

“STIRRING A LONG ‘BRAIN-WAVE’  
BEHIND IT OF PERHAPS QUITE ALIEN ASSOCIATIONS”:  
THE PARADOXICAL AFTERLIFE OF  
WALTER PATER’S “CONSUMMATE” WORDS

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*For to the grave reader words too are grave; and the ornamental word, the figure, the accessory form or colour or reference, is rarely content to die to thought precisely at the right moment, but will inevitably linger awhile, stirring a long “brain-wave” behind it of perhaps quite alien associations.*

– Walter Pater, “Style”

In his essay on “Style” (1888), Walter Pater exposes the function of his poetics by insisting on a sculptural metaphor that recurs in his writings: the adjective “grave” evokes a multifariousness of associations, and among them the idea of carving, sculpting, engraving, or impressing. Carving the word amounts to elaborating the language that could best express thought indissolubly linked with style, content allied with form. Pater recurrently envisages writing as a carving process and sculpture as “a metaphor for literary style.”<sup>1</sup> In her latest monograph on Pater, Lene Østermark-Johansen associates the process of carving the word to the relief or *rilievo* as it best expresses the idea of the unity between form and content.<sup>2</sup> The carefully wrought-out word is indeed relieved and protrudes from the sentence.

Wavering between the linear and the fragmented, his writing is often remarked for the attention he gives to the carefully wrought-out unit – be it the page, the sentence, or the word. The unit is given much attention so as to provide maximum unity: “The one word for the one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words, terms, that might just do: the problem of style was there! – the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay, or song, absolutely proper to the single mental presentation or vision within” (*Appreciations* 29).

In the multitude of his words and terms, a number of them seem particularly notable for their poetical resonances and their semantic potential. This perhaps explains why they came to have lives of their own and to re-emerge