

REDEEMED MATTER:
WALTER PATER'S AESTHETIC MELANCHOLY

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Walter Pater famously shifted the object of criticism from Matthew Arnold's "the object as in itself it really is," to the object as it really is "to me" (*Renaissance* xix-xx), but writing in the tradition of skeptical empiricism the difficulty is that jettisoning objectivity involves jettisoning the object itself. In the words of Carolyn Williams, "without distance between observer and object, there can be no perceivable definition, no 'outline' nor can there be a sense of a 'sharp' and 'importunate' external reality 'outside,' ready to [call] us out of ourselves" (20). As Kit Andrews has shown, this anxiety about the lost object is an element of Pater's modernity, shared particularly with Walter Benjamin: for Pater philosophy and science reduce objects to mere abstract data, and for Benjamin the marketplace similarly reduces "objects to mere abstractions of exchange value." Andrews argues convincingly that for both Pater and Benjamin the lost object can in some sense be redeemed if it is sufficiently stilled in the midst of the Heraclitean flux of matter, or sufficiently worthless to fall out of commodity culture altogether: "For Pater, the aesthetic critic finds his fulfillment through the object; for Benjamin, the collected object finds its freedom through the collector" (252-53). Andrews reads the aesthetic critic as the diaphanous temperament described in Pater's first significant essay, "Diaphaneitè," but without disputing this reading, I want to pursue a second line suggested by the comparison with Benjamin: that Pater's aesthetic critic closely resembles the melancholy allegorist from Benjamin's early work. For both, the lost object is best retrieved as a ruin or as dead matter, a relic, or a corpse, and melancholic brooding on the dead object redeems it, as life or spirit. In effect, both critics suffer the loss of the material world, seek out relics of it, and return it as spirit.

Perhaps the best way to start is with Pater's assertion that "in our actual concrete experience, the two trains of phenomena which the words *matter* and *spirit* do but roughly distinguish, play inextricably into each other" (*Appreciations* 212). The notorious "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* demat-