

The Collected Works of Walter Pater, Volume IX: Correspondence edited by Robert M. Seiler. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2023. lxix, 456 pp + 5 b/w illus. ISBN 978-0-19-284831-4. \$220.00.

On November 18, 1882, Walter Pater writes from Oxford to his friend the writer and critic Vernon Lee: “Lately the weather has been very damp, in all sorts of ways, binding up one’s arteries.... We had however last night one of the prettiest auroras I have ever seen – a large part of the sky almost as bright as day with sheets and beams of light, milky or faintly coloured; and all in delicately elusive motion: it was like the *making* of opal or mother-of-pearl.” Pater’s description of the aurora positions him as the aesthetic critic we recognize from the Preface and Conclusion of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). He has his own distinctive impression of the dawn sky, and he effectively analyzes this impression, breaking it down into constitutive parts, trying to discriminate the sources of the sensations he feels. He is existentially revitalized by his experience, and the arc of the passage transitions from paralysis to motion, darkness to light, blockage to creativity, and restriction to liberty. Pater’s singular impression of the aurora, it would seem, is one of those elusive heightened moments he describes in the Conclusion of *The Renaissance*, yielding him the fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness.

Unfortunately, in the context of Pater’s collected known correspondence, now so proficiently compiled, edited, and annotated by Robert M. Seiler, this passage stands out for its rareness, not for its exemplarity. Pater the letter writer is anything but Pater the aesthetic critic, or Pater the experimental fiction writer. His letters only rarely dwell on aesthetic impressions or sensations or heightened moments of any kind. And when they do, they often lapse into clichés that ossify the very experiences to which they ostensibly pay tribute. In response to Pater’s offhand description in a letter to Michael Field of their play *The Tragic Mary* (1890) as “a sterling piece of literary work,” for instance, Seiler reports, “Pater’s bland expression infuriated [Katharine] Bradley, who wrote ... ‘I will never forgive Mr. Pater for a word of clumsy praise of T.M. in wh. the word “sterling” occurs.’”

For his part, Pater in his letters preemptively fends off such criticism by repeatedly announcing himself as an “unfruitful correspondent,” “a poor letter-writer,” and “a reluctant letter-writer,” a leitmotif that runs throughout his entire correspondence. By his own avowal, he has little to offer as a correspondent. Regarded by many as a supreme literary stylist, he is not one of literature’s great letter writers. His reticence in letters may have to do with his desire for privacy, as some scholars have supposed, or perhaps also with deficiencies he finds inherent in the epistolary form itself. If we read Pater’s