

Pater, Morris, and
"Aesthetic Poetry"

Walter Pater's fourth published essay was "Poems by William Morris," which appeared anonymously in 1868.¹ It was a review of The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems, The Earthly Paradise, and The Life and Death of Jason. Pater later included the essay, with changes, in the first edition of Appreciations (1889), under the title "Aesthetic Poetry," but dropped it from the second edition (1890), and it was not included in his collected works.² Until 1940, lists of Pater's work placed its composition between "Winckelmann" and the "Conclusion" to Studies in the History of the Renaissance; but, in reality, the famous "Conclusion" was originally the final section of the Morris review. That Pater omitted the "Conclusion" from the second edition of The Renaissance is well-known; perhaps the common origin of the two also led him to remove "Aesthetic Poetry" from Appreciations. Certainly, his later views and practice of criticism differed from those in the essay on Morris' work. The essay has been largely neglected by Pater scholars, but it is significant because of its relationship to the "Conclusion," its being a prime illustration of Pater's early concept of criticism, and its being his first essay on the works of a Victorian contemporary. An examination of Pater's relationship to Pre-Raphaelitism, his early theories of criticism, and the essay itself provides understanding of this example of, to use René Wellek's phrase, Pater's "metaphorical method of criticism."³

Pater entered Queen's College, Oxford, in 1858. Matthew Arnold was Professor of Poetry; Rossetti, Morris, and their friends had just completed the frescoes in the Oxford Union; Morris's Defence of Guenevere was published that year; and Swinburne was an undergraduate at Balliol College. Pater had already read Ruskin while at Canterbury School. These names and activities give some indication of the artistic and literary mood at Oxford and of the influences working upon the young Pater. However, there seems to have been little personal contact between him and the Pre-Raphaelites at this time, even though both he and Swinburne were members of the Old Mortality Society at Oxford. When he became a fellow of Brasenose College in 1864, he did become friendly with Swinburne, "but his shyness and his seclusion in Oxford prevented him from entering the