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Pater's Aesthetic Poet: The Appropriation of Rossetti from Ruskin

On March 5, 1883 Walter Pater wrote to Thomas Ward, who had invited him to contribute an introductory essay about Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry to his anthology *The English Poets: Selections*, in the following terms:

Many thanks for your letter, which I have been unable to answer before. I think I shall be able to do what you propose for your new edition, but can't feel quite certain for a day or two. . . .¹

Four days after Pater wrote this letter John Ruskin inaugurated his second and final period of tenure as the Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford with a lecture about "Realistic Schools of Painting: D. G. Rossetti and W. Holman Hunt" which was followed two months later with another which discussed Rossetti entitled "Mythic Schools of Painting; E. Burne-Jones and G. F. Watts." Is it possible that Pater was waiting to hear what Ruskin had to say about the recently dead Rossetti before committing himself to paper?

It is a commonplace of Pater studies that apart from Matthew Arnold the major English influence on Pater's writing was Ruskin, who according to Arthur Benson, Pater had "read as a boy of nineteen."² Several modern commentators argue that with a characteristic indirectness Pater's writings often implicitly subvert Ruskin's: Harold Bloom claims that "Pater's context begins with his only begetter, Ruskin, whose effect can be read, frequently through negations, throughout Pater's work"; Barrie Bullen argues that "Pater's rather oblique approach to Michaelangelo . . . suggests that he might

have had Ruskin in mind"; and Richard Ellmann believes that although *The Renaissance* "doesn't mention Ruskin by name" it "uses him throughout as an adversary."³

These commentators' view that Pater's writings are frequently covertly subversive of Ruskin's is supported by the few direct comments Pater made about him. Benson reports Pater as saying: "I cannot believe that Ruskin saw more in the church of St. Mark than I do" (Benson 185) and in November 1881 Pater told Henry Nicholl that his essay about Botticelli was "the first notice in English of that old painter" preceding "Mr. Ruskin's lectures on the subject by I believe two years" (*LWP* 41). That Pater became increasingly conscious of Ruskin as a lecturer in the 1880s is also evident from the fact that early in 1885 he allowed his name to be put forward, unsuccessfully, for the post of Slade Professor of Art when Ruskin resigned.

If Pater was particularly aware of his rival Ruskin at this time then there are two reasons why he would have found the Pre-Raphaelite poet-painter Rossetti both a congenial subject in himself and of considerable value in his continuing cold war with Ruskin. In the first place, many of Pater's earlier writings comment favourably upon Rossetti's work or echo his poetry. Secondly, because Ruskin's 1883 *Art of England* lectures effectively disown Rossetti as a painter they allow Pater to appropriate him from his earliest champion and to rewrite the history of Pre-Raphaelites as an aesthetic literary movement rather than a school of Ruskinian painters, by implication exposing Ruskin's *volte-face* about Rossetti.