

PATER'S MUSIC

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"All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" (*Renaissance* 135). That well-known quotation still trips off the tongue. It is provoking, memorable, possibly nonsense, but Walter Pater is good at memorable nonsense. Music, he proposes, lies above and beyond the other arts, beyond good and evil, beyond responsibility to sense or content. It is pure form. "All the others translate." That line is Auden's, from his 1938 poem "The Composer," which seems to put Pater's axiom into verse. "Only your notes are pure contraption, / Only your song is an absolute gift" (148). At about the same time Wallace Stevens wrote a poem called "Mozart, 1935." "Poet, be seated at the piano," it begins. The line is repeated, but against menacing odds:

If they throw stones upon the roof
While you practice arpeggios,
It is because they carry down the stairs
A body in rags.
Be seated at the piano. (107)

The aestheticist legacy, which runs through the 'pure poetry' of Mallarmé, Valéry, Stevens, for instance, finds in music its goal and model, as well as its awesome self-justification. Mallarmé's "Coup de Dè" is, by his own account, spaced on the page like a musical score. It makes music, more than sense. It makes less sense for being, almost, music. It was George Moore who once suggested that if Pater "had lived to hear *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, he could not have done else but think that he was listening to his own prose changed into music" (187).

Changed into music. How does one write about music in literature without resorting either to wishful appreciation or technical minutiae? In particular, how does one write about music in prose? Is music, in Pater, anything more