

“OF THE THINGS SWEET TO TOUCH”:
WALTER PATER AND THE TYRANNIES OF SENSATION

Kate Hext

*And haply when tragic clouds of night
Were slowly wrapping round thee, in the cold
Of which men always die, a sense renewed
Of the things sweet to touch and breath and sight.*
– Michael Field, “Walter Pater: A Poetic Tribute”

Walter Pater carefully satiated his desire for innocuous sensations. He kept a bowl of rose petals on his desk and a fresh orange peel on his windowsill to create exquisite aromas (Bussell 285). Once, at a luncheon party, he was playfully asked if he were to be a fish what kind of fish would he be. To this he replied, “a carp” (qtd in Seiler 105). In this dry parody of his popular image, Pater would be, no doubt, an ornamental carp with luminescent, silvery multi-colours to make him a fish of vivid beauty. He would exist to experience pure, unreflective, superficial sensations, aware only of himself and his immediate surroundings. Not only was he painfully conscious that his aesthetic followers conceived him as such, there was an element to Pater that wished to be this complete and unreserved aesthete. Yet it was not to be. Despite his quiet enjoyment of heightened sensations, his infamous affirmations of sensual experience, and the appropriation of his ideas by a generation of undergraduates, in Pater’s broader aesthetic philosophy sensation has ambivalent status: it is not so much a creed as a problem. And so this article explores the underlying dangers of “the things sweet to touch and breath and sight” that admirers like Field found in Pater’s writings. I suggest that Pater is intensely concerned with the way sensuality may enslave the passions of the individual and argue that, ultimately, art offers him a meta-sensuality played out in the theatre of the imagination to control the danger of sensuality enacted on real flesh.