

CHARACTERLESS AESTHETICS:
PATER, WILDE, AND THE END OF HEGELIAN HELLENISM

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Hegel's evolutionary history of art was a fundamental theoretical basis for Victorian aesthetic Hellenism; it was central to the early work of Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds, providing them with both a theory of media and an epochal narrative of the emergence of Hellenic culture. My claims here are, first, that Hegel's dialectical narrative of the history of the arts contains an unresolved question about the fate of art in modernity which haunted the key theoretical and narrative texts of aestheticism. Second, that the way Pater mobilized and to some extent subverted Hegel's *Aesthetics* in his "Winckelmann" essay suggests an internal theoretical logic, as distinct from a cultural historical reason, for the passage of aesthetic Hellenism into decadence. And third, that Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* works as an extended deconstructive commentary on Pater's attempt to prescribe a "characterless aesthetic" within the framework of Hegelian Hellenism.¹ The basic premise of this reading is that there is an aporia in Pater's early promotion of an ideal Hellenic personality. In "Winckelmann," Pater promoted a "characterless" ideal based on the sculptural image of the *adorante* – an adolescent boy at the moment of awakening – but at the very moment that he appears to have endorsed the supremely fragile and tremulous qualities of adolescent impressionability, he goes on to endorse Hegel's quite different version of the Greek personality: blithe, self-producing, asserting its own authority through original self-invention. This moment of theoretical sleight of hand may have disguised the inner contradictions of Pater's early aestheticism, but the fragility of Pater's characterless Hellenic ideal would be exposed in the era of literary decadence. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* narrates the history of such a character in such a way as to perform an unravelling of the fundamental ideals of aesthetic Hellenism. At the fin de siècle, Wilde gave these ideals a spectacular frame at the moment of their obsolescence. Already passing into the condition of a spectral afterlife, aestheticism was most conscious of its own inner contradictions at the moment of dissolution. But the theoretical contradictions I