

PATER, DECADENT HISTORICISM,  
AND THE POETICS OF THE FRAGMENT:  
*GASTON DE LATOUR* AND “DENYS L’AUXERROIS”

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From the Greco-Roman twilight that infiltrates the late-second-century world of *Marius the Epicurean* through to the memorable portrait of Winckelmann suspended between his own eighteenth century and the classical past, Walter Pater shows a consistent interest in selves with hybrid natures and in epochs that mark a state of transition. Thus, in “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” in *Imaginary Portraits*, Pater evokes “times of decadence or suspended progress” (136) as eras in which death is fetishized in material culture. Pater’s language here seems to evoke a static moment; and yet this notion of a languid perfectionist decadence is a problematic one, and not only because the bustling and forward-looking 1880s and ’90s can hardly be thought of as a time of “suspended progress.” His rhetoric seems purposely to undermine itself; for, in spite of Thomas Wright’s characterization of him as a writer who “stands for white marble” (24) and Arthur Symons’s contention that Pater’s oeuvre contains “not a page that is not perfectly finished” (“Decadent Movement” 867), Pater’s imaginary and critical portraits reveal a writer who can find significance equally in unfinished works, in ideals unreached, and in bodies rent and torn. This discussion will chart the connections between Pater’s sensitivity to moments of historical mutation or change (taking his unfinished fiction *Gaston de Latour* as its example), his use of material objects with imperfect execution or problematic provenance (like the unfinished architecture and mysterious unearthed flask in the early movements of the story of “Denys L’Auxerrois” in *Imaginary Portraits*), and his portrayal of human bodies and their relics in the act or state of dismemberment, translation, or decay (in the final movements of “Denys”).

Drawing on Dennis Denisoff’s description of Pater’s sense of the “porosity of the carnal” (441) and on Jonathan Loesberg’s characterization of Pater’s method as one that “starts with the world and ends with our awareness