

LIONEL JOHNSON AND CHARING CROSS

Francis O’Gorman

Walter Pater is a founding figure, if not a straightforward one, of a decade he did not fully know – the 1890s. His acute sense of the complex rewards of art, including sculpture, and his efforts to be exact about discriminating his response to them, broadly energized and was reinterpreted by a group of writers who found in aesthetic form exquisite pleasures – Oscar Wilde most memorably. To assert this is neither contentious nor original. But I want to be more exact about – exactness. The author of *The Renaissance* (1873) was attentive to the challenges of putting into words what an art object meant to an observer, what it felt like, what impressions it created. The fine realization of those impressions was a kind of art itself. Matthew Arnold had said that it was necessary, Pater observed in the Preface to *The Renaissance*, to “see the object as in itself it really is” (viii). But this principle, Pater continued, had now to be supplemented. In “aesthetic criticism,” he remarked memorably, “the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly” (viii).

I take this idea seriously insofar as it relates to a poem by Lionel Johnson. I do not claim that Johnson’s poem is “Paterian” in aesthetic terms (though that could be argued). Rather, I take Pater’s sense of exactness as a method for reading it, as a guide to how to respond. This is an essay about a real object, a work of sculpture, and about how its meaning could be realized distinctly – in all its possible complexities – in a poem by a writer of the 1890s who had inherited something of Pater’s absorption with the importance of *things*. I try to reconstruct what could have been Johnson’s fulfilment of Pater’s injunction to discriminate exactly what an art object signified at a particular moment in nineteenth-century urban history. It was a set of responses that Johnson then turned back into art.

One of Johnson’s most celebrated poems is “By the Statue of King Charles the First at Charing Cross.” Composed in 1889, it was first published in the pro-Jacobite magazine *The Royalist* in February 1892 and also included in *The Book of the Rhymers’ Club*, published by Elkin Matthews in the same