

WALTER PATER, LANDSCAPE ARTIST

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Landscape is the child of history, at first inseparable from the parent. Gradually it advanced until, from being the humble attendant on history, it became able to stand side by side with it on the same eminence, and you could hardly tell which was the most distinguished or the most indispensable. In time it went alone, and afterwards, in the decline of history, it may be seen like a dutiful child supporting its aged parent ... and lending its aid to uphold the feebleness of decay.

– John Constable, “The Origins of Landscape” (1836)

Would Michelangelo have painted as he did, sculpted as he did, had it not been for his early experiences in the storied Tuscany countryside? Did Giorgione and Titian truly create in response to their Venetian surroundings? How does Edward Burne-Jones go “beyond” his “old masters” in part because of how he “ministers” to a “modern landscape” (Pater, “Aesthetic Life” 25’)? Questions such as these compelled Walter Pater to learn as much as possible about landscaping – how visual artists, writers of fiction, and essayists not only explored the physical world but were inspired to develop representational techniques and methods that the receptive aesthetic critic and reader could appreciate. As this essay outlines, Pater uses the flexible affordances of non-fictional prose to produce verbal landscapes for their own sake and for the sake of addressing the human condition. He also uses the spatial domain to probe and to convey life’s painful temporal truths, “this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch” (Pater, *Renaissance* in *CW* 1:199). And what he learned from studying visual and verbal landscape artists in his first decade as a critic he put to singular use, from 1878 to 1894, in his own imaginary portraits. Yes, as Pater ruefully suggests in the unfinished essay “The Aesthetic Life,” our “\mechanical/ modern science has taken from nature something of its thaumaturgic touch,” but his landscape writing “has evolved a remarkable” and multifaceted “sensibility” (25’, 26’) that gives back so much to the reader.

Since the 1590s, the Dutch word *landschap* (derived from the German *landschaft*) has been repurposed in English to mean both a painted represen-