://punch.photoshelter.com/image/I0000s3epJ2mVwsc> (accessed Nov. 2013).

⁶ See Hamilton 99-100.

love” (a visual pendant to his “A Love-Agony, design by Maudle” of June 5, 1880), which shows Wilde as an effeminate young man reclining dejectedly, an edelweiss at hand. Postlethwaite explains that he misses the much-cherished company of two friends – a man and a woman whom he places on the same pedestal but whom he differentiates by stating that “*She* is Supremely consummate – whereas *He* is Consummately Supreme,” while his two friends believe that he too combines “Supreme Consummateness with Consummate Supremacy.” (“Fleurs des Alpes” 293) This cartoon obviously derides the rhetoric of intensity as well as deviant sexual mores. In 1881, a comical review of Wilde’s first volume of poems mentions that “the cover is consummate, the paper is distinctly precious, the binding beautiful and the type is utterly too.” (*Punch* 1881, 117) A few pages later, a humorous poem describing Wilde’s visit to the Grosvenor Gallery provided an adverbial variant to the word: “He’s quite too consummately utter, / as well as too utterly quite.” (*Punch* 1881, 218) “Consummate” and its synonym, “utter,” came to characterize the category which these parodies constructed and ridiculed. In another caricature, Du Maurier stages another character based on Wilde, named Maudle, who exclaims: “How *consummately* lovely your son is, Mrs. Brown!”⁷ This obviously alludes to the numerous connotations of the word, as the theme of the beautiful male object’s perfection collides with that of consummation. The parodic derivations of the adjective establishes a clear link with the rhetoric of perfection and intensity that be traced back to Pater’s aesthetics, which places the male figure at its centre.

Other such parodies proliferated. Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Patience*, which opened in October 1881 at the new Savoy Theatre, teems with a similar vocabulary. One “Aesthetic” girl, Angela, tells another “gem-like” character (taking up Pater’s image of the precious stone): “Oh, Saphir – see – see! The immortal fire has descended on them, and they are of the Inner Brotherhood – perceptively intense and consummately utter.”⁸ The whole operetta comically plays on a similar absorption of the supposed lexicon of Aestheticism. Likewise, the first act of another farce, *The Colonel* by F. C. Burnand (1881), opens with a pastiche that also humorously takes up the vocabulary of Aestheticism and its role of a commercial enterprise. One character, Streyke, exclaims: “The object which the Aesthetic High Art Company, Limited, has in view is the cultivation of The Ideal as the consummate embodiment of The Real, and to proclaim aloud to a dull, material world the worship of the Lily and the Peacock Feather” – to which other members of the cast answer: “Perfect! Too precious!!

⁷ “Maudle on the Choice of a Profession,” *Punch* February 12, 1881, 12.

⁸ *Patience, or Bunthorne’s Pride*, written by W. S. Gilbert, composed by Arthur Sullivan, 1881, Act II, See the libretto on the Gilbert and Sullivan archive, 28: <http://diamond.boisestate.edu/gas/patience/patienclib.pdf> (accessed Nov. 2013).

Consummate!”⁹ The word, used either in its adjectival or adverbial form, has now acquired a musical quality. It also appears in various music sheets illustrated by Alfred Concanen. In “*My Aesthetic Love*” (1881), the caption reads: “My Aesthetic Love, Or utterly utter” / “consummate too too.” This is then echoed by the refrain: “She’s utterly utter consummate too too! / And feeds on the lily and old china blue, / And with a sunflower she’ll sit for an hour, / She’s utterly utter consummate too too.”¹⁰ Like Pater’s “particle,” the word “consummate” has circulated and aggregated other words either derived from or synonymous with it. That such poetics of the “consummate” should have been parodied reflects the perceived anxieties it generated.

Central to Pater’s conception of language and style is a chiselling work – a refining process in which the word is carefully chosen to best express thought and texture. He defends Flaubert’s notion of *le mot juste*, which he translates as “the *unique* word” (Pater 1910, 29), and a style that shuns the “otiose, the facile, surplusage” (Pater 1910, 21). Such a pursuit is at the core of literary creation. It becomes the condition for the “beauty of literature, the possibility of which constitutes it a fine art” (Pater 1910, 30).¹¹ At stake in Pater’s poetics is the idea that the carved word – which protrudes, relief-like, from out of the background of the text – is replete with meanings and associations that do linger. What is propounded, then, is a notion of language and style that seems at the opposite of the “brain-wave” process that characterizes the word “consummate.” Getting hold of “the *unique* word” is indeed contradictory with the idea of the word as a disseminating “particle.” Exactly as Østermark-Johansen notes, in the “basic schism” between “Pater’s subtractive ideals, based on the removal of surplusage,” and “his additive practice” (Østermark-Johansen, 276), one may see another fruitful paradox, as his carved words escape the background of the sentence and become floating particles. The “removal of surplusage” effected by Pater seems to go against the very semantic and connotative richness of some of his words, which was such that these words were subsequently taken up and circulated.

Pater’s reflection on language is complex, for he does acknowledge the various meanings,

⁹ *The Colonel*, Comedy in 3 Acts (founded on “Le Mari à la Campagne”), written by F. C. Burnand, Act I. See: <http://www.xix-e.pierre-marteau.com/ed/colonel/text.html> (accessed Nov. 2013).

¹⁰ “My Aesthetic Love or Utterly Utter, Consummate Too Too,” written by T. S. Lonsdale and composed by W. T. Eaton, full-page coloured title by Alfred Concanen, printed by Stannard and Son, 1881. See: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/8320> (accessed Nov. 2013).

¹¹ This process does not only concern the writer, as Pater claims that “all art does but consist in in the removal of surplusage, from the last finish of the gem-engraver blowing away the last particle of invisible dust, back to the earliest divination of the finished work to be, lying somewhere, according to Michaelangelo’s fancy, in the rough-hewn block of stone.” Pater 1910, 18-19.

values, and textures of a word:

Still opposing the constant degradation of language by those who use it carelessly, [the lover of words] will not treat coloured glass as if it were clear; and while half the world is using figure unconsciously, will be fully aware not only of all that latent figurative texture in speech, but of the vague, lazy, half-formed personification – a rhetoric, depressing, and worse than nothing, because it has no really rhetorical motive – which plays so large a part there, and, as in the case of more ostentatious ornament, scrupulously exact of it, from syllable to syllable, its precise value. (Pater 1910, 20-21)

Pater recognizes the possibility that a word may have colour as much as clearness, while insisting on the writer's task to extract a specific value.

In his essay on Style, Pater offers a highly refined reflexion on the power of words and of particular linguistic processes. But despite the image of the carving, his poetics also gives much value to what is fugitive, floating, or impressionistic. His words escape the carving process, free themselves from his intricate syntax and even become alienated from his complex thought. They came to have a life of themselves, sometimes even turning into those “half-formed personifications” which he underrates here. The word “consummate” was indeed associated with the enervated and consumptive figure of the Aesthete, thereby conforming to the “depressing rhetoric” he condemns. Such a word has become an autonomous reverberation that still retains clearly identifiable echoes of his poetics of intensity. There is, thereby, a “life” of Pater's carefully chosen words, individual words which become like “forces parting sooner or later on their ways,” to take up his terms in the Conclusion (Pater 1980, 187). Yet sometimes the source of these forces has been forgotten. Such was Walter Pater's paradoxical success.

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