Walter Pater and Persons by Stephen Cheeke. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2024. ix, 214 pp. ISBN 9780198920267. $90.00.

In a superbly funny sequence in Woody Allen's film *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), one that cleverly explores the experience of a mid-life crisis, Robin Williams's character, who is a professional actor on the set of a movie, discovers one day that he is temporarily "out of focus." First the crew trying to film him, then his wife and children back at the apartment, find themselves baffled by the fact that, irrespective of whether he is looked at through a camera lens or not, he is "all blurry." To the viewer, too, he is "all blurry" – other characters in the relevant scenes are sharply defined, but his outline and facial features are frustratingly fuzzy. His entire personality has become indefinite. The effect of his being on those around him, to paraphrase George Eliot, is not so much incalculably diffusive as just feebly diffuse.

In his lifetime, Walter Pater was also often felt to be "out of focus," seemingly almost permanently. In contrast to comparable mid- or late-Victorian intellectuals, such as Ruskin or Morris, Pater had a notoriously indistinct, somehow forceless personality – to the disappointment of many of his contemporaries, especially those who, like Symons, Wilde, and the other so-called decadents, sought him out as a spiritual and intellectual mentor or sort of secular priest. In *Walter Pater and Persons*, a fascinating, consistently stimulating book, full of sympathetic insights into Pater's thinking and writing, Stephen Cheeke quotes a couple of contemporaneous descriptions (taken from Thomas Wright's *Life of Walter Pater*, 1907) of the reluctant, self-effacing Oxford don that reinforce this impression. In one, he is described as the "shivery-shaky man" and referred to, in Wright's formulation, "as if he were a blanc mange or a jelly"; that is, pale and trembling. It might be a description of Williams's character in *Deconstructing Harry*, a middle-aged man who is undergoing a crisis of confidence and whose silhouette, in consequence, never settles into a shape that can be clearly seen or grasped. In another description, a former student named G.C. Monck (whom Cheeke erroneously names "Monk") remembers Pater's habit in Oxford of "slouching past under the wall and never looking anyone fairly in the face," which led to undergraduates calling him – unforgivingly enough – "Judas." Pater was certainly more diffident than duplicitous, but his retiring, distinctly recessive behaviour obviously seemed sinister to some, as if his blandness in social settings was a screen for malign intentions or motivations. "A suspicion arose that there was something essentially deceptive about him," Cheeke comments, implicitly pointing to the homophobic assumptions prevailing at the time, even in places such as Oxford where the culture of homosexuality was an open secret. Pater, sublimating both his sexuality and his complex, elusive