

THE AUTHORITY OF AFFINITY:
WALTER PATER'S STAND AGAINST DECADENCE
IN *PLATO AND PLATONISM*

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Walter Pater's final book in his lifetime, *Plato and Platonism* (1893), portrays a protagonist trying to stop society's falling into decline, both revealing and following Plato's creative method of philosophy. He places Plato in similar circumstances to his own, in a world "almost weary of philosophical debate," where "language and the processes of thought were already become sophisticated, the very air he breathed sickly with off-cast speculative atoms" (*Plato* 5). The synthetic philosophy of Plato revivifies this matter into new form, portraying the creative model of Pater's ideal artists who possess a divine power to make organic, with an intelligible principle of proportion, atoms that are otherwise anarchical in flux. For Pater, Platonism is fundamentally a philosophical method that appreciates the intelligible principle in things, known as form. Every organic being partakes of form, and its success is measured according to its proportion of form and matter, while Pater applies this theoretical standard analogously, from a State, to an individual soul, to a work of art.

There are several careful studies that reveal Pater's relationship to Plato in the late Victorian context at Oxford by Linda Dowling, Richard Dellamora, Lesley Higgins, Anne Varty, Stefano Evangelista, and a fertile work by Patricia Cruzalegui, *The Platonic Experience: in Nineteenth Century England* (1998), translated into English in 2006. Although these studies are finely nuanced and individual, they have in common the belief that Pater's Platonism is largely about same-sex desire and aesthetics, because of the degree to which he foregrounds sensuality in his work.

Building on these arguments, I will explore how Pater goes beyond the physical aspect of Platonism, which is its first phase, to the metaphysical. I mean metaphysical in its simplest, Aristotelian sense, as literally beyond the physical, passing from seen to unseen beauty, as Pater writes of Michelangelo in *The Renaissance* (87), and reiterates throughout his writings. Pater finds in