

Life as the End of Life: Algernon Charles Swinburne, Walter Pater, and Secular Aesthetics



View/Open

 Lyons_Sarah final.pdf (1.809Mb)

Publisher

Queen Mary University of London

Metadata

[Show full item record](#)

Abstract

This thesis elucidates the relationship between the emergence of literary aestheticism and ambiguities in the status and meaning of religious doubt in late Victorian Britain. Aestheticism has often been understood as a branch of a larger, epochal crisis of religious faith: a creed of 'art-for-art's-sake' and a cult of beauty are thought to have emerged to occupy the vacuum created by the departure of God, or at least by the attenuation of traditional forms of belief. However, the model of secularisation implicit in this account is now often challenged by historians, sociologists, and literary critics, and it fails to capture what was at stake in Swinburne and Pater's efforts to reconceptualise aesthetic experience. I suggest affinities between their shared insistence that art be understood as an independent, disinterested realm, a creed beyond creeds, and secularisation understood as the emptying of religion from political and social spheres. Secondly, I analyse how Swinburne and Pater use the apparently neutral space created by their relegation of religion to imagine the secular in far more radical terms than conventional Victorian models of religious doubt allowed. Their varieties of aestheticism often posit secularism not as a disillusioning effect of modern rationality but as a primordial enchantment with the sensuous and earthly, prior to a 'fall' into religious transcendence. I explore their tendency to identify this ideal of the secular with aesthetic value, as well as the paradoxes produced by their efforts to efface the distinctions between the religious and the aesthetic. My argument proceeds through close readings that reveal how the logic of aestheticism grows out of Swinburne's and Pater's efforts to challenge and refashion the models of religious doubt and secularism established by a previous generation of Victorian writers – Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, John Stuart Mill, and Alfred Tennyson – and situates this shared revisionary impulse within larger debates surrounding the idea of secularisation.

Authors

Lyons, Sarah

URI

<http://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/handle/123456789/33745>

Collections

[Theses \[3009\]](#)

Copyright statements

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author and no quotation from it or information derived from it may be published without the prior written consent of the author





Follow QMUL on Twitter



Follow QM Research
Online on twitter



Like us on Facebook

[Site Map](#) | [Privacy and cookies](#) | [Disclaimer](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Contacts](#) | [Intranet](#) | [Current students](#) |

[Modern Slavery Statement](#)

Queen Mary University of London

Mile End Road

London E1 4NS

Tel: +44 (0)20 7882 5555

© Queen Mary University of London.

Algernon Charles Swinburne, (born April 5, 1837, London—died April 10, 1909, Putney, London), English poet and critic, outstanding for prosodic innovations and noteworthy as the symbol of mid-Victorian poetic revolt. The characteristic qualities of his verse are insistent alliteration, unflagging rhythmic energy, sheer melodiousness, great variation of pace and stress, effortless expansion of a given theme, and evocative if rather imprecise use of imagery. His poetic style is highly individual and his command of word-colour and word-music striking. Swinburne's technical gifts and capacity for View Walter Pater Research Papers on Academia.edu for free. movement born at the end of the XIX century. It is an expression of a group of rich intellectuals who believed in the research for beauty and Hedonism. Save to Library. I also contextualized Rossetti's point of view by examining the art criticism of Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walter Pater, who both wrote vividly of the dangerous beauty of women in Renaissance art. Save to Library. by Carolyn Porter Phinizy. Deirdre mourns for the dead and for an alluring life she cannot fully grasp: one outside of societal conventions. For Lyons, the aestheticism developed and progressively revised by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) and Walter Pater (1839-1894) illuminates the contradictory impulses of modern secularism: on the one hand, a desire to cast itself as a form of neutrality or disinterestedness; on the other, a desire to affirm 'this world' as the place of human flourishing or even enchantment. The standard narrative of a 'crisis of faith' does not do justice to the fissured, uncertain quality of Victorian visions of secularization. Precisely because it had the status of a confusing hypo Walter Pater is not usually considered as a politically committed writer, neither is Aestheticism of which he was the gifted theoretician with *The Renaissance* (1873). Although the political commitments of the Aesthetic movement have been questioned over the last two decades, both by including women aesthetes, and by re-evaluating the movement's dissemination among the middle classes, discussion of Pater's political ideas is almost non-existent. Stylistic formalism thereby rises to prominence toward the end of the Victorian period not as a reaction against mid-century moralism but rather as its logical extension. View. Show abstract. 15 Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 40.