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Water Pater: The Intoxication of Belatedness

... What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?

PATER ("Preface" to *The Renaissance*)

... Why should a poem not change in sense when there is a fluctuation of the whole of appearance? Or why should it not change when we realize that the indifferent experience of life is the unique experience, the item of ecstasy which we have been isolating and reserving for another time and place, loftier and more secluded.

STEVENS ("Two or Three Ideas")

1 "Aesthetic" Criticism

Pater is a great critic of a kind common enough in the nineteenth century—Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, De Quincey, above all Ruskin—but scarcely to be found in the twentieth. Difficult to define, this sort of critic possesses one salient characteristic. His value inheres neither in his accuracy at the direct interpretation of meaning in texts nor in his judgments of relative eminence of works and authors. Rather, he gives us a vision of art through his own unique sensibility, and so his own writings obscure the supposed distinction between criticism and creation. "Supposed," because who can convince us of that distinction? To adapt Shelley's idea of the relation between poetry and the universe, let us say that criticism creates

the poem anew, after the poem has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. Ruskin's or Pater's criticism tends to create anew not so much a particular work of art but rather the precisely appropriate consciousness of the perceptive reader or viewer. This does not mean that these great critics are monuments to the Affective Fallacy, or that literary historians with formalist tendencies are justified in naming Ruskin and Pater as critical Impressionists. Oscar Wilde, who brilliantly vulgarized both his prime precursors, insisted that their work treated "the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation." Matthew Arnold had asserted that the "aim of criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is." A few years later, implicitly invoking Ruskin against Arnold, Pater slyly added that "the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly." Wilde, attempting to complete his master, charmingly amended this to the grand statement that "the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not." Between Arnold's self-deception and Wilde's wit comes Pater's hesitant and skeptical emphasis upon a peculiar kind of vision, with which he identifies all aesthetic experience.

We owe to Pater our characteristic modern use of "aesthetic," for he emancipated the word from its bondage to philosophy, both when he spoke of the "aesthetic critic" in his "Preface" to *The Renaissance*, and when he named the work of Morris and Rossetti as the "aesthetic poetry" in *Appreciations*. Vulgarized again by his ebullient disciple Wilde, and by the parodies of Wilde as Bunthorne in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, and of Pater himself as Mr. Rose in W. H. Mallock's *The New Republic*, Pater had to endure the debasement of "aesthete" as a term, and we endure it still. Pater meant us always to remember what mostly we have forgotten: that "aesthete" is from the Greek *aisthetes*, "one who perceives." So the "aesthetic critic" is simply the perceptive critic, or literary critic proper, and "aesthetic poetry" is precisely the contemporary poetry

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that is most perceptive, that is, in one's judgment most truly poetry.

Pater's key terms as a critic are "perception" and "sensation," which is response to perception. "Vision" for Pater, as for Blake, is a synonym for Coleridge's or Wordsworth's "Imagination," and Pater further emulated Blake by questing after the "spiritual form" of phenomena as against "corporeal form." This is the "form" that: "Every moment . . . grows perfect in hand or face," according to the almost preternaturally eloquent "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*. In the marvelous "Postscript" on "Romanticism" to *Appreciations*, Pater traces the genesis of form:

. . . there are the born romanticists, who start with an original, untried *matter*, still in fusion; who conceive this vividly, and hold by it as the essence of their work; who, by the very vividness and heat of their conception, purge away, sooner or later, all that is not organically appropriate to it, till the whole effect adjusts itself in clear, orderly, proportionate form; which form, after a very little time, becomes classical in its turn.

Vividness and *heat* purge away from the Romantic idea all that is not form, and form is the reward of the aesthete or perceptive man, if he has the strength to persist in his purgation. "In the end, the aesthetic is completely crushed and destroyed by the inability of the observer who has himself been crushed to have any feeling for it left." That dark observation is by Wallace Stevens, an heir (unwilling) of Pater's aestheticism. A more accurate observation of the aesthete's defeat comes from as great an heir, more conscious and willing, who attributed to Pater's influence his poetic generation's doomed attempt "to walk upon a rope, tightly stretched through serene air." Yeats nevertheless got across to the other side of the Nineties, and carried Pater alive into our century in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917) and *A Vision* (1925, 1937). Pater's vision of form culminates in Yeat's Phase 15: "Now contemplation and desire, united into one, inhabit a world where every beloved image has bodily form, and every bodily form is loved." Pater, for whom the attained form demanded purgation, an *askesis* (to which

I shall return), hesitantly held back from this Yeatsian version of a High Romantic Absolute.

To know Pater, and to apprehend his influence not only on Stevens and Yeats, but on Joyce, Eliot, Pound and many other writers of our century, we need to place Pater in his Oedipal context in the cultural situation of his own time. The pleasures of reading Pater are intense, to me, but the importance of Pater transcends those pleasures, and finally is quite out of proportion to Pater's literary achievement, fairly large as that was. Pater is the heir of a tradition already too wealthy to have required much extension or variation when it reached him. He revised that tradition, turning the Victorian continuation of High Romanticism into the Late Romanticism or "Decadence" that prolonged itself as what variously might be called Modernism, Post-Romanticism or, self-deceivingly, anti-Romanticism, the art of Pound's Vortex. Though Pater compares oddly, perhaps not wholly adequately, with the great Victorian prose prophets, he did what Carlyle, Ruskin, Newman, Arnold could not do: he fathered the future. Wistful and elaborately reserved, renouncing even his own strength, he became the most widely diffused (though more and more hidden) literary influence of the later nineteenth upon the twentieth century. In its diffusion, particularly in America, the Paterian influence was assimilated to strikingly similar elements in Nietzsche and Emerson, a process as indubitable as it is still largely unstudied. When Yeats proclaimed the "profane perfection of mankind" or Pound or Stevens their images of the poet as a crystal man they combined Pater with Nietzsche and Emerson (both of whom he seems to have neglected). "Just take one step farther," Nietzsche urged, and "love yourself through Grace; then you are no longer in need of your God, and the whole drama of fall and redemption is acted out in yourself." "In the highest moments, we are a vision," is the anti-nomian counsel of Emerson. Pater's first essay, "Diaphaneite," read to an Oxford literary group in 1864, presented the artist as a transparent or crystal image of more-than-human perfection, an

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Apollonian hero. How often, in Modern poetry, we have heard these strains mingled, until by now our latest poets alternately intoxicate and eradicate themselves in the inhuman effort that might sustain a vision so exalted. Pater, though a theorist of the Dionysian, evaded the heroic vitalism of a Nietzsche or the quasi-divine self-reliance of an Emerson, declining to present himself either as prophet or as orator. Yet his baroque meditations upon art, hieratic and subdued, touch as firmly upon the ruinous strength of our major Modern poets as any other precursor of our sensibility does.

2 Privileged Moments

Pater's context begins with his only begetter, Ruskin, whose effect can be read, frequently through negation, throughout Pater's work. Believing, as he says in "Style," that imaginative prose largely took the place of poetry in the modern world, Pater necessarily assumed, consciously I think, the characteristic malady of post-Enlightenment poetry, the new creator's anxiety-of-influence in regard to his precursor's priority, which becomes a menacing spiritual authority, in a direct transference from the natural to the imaginative world. Ruskin, despite his irrelevant mania for ferocious moralizing, is the major "aesthetic critic," in Pater's sense, of the nineteenth century. Stylistically, Pater owed more to Swinburne, but stance rather than style is the crucial indebtedness of a poet or imaginative prose writer. This is Swinburne, *sounds* like Pater, yet menaced him not at all:

All mysteries of good and evil, all wonders of life and death, lie in their hands or at their feet. They have known the causes of things, and are not too happy. The fatal labour of the world, the clamour and hunger of the open-mouthed all-summoning grave, all fears and hopes of ephemeral men, are indeed made subject to them, and trodden by them underfoot; but the sorrow and strangeness of things are not lessened because to one or two their secret springs have been laid bare and the courses of their tides made known; reflux evil and good, alternate grief and joy, life inextricable from death, change inevitable and insuperable fate.

Swinburne is speaking of Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Shakespeare; masters of the Sublime, whose mastery does not lessen "sorrow and strangeness." The accent here becomes Pater's (Cecil Lang surmises that Gautier's prose is behind Swinburne's, and Gautier also affected the early Pater) but the attitude, superficially akin to Pater's, is profoundly alien to the Epicurean visionary. Swinburne broods on knowledge and powerlessness, but Pater cared only about perception, about seeing again what Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Shakespeare *saw*. Ruskin's Biblical style was no burden to the Hellenizing Pater, but Ruskin's critical stance was at once initial release yet ultimate burden to his disciple. For this is Pater's Gospel, but it is Ruskin's manifesto: "... the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion all in one." Pater was not concerned to tell what he saw in a plain way, but he was kindled by this exaltation of seeing.

Ruskin himself, though uniquely intense as a prophet of the eye, belonged to the Spirit of the Age in his emphasis, as Pater well knew. The primal source of later Romantic seeing in England was Wordsworth, who feared the tyranny of the eye, yet who handed on to his disciples not his fear of the visual, nor (until much later) his Sublime visionary sense, but his program for renovation through renewed encounters with visible nature. Carlyle, a necessary link between Wordsworth and Ruskin, equated the heroism of the poet with "the seeing eye." But a trouble, already always present in Wordsworth and Coleridge, developed fully in Ruskin's broodings upon vision. *Modern Painters III* (1856) distinguishes: "the difference between the ordinary, proper, and true appearances of things to us; and the extraordinary, or false appearances, when we are under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy; false appearances, I say, as being entirely unconnected with any real power or character in the object, and only imputed to it by us." This imputation of life to the object-world Ruskin called the "pathetic fallacy" and judged as "a falseness in all our impressions of external

things.” The greatest order of poets, the “Creative” (Shakespeare, Homer, Dante), Ruskin declared free of the pathetic fallacy, finding it endemic in the second order of poets, the “Reflective or Perceptive” (Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson). Himself a thorough Wordsworthian, Ruskin did not mean to deprecate his Reflective (or Romantic) grouping, but rather to indicate its necessary limitation. Like Pater after him, Ruskin was haunted throughout his life and writings by Wordsworth’s “Intimations” Ode, which objectified for both critics their terrible sense of bereavement, of estrangement from the imaginative powers they possessed (or believed themselves to have possessed) as children. Both Ruskin and Pater began as Wordsworthian poets, and turned to imaginative prose partly because of the anxiety-of-influence induced in them by Wordsworth.

Ruskin’s formulation of the pathetic fallacy protests the human loss involved in Wordsworth’s compensatory imagination. As such, Ruskin’s critique prophesies the winter vision of Wallace Stevens, from “The Snow Man” through to “The Course of a Particular.” When Stevens reduces to what he calls the First Idea, he returns to “the ordinary, proper, and true appearances of things to us,” but then finds it dehumanizing to live only with these appearances. So the later Ruskin found also, in his own elaborate mythicizings in *Sesame and Lilies* and related books, and in the Wordsworthian autobiography *Praeterita*, that closed his work. What Wordsworth called “spots of time,” periods of particular splendor or privileged moments testifying to the mind’s power over the eye, Ruskin had turned from earlier, as being dubious triumphs of the pathetic fallacy. Pater, who subverted Ruskin by going back to their common ancestor, Wordsworth, may be said to have founded his criticism upon privileged moments of vision, or “epiphanies” as Joyce’s Stephen, another Paterian disciple, was to term them.

The “epiphany,” for us, has been much reduced, yet still prevails as our poets’ starting-point for moving from sensation to mastery, or at least to self-acceptance:

Perhaps there are times of inherent excellence,
.....

Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
 Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which
 We more than awaken. . . .

But Stevens's good moments, as here in *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, have receded even from the modified Wordsworthianism that Pater offered as privileged moments, or pathetic fallacies raised to triumphs of perception. For Ruskin's "Perceptive" poets are Pater's "Aesthetic" poets, not a second order but the only poets possible in the universe of death, the Romantic world we have come to inhabit. Joyce's Stephen, recording epiphanies as "the most delicate and evanescent of moments," is recollecting Pater's difficult ecstasy that flares forth "for that moment only." The neo-orthodox, from Hopkins through Eliot to Auden, vainly attempted to restore Pater's "moments" to the religious sphere, yet gave us only what Eliot insisted his poetry would not give, instances of "the intense moment / Isolated, with no before and after," the actual art (such as it is) of *Four Quartets* even as it was of *The Waste Land*. Pater remains the most honest recorder of epiphanies, by asking so little of them, as here in the essay on the poet Joachim Du Bellay in *The Renaissance*:

A sudden light transfigures a trivial thing, a weathervane, a windmill, a winnowing flail, the dust in the barn door; a moment—and the thing has vanished, because it was pure effect; but it leaves a relish behind it, a longing that the accident may happen again.

"He had studied the nostalgias," like his descendant in Stevens' more qualified vision, and he did not pretend we could be renovated by happy accidents. Yet he offered a program more genuinely purgative than High Romanticism had ventured:

. . . painting and poetry . . . can accomplish their function in the choice and development of some special situation, which lifts or glorifies a character, in itself not poetical. To realise this situation, to define, in a chill and empty atmosphere, the focus where rays, in themselves pale and impotent, unite and begin to burn . . .

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This, from the early essay on "Winckelmann," presents the embryo of a Paterian epiphany. Here is such an epiphany at its most central, in the crucial chapter, "The Will as Vision," of *Marius the Epicurean*:

Through some accident to the trappings of his horse at the inn where he rested, Marius had an unexpected delay. He sat down in an olive garden, and, all around him and within still turning to reverie. . . . A bird came and sang among the wattled hedgeroses: an animal feeding crept nearer: the child who kept it was gazing quietly: and the scene and the hours still conspiring, he passed from that mere fantasy of a self not himself, beside him in his coming and going, to those divinations of a living and companionable spirit at work in all things. . . .

In this peculiar and privileged hour, his bodily frame, as he could recognize, although just then, in the whole sum of its capacities, so entirely possessed by him—Nay! actually his very self—was yet determined by a farreaching system of material forces external to it. . . . And might not the intellectual frame also, still more intimately himself as in truth it was, after the analogy of the bodily life, be a moment only, an impulse or series of impulses, a single process. . . ? How often had the thought of their brevity spoiled for him the most natural pleasures of life. . . .—To-day at least, in the peculiar clearness of one privileged hour, he seemed to have apprehended. . . . an abiding place. . . .

Himself—his sensations and ideas—never fell again precisely into focus as on that day, yet he was the richer by its experience. . . . It gave him a definitely ascertained measure of his moral or intellectual need, of the demand his soul must make upon the powers, whatsoever they might be, which had brought him, as he was, into the world at all. . . .

All of Pater is in this passage. Wordsworth lamented the loss of an earlier glory, ultimately because such glory was equal to an actual sense of immortality. He celebrated "spots of time," not because they restored that saving sense, but in the hope they testified to his spirit's strength over a phenomenal world of decay, and so modestly hinted at some mode of survival. Ruskin, until he weakened (on his own terms) insisted on the Homeric strength of gazing upon ocean, and seeing no emblem of continuity but only pure physical nature: "Black or clear, monstrous or violet-coloured, cold salt water it is always, and nothing but that." Pater's Marius has been found by a skeptical but comforting compromise between the natural visions of Wordsworth and Ruskin. "Peculiar and

privileged,” or “extreme, fortuitous, personal” as Stevens was to call it, the time of reverie abides in Ruskin’s “pure physical nature,” yet holds together in continuity not only past and present but what was only potential in the past to a sublimity still possible in the future. The self still knows that it reduces to “sensations and ideas” (the subtitle of *Marius the Epicurean*), still knows the brevity of its expectation, knows even more strongly it is joined to no immortal soul, yet now believes also that its own integrity can be at one with the system of forces outside it. Pater’s strange achievement is to have assimilated Wordsworth to Lucretius, to have compounded an idealistic naturalism with a corrective materialism. By de-idealizing the epiphany, he makes it available to the coming age, when the mind will know neither itself nor the object but only the dumbfounding abyss that comes between.

3 Historicisms: Renaissance and Romanticism

Pater began to read Ruskin in 1858, when he was just nineteen, eight years before he wrote his first important essay, “Winckelmann.” From then until the posthumously published writings, Pater suffered under Ruskin’s influence, though from the start he maintained a revisionary stance in regard to his precursor. In place of Ruskin’s full, prophetic, even overwhelming rhetoric, Pater evolved a partial, hesitant, insinuating rhetoric, yet the result is a style quite as elaborate as his master’s. The overt influence, Pater buried deep. He mentioned Ruskin just once in his letters, and then to claim priority over Ruskin by two years as the English discoverer of Botticelli (as late as 1883, Ruskin still insisted otherwise, but wrongly). Ruskin is ignored, by name, in the books and essays, yet he hovers everywhere in them, and nowhere more strongly than in *The Renaissance* (1873), for Pater’s first book is primarily an answer to *The Stones of Venice* (1851, 1853) and to the five volumes of *Modern Painters* (1843-1860). Where Ruskin had deplored the Renaissance (and located it in Italy, between the four-

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teenth and sixteenth century), elevating instead the High Middle Ages, Pater emulated the main movement of English Romanticism by exalting the Renaissance (and then anticipated later studies by locating its origins in twelfth century France). Yet the polemic against Ruskin, here as elsewhere, remains implicit. One of Pater's friends reported that once, when talking of Ruskin's strength of perception, Pater burst out: "I cannot believe that Ruskin saw more in the church of St. Mark than I do." Pater's ultimate bitterness, in this area, came in 1885, when Ruskin resigned as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford. Pater offered himself for the professorship, but it went to one Hubert Von Herkomer, and not to the author of the notorious book on the Renaissance, whose largest departure from Ruskin was in opposing a darker and hedonistic humanism to the overtly moral humanism of his aesthetic precursor.

The vision of Pater's *Renaissance* centers upon the hope of what Yeats was to call Unity of Being. Drawing his epigraph from the Book of Psalms, Pater hints at the aesthetic man's salvation from the potsherds of English Christianity in the 1860s: "Though ye have lain among the pots, yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold" (Psalms 68:13). The aesthetic man, surrounded by the decaying absolutes inherited from Coleridge-as-theologian, accepts the truths of solipsism and isolation, of mortality and the flux of sensations, and glories in the singularity of his own peculiar kind of contemplative temperament. Pater would teach this man self-reconciliation and self-acceptance, and so Unity of Being. In the great figures of the Renaissance—particularly Botticelli, Michelangelo, Leonardo—Pater presents images of this Unity of aesthetic contemplation. Ruskin, a greater critic than Pater, did not over-idealize the possibilities of aesthetic contemplation, not even in books as phantasmagoric as *The Queen of the Air*. Pater's desperation, both to go beyond Ruskin and to receive more from art, is at once his defining weakness in comparison to Ruskin, and his greater importance for what was to come, not just in the 1880s and 1890s, but throughout our century.

In his vision of the Renaissance, Pater inherits the particular historicism of English Romanticism, which had found its own origins in the English Renaissance, and believed itself a renaissance of that Renaissance. Between the High Romantics and Pater many losses were felt, and of these Darwin compelled the largest. *The Renaissance* is already a Darwinian book, rather in the same way that *The Stones of Venice* was still a Coleridgean book. Pater's moral tentativeness necessarily reflected his own profound repressions, including his aversion to heterosexuality, and the very clear strain of sadomasochism in his psyche. But the intellectual sanction of Pater's skeptical Epicureanism was provided by the prevalent skepticism even of religious apologias in the age of Newman and the Oxford Movement. Evolution, whether as presented by Christian historicisms or by Darwin himself, gave the self-divided Pater a justification for projecting his temperament into a general vision of his age's dilemmas. His later work, considered further on in this essay, found a governing dialectic for his skepticism in the pre-Socratics and Plato, but in *The Renaissance* the personal projection is more direct, and proved more immediately influential.

The "Preface" to *The Renaissance* outlines a cycle in the concept of renaissance, which goes from an early freshness with "the charm of *ascesis*, of the austere and serious girding of the loins in youth" to "that subtle and delicate sweetness which belongs to a refined and comely decadence." The Greek word *ascesis* (or *askesis*) originally referred to athleticism, but easily transferred itself, even in ancient time, to an exercise in spiritualizing purgation. Paterian *askesis* is less a sublimation (as it seems when first used in the "Preface") than it is an aesthetic self-curtailment, a giving-up of certain powers so as to help achieve more originality in one's self-mastery. An Epicurean or hedonistic *askesis* is only superficially a paradox, since it is central in the Lucretian vision, that Pater labored to attain. For Lucretius, truth is always in appearances, the mind is a flow of sensory patterns, and moral good is always related directly to pleasurable sensations. But intense pleasure, as

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Epicurus taught, is grossly inferior to possessing a tranquil temperament. Pater's Epicureanism, in *The Renaissance*, was more radical, and hesitates subtly at exalting a quasi-homosexual and hedonistic humanism, particularly in the essays on Leonardo and on Winckelmann.

In the essay on "Two Early French Stories," Pater identifies his "medieval Renaissance" with "its antinomianism, its spirit of rebellion and revolt against the moral and religious ideas of the time." Pater's own antinomianism is the unifying element in his great first book, as he elaborately intimates "a strange idolatry, a strange rival religion" in opposition to the Evangelical faith of Ruskin and the revived orthodoxies of the Oxford Movement. The extraordinary essay on Botticelli, a triumphant prose poem, sees in his Madonna "one of those who are neither for Jehovah nor for His enemies," and hints at a sadomasochistic sadness with which Botticelli conceives the universe of pleasure he has chosen. In the essay on Leonardo, which may be Pater's finest poem, the visionary center is reached in the notorious (and wholly magnificent) passage on *La Gioconda*, which Yeats brilliantly judged to be the first Modern poem, but which he proceeded to butcher by printing in verse form as the first poem in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936). Yeats, in his "Introduction," asked an insightful and largely rhetorical question: "Did Pater foreshadow a poetry, a philosophy, where the individual is nothing, the flux of *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound, objects without contour . . . , human experience no longer shut into brief lines, . . . the flux . . . that within our minds enriches itself, redreams itself . . . ?"

Freud, in his study of Leonardo, found in the Mona Lisa the child's defence against excessive love for his mother, by means of identifying with her and so proceeding to love boys in his own image, even as he had been loved. In one of his most troubling insights, Freud went on to a theory of the sexual origins of all thought, a theory offering only two ways out for the gifted; either a compulsive, endless brooding in which all intellectual curiosity remains sexual, or a successful sublimation, in which thought, to

some extent, is liberated from its sexual past. Is Pater, throughout *The Renaissance*, and particularly in the "Leonardo" and the "Conclusion," merely a fascinating, compulsive brooder, or has he freed his thought from his own over-determined sexual nature? Some recent studies reduce Pater only to the former possibility, but this is to underestimate an immensely subtle mind. Here is the crucial passage, not a purple patch but a paean to the mind's mastery over its own compulsiveness:

The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the world are come," and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed! All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants, and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea.

Most broadly, this is Pater's comprehensive vision of an equivocal goddess whom Blake called "the Female Will" and the ancient Orphics named *Ananke*, meaning "Necessity." Pater dreads and desires her, or perhaps desires her precisely through his dread. Desire dominates here, for the sight of her is a privileged moment, an epiphany of the only divinity Pater truly worshipped. In the

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essay following, on "The School of Giorgione," Pater speaks of "profoundly significant and animated instants, a mere gesture, a look, a smile, perhaps—some brief and wholly concrete moment—into which, however, all the motives, all the interests and effects of a long history, have condensed themselves, and which seem to absorb past and future in an intense consciousness of the present." The Lady Lisa, as an inevitable object of the quest for all which we have lost, is herself a process moving towards a final entropy, summing up all the estrangements we have suffered from the object-world we once held close, whether as children, or in history. She incarnates too much, both for her own good and for ours. The cycles of civilization, the burden our consciousness bears, renders us latecomers but the Lady Lisa perpetually carries the seal of a terrible priority. Unity of Being she certainly possesses, yet she seems to mock the rewards Pater hoped for in such Unity. A powerful juxtaposition, of the ancient dream of a literal immortality, of living all lives, and of Darwinianism ("modern philosophy") ends the passage with an astonishing conceptual image. The Lady Lisa, as no human could hope to do, stands forth as a body risen from death, and also as symbol of modern acceptance of Necessity, the nondivine evolution of our species. She exposes, as Pater is well aware, the hopelessness of the vision sought by *The Renaissance*, and by all Romantic and post-Romantic art.

Yet, with that hopelessness, comes the curious reward of the supreme Paterian epiphany. Rilke remarked of the landscape behind the Madonna Lisa that "it is Nature which came into existence . . . something distant and foreign, something remote and without allure, something entirely self-contained. . . ." Following Rilke, the psychologist J. H. Van den Berg associates this estrangement of an outer landscape with the growth of a more inward, alienated self than mankind had known before:

The inner life was like a haunted house. But what else could it be? It contained everything. Everything extraneous had been put into it. The entire history of the individual. Everything that had previously belonged to everybody, everything that had been collective property and had existed

in the world in which everyone lived, had to be contained by the individual. It could not be expected that things would be quiet in the inner self.

In his way, Van den Berg, like Rilke, sides with Ruskin and not with Pater, for the implicit argument here is that the Romantic inner self cost too much in solipsistic estrangement. But Pater was a divided man, humanly wiser than he could let himself show as a Late Romantic moralist-critic. His vision of the Mona Lisa is as much a warning as it is an ideal. This, he says, is our Muse, mistress of Unity-of-Being. The poets of the Nineties, including the young Yeats, chose to see the ideal and not to heed the warning. The further work of Pater, after *The Renaissance*, shows the Aesthetic Critic accepting his own hint, and turning away from self-destruction.

One cannot leave the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* without acknowledging the power which that handful of pages seems to possess even today, a hundred years after their composition. In their own generation, their pungency was overwhelming; not only did Pater withdraw them in the second edition, because he too was alarmed at their effect, but he toned them down when they were restored in the third edition. The skeptical eloquence of the "Conclusion" cost Pater considerable preferment at Oxford. There is a splendidly instructive letter from John Wordsworth (clerical grandnephew of the poet) to Pater, written in 1873, indignantly summing up the "Conclusion" as asserting: "that no fixed principles either of religion or morality can be regarded as certain, that the only thing worth living for is momentary enjoyment and that probably or certainly the soul dissolves at death into elements which are destined never to reunite." One can oppose to this very minor Wordsworth a reported murmur of Pater's: "I wish they would not call me a hedonist. It gives such a wrong impression to those who do not know Greek."

Early Pater, in all high seriousness, attains a climax in those wonderful pages on the flux-of-sensations and the necessity of dying with a faith in art that conclude *The Renaissance*. Written in 1868,

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they came initially out of a review of William Morris' poetry that became the suppressed essay on "Aesthetic Poetry." They gave Pater himself the problem of how he was to write up to so fierce a demand-of-self: "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life."

4 Fictive Selves

Pater's own life, by his early standards, was only ambiguously a success. His work, after *The Renaissance*, is of three kinds, all of them already present in his first book. One is "imaginary portraits," a curious mixed genre, of which the novel *Marius the Epicurean* is the most important, and of which the best examples are the semi-autobiographical "The Child in the House" and the book called *Imaginary Portraits*. Another grouping of Pater's work, critical essays, were mostly gathered in *Appreciations*. The last group, classical studies proper, stand a little apart from the rest of his work and will be considered at the close of this essay.

"Imaginary portraits," in Pater's sense, are an almost indescribable genre. Behind them stand the monologues of Browning and of Rossetti, the *Imaginary Conversations* of Landor, perhaps Sainte-Beuve's *Portraits contemporains*. Like *The Renaissance* and *Appreciations*, they are essays or quasi-essays; like "The Child in the House" they are semi-autobiographical; yet it hardly helps to see "Sebastian Van Storck," or "Denys L'Auxerrois" or "Hippolytus Veiled" as being essays or veiled confessions. Nor are they romance-fragments, though closer to that than to short stories. It may be best to call them what Yeats called his Paterian stories, "Mythologies," or "Romantic Mythologies." Or, more commonly, they could be called simply "reveries," for even at their most marmoreal and baroque they are highly disciplined reveries, and even the lengthy *Marius the Epicurean* is more a historicizing reverie than it is a historical novel. "Reverie" comes from the French *rever*, "to dream," and is already used in music to describe an instrumental

composition of a dream-like character. The power and precariousness alike of Pater's reveries are related to their hovering near the thresholds of wish-fulfillment. I suspect that Pater's nearest ancestor here is Browning, even as Ruskin looms always behind Pater's aesthetic criticism. Just as Browning made fictive selves, to escape his earlier strain of Shelleyan subjectivity in the verse-romances *Pauline*, *Paracelsus* and *Sordello*, so Pater turned to "imaginary portraits" to escape the subjective confession that wells up in his "Leonardo da Vinci" and "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*. On this view, *The Renaissance* is Pater's version of Shelley's *Alastor* or Keats's *Endymion*: it is a prose-poem of highly personal Romantic quest after the image of desire, visualized by Pater in the Mona Lisa. Turning from so deep a self-exposure, Pater arrives at his kind of less personal reverie, a consciously fictive kind.

Pater had no gifts for narrative, or drama, or psychological portrayal, and he knew this well enough. Unlike Browning, he could not make a half-world, let alone the full world of a mythopoeic master like Blake. Pater, who intensely admired both poets, oriented his portraits with more specific reference to the most inescapable of Romantic poets, Wordsworth, concerning whom he wrote the best of his essays in strictly literary criticism. In the nearly-as-distinguished essay on "Coleridge," Pater justly praises Wordsworth as a more instinctual poet than Coleridge. Wordsworth is praised for "that flawless temperament . . . which keeps his conviction of a latent intelligence in nature within the limits of sentiment or instinct, and confines it to those delicate and subdued shades of expression which perfect art allows." Pater, too consciously, seeks in his portraits to be instinctual rather than intellectual, hoping that thus he can avoid drama and self-consciousness. Unfortunately, he cannot sustain the Wordsworthian comparison, as again he knew, for though he shared Wordsworth's early naturalism, he lacked the primordial, Tolstoyan power that sustains poems like "The Ruined Cottage," "Michael," "The Old Cumberland Beggar." Yet he yearned for such power, and would have been a Wordsworthian novelist, like George Eliot and Hardy, if he had found the requisite strength.

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But this yearning, poignantly felt all through the beautiful Wordsworth essay, was a desperate desire for his opposite. Wordsworth lived in nature, Pater in a dream. Longing for the sanctities of earth, Pater found his true brothers in Rossetti and Morris, poets of phantasmagoria, and his true children in Yeats and the Tragic Generation. The “imaginary portraits” are crucial to our understanding of Pater, but as art they are equivocal achievements, noble but divided against themselves.

5 Sorrows of Influence

My own favorite among Pater’s books is *Appreciations*. Pater is not the greatest critic English Romanticism produced—Coleridge and Ruskin vie for that eminence—but he is certainly the most underrated major nineteenth-century critic, in our own time. He is superior to his older rival, Arnold, and to his disciple, Wilde, both of whom receive more approval at this moment. Yet even as a literary critic, he is evasive, and remains more a master of reverie than of description, let alone analysis, which is alien to him. This becomes a curious critical strength in him, which requires both description and analysis to be apprehended.

Appreciations begins with the extraordinary essay on “Style,” which is Pater’s *credo* as a literary critic. As the essay urges awareness of the root-meanings of words, we need to remember that “style” originally meant an ancient instrument for writing on a waxed tablet, and having one pointed end for incising words, and one blunt end for rubbing out writing, and smoothing the tablet down. We might also remember that “appreciations” originally meant “appraisals.” Before appraising Wordsworth, Coleridge, Rossetti, Morris, Lamb and others, Pater offers us a vision of his stylistic attitude, incisive but also ascetic. Ian Fletcher, Pater’s best scholar, reminds us that Pater’s idea of style is “as a mode of perception, a total responsive gesture of the whole personality.” Since Pater’s own style is the most highly colored and self-conscious

of all critics who have written in English, there is a puzzle here. Pater attempted to write criticism as though he were style's martyr, another Flaubert, and his insistence upon *askesis*, the exercise of self-curtailment, hardly seems compatible with a whole personality's total response. We do not believe that the style is the man when we read Pater, and a glance at his letters, which are incredibly dull and nonreleatory, confirm our disbelief. Pater's style, as befits the master of Wilde and Yeats, is a mask, and so Pater's idea of style and his actual style are irreconcilable. As always, Pater anticipates us in knowing this, and the essay "Style" centers upon this division.

Prose, according to Pater, is both music's opposite and capable of transformation into the condition of music, where form and matter seem to dissolve into one another. Pater's subject is always the mystery of utter individuality in the artistic personality; his style strives extravagantly to award himself such individuality. Whether in matter or style, Pater has therefore a necessary horror of literary influence, for to so desperate a quester after individuality *all* influence is over-influence. Pater's subject matter is also Ruskin's and Arnold's; his style is also Swinburne's, or rather one of Swinburne's styles. Unlike Emerson and Nietzsche, who refused to see themselves as latecomers, Pater's entire vision is that of a latecomer longing for a renaissance, a rebirth into imaginative earliness. The hidden subject of *Appreciations* is the anxiety of influence, for which Pater's remedy is primarily his idea of *askesis*. "Style" urges self-restraint and renunciation, which it calls an economy of means but which in Pater's actual style seems more an economy of ends. Ruskin, threatening precursor, was profuse in means and ends, master of emphasis and of a daemonic, Sublime style, which in his case *was* the man. Swerving from Ruskin, Pater turns to Flaubert in "Style," seeking to invent a father to replace a dominant and dangerous aesthetic parent. But guilt prevails, and Pater's anxiety emerges in the essay's long concluding paragraph, which astonishingly seems to repeal the special emphasis of everything that has come before. "Good art, but not necessarily great art," Pater sadly murmurs, suddenly assuring us that greatness depends not upon

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style but on the matter, and then listing Dante, Milton, the King James Bible, and Hugo's *Les Misérables*, which seems rather exposed in this sublime company, and hardly rivals Flaubert in its concern with form. By the test of finding a place in the structure of human life, Hugo will receive the palm before Flaubert, Ruskin before Pater, Tennyson (secretly despised by Pater) before Rossetti and Morris. The final *askesis* of the champion of style is to abnegate himself before the burden of the common life he himself cannot bear.

In the essay, "Wordsworth", Pater has the happiness of being able to touch the commonal through the greatest mediating presence of nineteenth-century poetry. The essays on Wordsworth of Arnold and, *contra* Arnold, of A. C. Bradley, have been profoundly influential on rival schools of modern Wordsworthian interpretation, and Pater has not, but a reading of the three essays side by side will show Pater's superiority. His Wordsworth is neither Arnold's poet of Nature nor Bradley's poet of the Sublime, but rather a poet of instinctual pagan religion. Wordsworth would have been outraged by Pater's essay, and most modern scholars agree that Pater's Wordsworth is too much Pater's Marius and too little Wordsworth. Against which, here is Pater's account of Wordsworth's actual religion, *as a poet*:

Religious sentiment, consecrating the affections and natural regrets of the human heart, above all, that pitiful awe and care for the perishing human clay, of which relic-worship is but the corruption, has always had much to do with localities, with the thoughts which attach themselves to actual scenes and places. Now what is true of it everywhere, is truest of it in those secluded valleys where one generation after another maintains the same abiding place; and it was on this side, that Wordsworth apprehended religion most strongly. Consisting, as it did so much, in the recognition of local sanctities, in the habit of connecting the stones and trees of a particular spot of earth with the great events of life, till the low walls, the green mounds, the half-obliterated epitaphs seemed full of voices, and a sort of natural oracles, the very religion of those people of the dales, appeared but as another link between them and the earth, and was literally a religion of nature.

What is most meaningful for Pater are those voices coming from low walls, green mounds, tombstones. These things remain *things* in Wordsworth, yet wholly other than ourselves, but we are deeply affected by what emanates from them. Pater was converted by them to the only religion he ever sincerely held, "literally a religion of nature." Just as the spots of time gave Wordsworth not a sense of the Divine, but precise knowledge to what point and how his own mind displayed a mastery over outward sense, so for Pater the spots of time he located in works of art gave a precise knowledge of the limited efficacy of the great Romantic program for renovation. The Romantics, as Pater understood and Arnold did not, were not nature-poets, but rather exemplars of the power of the mind, a power exerted against the object-world, or mere universe of death. Like Ruskin, and like Yeats and Stevens, Pater is a Romantic critic of Romanticism. Whether Pater writes on Giorgione or Winckelmann, the myth of Dionysus or Plato and the Doctrine of Change, Rossetti or Wilde, he writes as a conscious post-Wordsworthian, and his true subject is the partial and therefore tragic (because momentary) victory that art wins over the flux of sensations. The step beyond Pater is the one taken by his disciple, Yeats, who insists on the tragic joy of art's defeat, and who in his savage last phase celebrates the flux, exulting in his own doctrine of change.

Pater, withdrawing in *Appreciations* as in *Marius* from hailing the Heraclitean flux, is most moved by Wordsworth's quiet and primordial strength, the instinctual power of "impassioned contemplation." The eloquent and compassionate essay on "Coleridge" begins from Pater's recognition that Coleridge lacked this strength, and goes on to reject Coleridge's theological reliance upon outworn Absolutes. More strikingly, Pater pioneers in rejecting the Organic Analogue that Coleridge popularized. The motto of Pater's essay on Coleridge might well come from Nietzsche: "But do I bid thee be either plant or phantom?" Coleridge, Pater suggests, bid us be both, and so "obscured the true interest of art," which is to celebrate and lament our intolerably glorious condition of being mortal gods.

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Beyond his steady defence of art's dignity against metaphysical and religious absolutes, Pater's nobility and uniqueness as a nineteenth-century literary critic stem from his insistence that the later nineteenth-century poet "make it new," even as that poet (like Pater himself) remains fully conscious of the inescapable sorrows of influence. Such a poet wanders in the half-lights of being a latecomer, trailing after the massive, fresh legacy of Goethe, Wordsworth, Blake, Hugo, Keats, Shelley, Baudelaire, Browning, even as Pater trailed after De Quincey, Lamb, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Arnold and the inescapable Ruskin, quite aside from Swinburne and the unmentioned Emerson and Nietzsche. Pater is still the best critic pre-Raphaelite poetry has had, largely because he understood so well the anxiety of influence consciously present in Rossetti and unconsciously at work in Morris. The great essay on Morris, "Aesthetic Poetry," properly close to the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* which he quarried from it, presents Pater's most unguarded vision of poetic experience, so that Pater inevitably suppressed it:

...exotic flowers of sentiment expand, among people of a remote and unaccustomed beauty, somnambulistic, frail, androgynous, the light almost shining through them... The colouring is intricate and delirious, as of "scarlet lilies." The influence of summer is like a poison in one's blood, with a sudden bewildered sickening of life and all things... A passion of which the outlets are sealed, begets a tension of nerve, in which the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliancy and relief—all redness is turned into blood, all water into tears... One characteristic of the pagan spirit the aesthetic poetry has...—the sense of death and the desire of beauty: the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death...

Remarkably hinting that sadomasochistic yearnings and the anxiety of being a late representative of a tradition are closely related, Pater implies also that the heightened intensity of Morris and Rossetti (and of Pater) compensates for a destructively excessive sexual self-consciousness. The sensible world becomes phantasmagoria because one's own nature is baffled. A critic who understands the dialectic of style, as Pater magnificently did, is in no need of psychoanalytic reduction, as these essays on Morris and

Rossetti show. *Appreciations*, which influenced Wilde and Yeats, Joyce and Pound, and more covertly Santayana and Stevens, has had little influence upon modern academic criticism, but one can prophesy that such influence will yet come. In a letter (8 January 1888) to the young poet Arthur Symons, Pater recalled the marvelous dictum of Rossetti: "Conception, my boy FUNDAMENTAL BRAINWORK, that is what makes the difference in all art." Pater's apt purpose in this recall was to urge Symons, and the poets of his generation—Yeats, Dowson, Lionel Johnson—to make it new again through the fundamental brainwork necessary to overcome anxieties-of-influence. Here is the prophecy, addressed to the Paterian poets of the Tragic Generation, which Pound and his Modernists attempted to fulfill:

I think the present age an unfavourable one to poets, at least in England. The young poet comes into a generation which has produced a large amount of first-rate poetry, and an enormous amount of good secondary poetry. You know I give a high place to the literature of prose as a fine art, and therefore hope you won't think me brutal in saying that the admirable qualities of your verse are those also of imaginative prose; as I think is the case also with much of Browning's finest verse.

The Poundian dictum, that verse was to be as well written as prose, initially meant Browningsque verse and Paterian prose, as Pound's early verse and prose show. That literary Modernism ever journeyed too far from its Paterian origins we may doubt increasingly, and we may wonder also whether modern criticism as yet has caught up with Pater.

6 Centrifugal and Centripetal

In the important essay on Romanticism that he made the "Post-script" to *Appreciations*, Pater insisted that: "Material for the artist, motives of inspiration, are not yet exhausted..." yet he wondered how "to induce order upon the contorted, proportionless accumulation of our knowledge and experience, our science and

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history, our hopes and disillusion . . .” To help induce such an order seems to be the motive for *Plato and Platonism* (1893) and the posthumously published *Greek Studies* (1895). The Plato of Walter Pater, is Montaigne’s Plato (and probably Shelley’s), a skeptical evader of systems, including his supposed own, whose idea of order is the dialectic: “Just there, lies the validity of the method—in a dialogue, an endless dialogue, with one’s self.” Clearly this is Pater more than Plato, and we need not wonder why Pater favored this above his other books. In the chapter, “The Genius of Plato,” Pater gives us another reverie, an idealized imaginary portrait of what he would have liked the mind of Pater to be. A comparison with Emerson’s Plato (also influenced by Montaigne) is instructive, for the Plato of *Representative Men* is criticized for lacking “contact,” an Emersonian quality not far removed from “freedom” or wildness. Unlike Plato the author of the *Dialogues*, Walter Pater’s visionary indeed lacks “contact,” even as Pater severely made certain he himself lacked it.

Pater gives us the author of *The Republic* as “a seer who has a sort of sensuous love of the unseen,” and whose mythological power brings the unseen closer to the seen. This Plato is possible and possibly even more than marginal, yet he does seem more Ficino or Pico della Mirandola than he was Plato, for he is more a poet of ideas than a metaphysician, and more of a solipsistic Realist than an Idealist. Above all, he is Pater’s “crystal man,” a model for Yeats’s vision of an *antithetical* savior, a greater-than-Oedipus who would replace Christ, and herald a greater Renaissance than European man had known.

From reading both Hegel and Darwin, Pater had evolved a curious dialectic of history, expounded more thoroughly in *Greek Studies*, using the terms “centripetal” and “centrifugal” as the thesis and antithesis of a process always stopping short of synthesis:

All through Greek history we may trace, in every sphere of the activity of the Greek mind, the action of these two opposing tendencies—the centrifugal and centripetal . . . There is the centrifugal, the Ionian, the Asiatic tendency, flying from the centre . . . throwing itself forth in endless play of undirected imagination; delighting in brightness and colour, in

beautiful material, in changeful form everywhere, in poetry, in philosophy . . . its restless versatility drives it towards . . . the development of the individual in that which is most peculiar and individual in him . . . It is this centrifugal tendency which Plato is desirous to cure, by maintaining, over against it, the Dorian influence of a severe simplification everywhere, in society, in culture . . .

The centrifugal is the vision of Heraclitus, the centripetal of Parmenides, or in Pater's more traditional terms from the "Post-script" to *Appreciations*, the centrifugal is the Romantic, and the centripetal the Classic. Pater rather nervously praises his Plato for Classic correctiveness, for a conservative centripetal impulse against his own Heraclitean Romanticism. Reductively, this is still Pater reacting against the excesses of *The Renaissance*, and we do not believe him when he presents himself as a centripetal man, though Yeats was partially persuaded, and relied upon Pater's dialectic when he created his own version of an aesthetic historicism in *A Vision*.

Pater, in his last phase, continued to rationalize his semi-withdrawal from his own earlier vision, but we can doubt that even he trusted his own hesitant rationalizations. We remember him, and read him, as the maker of critical reveries who yielded up the great societal and religious hopes of the major Victorian prose-prophets, and urged us to abide in the mortal truths of perception and sensation. His great achievement, in conjunction with Swinburne and the pre-Raphaelites, was to empty Ruskin's aestheticism of its moral bias, and so to purify a critical stance appropriate for the apprehension of Romantic art. More than Swinburne, Morris, Rossetti, he became the father of Anglo-American Aestheticism, and subsequently the direct precursor of a Modernism that vainly attempted to be post-Romantic. I venture the prophecy that he will prove also to be the valued precursor of a post-Modernism still fated to be another Last Romanticism, another intoxication of belatedness. We can judge, finally, this ancestor of our own sensibility as he himself judged Plato:

His aptitude for things visible, with the gift of words, empowers him to express, as if for the eyes, what except to the eye of the mind is strictly

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invisible, what an acquired asceticism induces him to rank above, and sometimes, in terms of harshest dualism, oppose to, the sensible world. Plato is to be interpreted not merely by his antecedents, by the influence upon him of those who preceded him, but by his successors, by the temper, the intellectual alliances, of those who directly or indirectly have been sympathetic with him.