

*Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* by Lene Østermark-Johansen. Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. xvii, 364 pp. ISBN 978-1-4094-0584-9. £70; \$124.95.

Walter Pater was a notoriously elusive man. Henry James, in an ambiguous statement redolent with fin-de-siècle symbolism, dubbed him “the mask without the face.” Writing to Edmund Gosse after Pater’s death, James went on to express his satisfaction that “there isn’t in his total superficialities a tiny point of vantage for the newspaper to flap his wings on,” meaning that Pater seemed to have left behind him no memory or document that could be turned into a sensational story. Gosse had just written the first biographical portrait of Pater, a memorial piece that appeared in the *Contemporary Review*, and James’s words, although ostensibly used to denote Pater’s “literary fortune,” also convey a sense of the coldness of the detached aesthete. They predict a difficulty in dealing with his legacy. The symbolism of the mask, with its funereal undertones, introduces an atmosphere of death-in-life that suggests the impossibility of bringing the subject to life in the future. Indeed, Pater has proved elusive to subsequent generations of critics and students – let alone biographers – who have had to make do with few extant letters and little actual information about his life, friendships, and habits, and virtually no records of unguarded opinions about people or works. But in her most recent book, through the perhaps surprising medium of sculpture, Lene Østermark-Johansen has managed to get close to Pater in a way that has certainly added complexity and definition to the mask that, for James, symbolizes his reception. This sense of closeness is not the result of major discoveries of new sources. Østermark-Johansen, who is the author of much fine previous work on Pater and nineteenth-century artistic culture, uses sculpture to trace Pater’s development as art historian, writer, and thinker.

Although the focus of the book is on Pater, Østermark-Johansen shows that sculpture plays an important and little-understood role in the wider culture associated with aestheticism, and in nineteenth-century art criticism more generally. In recent years, critics engaging with this field have mostly focussed on painting and modern technologies. Conversely, Østermark-Johansen prefers to focus on the preoccupation with form and what she calls the “rebellion against narrative” of the late nineteenth century. For all its emphasis on aesthetics, though, the book is heavily historicist in method. This can be seen both in the constant search for sources and in the careful attention the author pays to Pater’s participation in periodical publishing, following the transformations of his texts as they were adapted from magazine to book form. The book also contains original material on some of Pater’s contemporaries, notably Oscar Wilde, Henry James, and Arthur Symons.