



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 3, Issue 2

Winter 2020

Review: Walter Pater, *The Collected Works of Walter Pater* Vol. IV: *Gaston de Latour*, ed. by Gerald Monsman (Oxford University Press, 2019)

Catherine Maxwell

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 December 2020

Date of Publication: 21 December 2020

Citation: Catherine Maxwell, 'Walter Pater, *The Collected Works of Walter Pater* Vol. IV: *Gaston de Latour*, ed. by Gerald Monsman (Oxford University Press, 2019)', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 3.2 (2020), 162–166.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v3i2.1460.g1573

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Walter Pater, *The Collected Works of Walter Pater*
Vol. IV: *Gaston de Latour*, ed. by Gerald Monsman
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 399 pp.
ISBN 9780198816164

Catherine Maxwell

Queen Mary, University of London

Gerald Monsman's edition (2019) of Pater's final and unfinished novel *Gaston de Latour* is one of the initial two volumes (the other being Lene Østermark-Johansen's edition of *Imaginary Portraits*) to be published in the new Oxford University Press *Collected Works of Walter Pater*, with Lesley Higgins and David Latham as General Editors. Along with *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), Pater's earlier novel of first-century Rome, *Gaston de Latour* was apparently intended to be part of a projected trilogy with each novel located in a different historical era. *Gaston* is set in sixteenth-century France in the years after the Reformation, and its eponymous hero is an observer whose meditative consciousness soaks up the religious, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic atmosphere of his age. He comes into contact with many of the period's significant figures: Pierre de Ronsard, leader of the Pléiade school of poetry, the philosopher and essayist Michel de Montaigne, the Italian Dominican friar and thinker Giordano Bruno, Queen Marguerite, wife of Henry of Navarre III (later Henry IV of France), and Henry himself.

The novel is, very typically for Pater, a series of scenes and portraits, with Gaston the mediating figure, highly sensitive to his surroundings and the magnetic personalities he encounters. Appropriately he is described by the narrator as 'thoughtfully looking on with us, all the while, as essentially, a creature of the eye, even more likely than others to be shaped by what he sees' (p. 166). Gaston moves through a number of scene-changes starting with his pensive childhood and early youth in his family's ancestral manor-house in La Beauce, 'the great corn-land of central France', and progressing through his contemplative adolescence as a 'young clerk' attached to the Cathedral at Chartres (pp. 37, 58). As a young man, he meets his literary heroes – Ronsard in the

priory at Croixval in Vendômois and Montaigne in his chateau in the Dordogne – and finally ends up in Paris. There he lives through the infamous murder of the Huguenots (the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre) and its aftermath, hears Giordano Bruno expound his pantheistic ideas, and comes into contact with the major players of the French court in a milieu at once rarefied, elegant, sinister, and malign. Although we learn, almost in an aside, that he marries Colombe, a Huguenot woman from whom he is separated during the Massacre, we see next to nothing of her and their relationship is telescoped into a few lines. Rather Gaston dwells on his feelings of guilt after her death, having learnt that she fled into the country in labour with their child and believed herself deserted by him. Subsequently, as he lives on in ‘a kind of priestly celibacy’, the sounds of young children’s reproachful voices hauntingly recurring at moments of distress, turning later into ‘the voices of grown boys’, and then ‘young men [...] in due order to what the age of the lost or dead child would have grown to be’ (pp. 129, 130).

Gaston de Latour presents the editor with a specific set of challenges. The novel was incomplete at the time of Pater’s death in 1894. He had started it soon after or perhaps even before finishing *Marius*, and published the first five chapters between June and October 1888 in *Macmillan’s Magazine*, before he gave up on serial publication. One other chapter on Giordano Bruno was originally published as a discursive essay in the *Fortnightly Review* in August 1889 and was subsequently revised by Pater to appear in the novel as Chapter 7: ‘The Lower Pantheism’. He continued to work on *Gaston* up to his death, and, afterwards, in 1896, his friend and colleague Charles L. Shadwell, having gathered the serially published chapters together with the Bruno chapter and another chapter in manuscript (Chapter 6), edited these and had them brought out in book form by Macmillan as *Gaston de Latour: An Unfinished Romance*. In his short preface, Shadwell recorded his decision not to print the remaining ‘portions of other chapters’ as they were ‘for the most part unfinished: and they certainly have not received that revision which he [Pater] would have been careful to give them before he allowed them to appear among his published writings’ (qtd. p. 2). In fact, Shadwell withheld six chapters in various states of completion. These previously

unpublished chapters have been subsequently edited and included by Monsman, who points out in his Critical Introduction that several of them ‘appear very polished indeed’ (p. 4).

The holographs of those unpublished chapters ended up in the possession of the late John Sparrow, former Warden of All Souls College, Oxford, and are now at King’s Hall and Brasenose College, Oxford with some stray pages acquired by the Houghton Library, Harvard. But after the periodical publication of Chapters 1–5 and 7, Pater recopied these chapters from their periodical form into a new manuscript making numerous small emendations, a revision that suggests that he would have used this text as the basis for his own later text of the novel. This manuscript, acquired for the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library, is thus selected by Monsman as the base text for Chapters 1–5 and 7 in the Oxford edition, with Shadwell’s printing of Chapter 6 the copy-text for that segment, this being the only known version at the present date. However, these chapters are also collated with the published periodical texts and Shadwell’s text. The Brasenose and Houghton holographs serve as copy-texts for Chapters 8–13.

Monsman’s OUP edition is not strictly new, being heavily reliant on the text he produced for the ELT Press in 1995 (*Gaston de Latour: The Revised Text*), still available new and second-hand for about a third of the price of the OUP volume which retails at £120.00/\$155.00. As regards the editing process, the chief difference between the two is that in the OUP edition, Monsman, guided by the General Editors, has adopted an alternative way of dealing with Pater’s interlineations in the Berg MS, treating all such interlineations, with or without a caret, as edition text ‘to illustrate the maximum reach of Pater’s experimentation with the poetics of prose’ (p. 25). While scholars will feel obliged to reference the OUP edition, it is questionable whether what many will regard as minor textual differences will make it seem worth the extra outlay. To my mind at least, the ELT edition is a clearer, more attractive volume to read and handle; it is more generously spaced in a larger font, and it is far quicker and easier to locate key words and phrases in the appended ‘Annotation’ sections where they are helpfully picked out in bold type, which is not the case in the

OUP 'Explanatory Notes'. Chapter divisions in the ELT 'Annotation' are also much more clearly indicated.

Readers remain, of course, deeply indebted to Monsman for his original substantial achievement in giving us a much-extended, reliably edited *Gaston*. Pater's novel is emphatically not an easy read and has its *longeurs*, but readers who persevere get to savour its many pleasures. In Monsman's edition we revisit the memorable telling passages such that (in Chapter 3: 'Modernity') brilliantly detailing the poetry of the Pléiade, represented as at once sensuous and ideal. Here Pater not only cannily encrypts references to Charles Baudelaire but makes his mesmerizing description also do duty for Pre-Raphaelite verse, or what he elsewhere called 'Aesthetic Poetry'. The added chapters build substantially on what preceded them with some extraordinary, beautifully intricate, and atmospheric writing – such as the exquisite fragment that forms Chapter 12: 'A Wedding' in which the aesthete dandy Jasmin, late for his sister's wedding and unaware of his impending doom, steps out in his dazzling white satin attire into the snow – 'the untouched, crisp particles in the delicious, frosty, virgin air' (p. 173).

However, Monsman has not gone out of his way to update or add much value to this OUP edition. Much of the prefatory material, although slightly tweaked and reordered, remains substantially the same, as do the 'Notes'. The invaluable Pater 'Chronology', vastly superior to anything I've seen before, is new, but this seems to be a standard feature in the OUP *Works*, so is presumably not Monsman's own work. He includes an expanded 'Bibliography', but this deals principally with contemporary nineteenth-century references and source material detailed in the 'Notes'. It would have been helpful to have a separate Bibliography dealing specifically with critical responses to *Gaston de Latour*. Although the 'Explanatory Notes' are suitably scholarly and well-informed, most readers will be unfamiliar with the complexities of sixteenth-century French history and will find it difficult to get an overview of the events by trying to piece together the substance of separate references. Many will undoubtedly find themselves resorting to internet searches. I found myself longing for a helpful contextual summary which might have been

provided in the form of an extended chapter headnote in the ‘Notes’, or as a short essay in the Appendices.

It should also be acknowledged that our critical perspective on decadence has evolved and broadened since 1995. Both editions usefully point out that there are interesting echoes of Oscar Wilde’s ideas and Pater’s response to these in Chapter 8: ‘An Empty House’. Yet, to give just one example, in the OUP edition Monsman could have pointed out that, in Chapter 10: ‘Anteros’, the treatment of Queen Marguerite – a type of the *femme fatale* – and the accompanying discussion of cruel love which he calls ‘a significant contribution to gender studies of the Victorian period’ (p. 3), surely owe something to the short story ‘Amour Dure’ (1887) by Vernon Lee, one of the writers Pater most respected. Not to indicate how our greater knowledge of the period might enhance our current perception of this fascinating text seems yet another disappointing missed opportunity.