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978-0-521-17928-7 - Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment
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I INTRODUCTION

1 Pater criticism

In 1948 the BBC devoted a series of lectures to Victorianism, and in the course of these Christopher Dawson stated, 'we are still too close to the later Victorians – to the generation of Arthur Balfour and Walter Pater – to understand them'.[1] Ten years later Edmund Chandler wrote in the foreword to his study *Pater on Style*: 'I have naturally looked at everything that I could lay my hands on about Pater – the total volume is not large. And I feel bound to say that most of what goes for biography and criticism of Pater is, in my opinion, frankly unsatisfactory . . . there is no single volume devoted to Pater that I found acceptable.'[2] What underlies these two statements is the fact that Pater criticism is for the most part lacking in any overall view. A certain critical distance seems necessary, since Pater's writings tend to resist traditional modes of classification. Saintsbury was among the first to stress how difficult it was to evaluate Pater,[3] since his work is a meeting-place for poetic, critical and philosophical concepts which intermingle in defiance of the conventional ideas of genres and disciplines. So marked is this characteristic that at times his stories resemble philosophical constructions, while his critical writings have the nature of a poetic intuition. Reisdorff reiterated the difficulty in evaluating Pater,[4] and indeed existing studies are notable for the one-sidedness of their approach. It is perhaps easier merely to condemn than to unravel the individual qualities and intentions of Pater's work, and the difficulty of classification has led to a good deal of unjustified criticism.[5] Equally unjustified, however, are the paeans of praise from those who claim spiritual kinship with Pater[6] and offer sycophantic distortions of the picture.

It is largely through awareness brought about by modern literature that we are now beginning to gain the distance necessary to understand the work of the quiet Oxford don. He marks an intersection of divergent trends, and although it cannot be said that he inaugurated the modernism or 'modernity' of which he often spoke,[7] nevertheless he is a transitional figure who highlights both a waning of Classical and Romantic traditions and a yearning for something new.

The growth of critical distance, and hence of more balanced judgement, can be traced through various monographs on the aesthetic movement in England. In 1921 Brie wrote a short study outlining the changes in the 'aesthetic world view' during the last 400 years. He showed how the

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More information

different aesthetic forms presupposed particular mental states and social situations, but owing to the limited range of the study, these were only summarised and Pater's ideas were merely outlined rather than interpreted. In 1926 Needham sought to explain the aesthetic movement of the nineteenth century as a sociological phenomenon, but Pater was only briefly touched upon, as his writings were of little relevance to such an approach. Then in 1931 came two comprehensive accounts of the aesthetic movement, by Farmer and by Rosenblatt, and these contain an abundance of indispensable material. They used a descriptive method to unravel the historical strands of Pater's work, with the aim of separating influence from appropriation; what they did not do was examine such basic concepts as *l'art pour l'art* and *décadence*. Gaunt's survey of the 'aesthetic adventure' (1945) runs along similar lines; he supplements Farmer's and Rosenblatt's picture of Pater with a series of illuminating views from different angles. It was not until 1949, however, that Pater interpretation took a new turn with Hough's study of the English Late Romantics. Starting from Eliot's essay on Pater, Hough sought to interpret him from the standpoint of his intellectual position within the context of Late Romanticism. Hough was the first to discard the positivistic view of the aesthetic movement, thus gaining insights that were unavailable to Farmer and Rosenblatt.

There is a similar change of approach to be traced in studies devoted specifically to Pater himself. The four biographies by Greenslet (1905), Benson (1906), Wright (1907) and Thomas (1913) contain material of varying quality[8] – only Benson's really brings Pater's personality to life, while the others offer little more than a chronological sequence of facts. There are no genuine insights into the relation between man and work until Cattan's at times illuminating essay of 1936.

The same pattern is to be observed in monographs on individual aspects of Pater's writings. It is this pigeon-holing of different aspects that typifies the earlier interpretation of his work. The first critical studies concern the link with Wilde: Bock (1913) and Bendz (1914) use parallel quotations to try to establish the extent of Pater's influence on Wilde. There is a similarly restricted purpose behind the dissertations of Proesler (1917), Beyer (1931) and Glücksmann (1932), who discuss respectively Pater's links with German literature, France, and Antiquity. Proesler and Glücksmann limit themselves to a general study of corresponding ideas and recurrent motifs, whereas Beyer interprets Pater's interest in French literature and culture as an expression of his aesthetic attitude.

In 1926 Staub sought to interpret *Imaginary Portraits* – a form both peculiar to and typical of Pater's fictive writing – from the standpoint of his intellectual attitude. Although this study is still permeated with the characteristic deficiencies of Pater criticism, as Reisdorff shows so clearly in his

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dissertation,[9] there is nevertheless a degree of critical insight. Staub goes to great lengths to uncover the intellectual presuppositions that led to this typically Paterian form. The ultimate inadequacy of his account is due to his negative evaluation and to the fact that he confines himself to historical details in his attempt to explain the form and intention that underlie *Imaginary Portraits*. Z. Chandler's dissertation of 1928 on Pater's stylistic technique offers a statistical survey of the main linguistic features, and is as factual and descriptive as Farmer's study of 1931, which simply states the principles operative in Pater's critical work. Eaker's dissertation (1933) breaks new ground in so far as it traces Pater's creative writing back to psychological origins. However, even if one cannot deny the subjective roots of Pater's work, the study of his stories as a key to his personality seems to be of doubtful relevance. Thus Eaker can only end by accusing Pater of various misunderstandings in relation to the treatment of his subjects. Also in 1933 Young published a well-researched thesis on the extent to which Pater's writings mirrored the views of his time. But however useful the individual references may be, the problem cries out for a synthetic solution. Olivero's comprehensive work of 1939 is the first real attempt to present an overall picture of Pater. But although it is in the form of a scholarly thesis, its tone is frequently that of a confession. Consequently it swings from general statements of fact to rank misjudgements, describing Pater as a man pure of heart and spirit, and a writer of greatest *distinzione* simply *per grazia di Dio*.[10] Thus in *Marius the Epicurean* Olivero sees the triumph of Christianity over paganism[11] even though it would be difficult to find any evidence of this in the text itself. The merit of Olivero's work is that he is the first to break away from focusing on isolated aspects of Pater's writings, but his method is still mainly confined to amassing historical material.

A much more sober and objective approach is Huppé's short essay (1948), exposing Pater's misinterpretations of Plato as a means of uncovering basic elements in the formation of the aesthetic attitude. Reisdorff's unpublished dissertation (1952) sets out to define the 'aesthetic idea' that underlay Pater's 'art criticism', and his starting-point is the eminently sensible belief, hitherto ignored, that Pater's work formed a coherent whole.[12] Thus criteria can be extracted from Pater's own writings, a fact which makes this study particularly revealing. Reisdorff grasps the special nature of Pater's criticism in its mutual permeation of the sensual and the spiritual, and even if the framework devised for conceiving this peculiar interpenetration appears to be rather blurred – the study often degenerates into a mere inventory of these combinations – Reisdorff's choice of perspective is certainly the right one. The year 1955 saw the publication of David Cecil's paper, whose subtitle *Scholar–Artist* denotes Pater's curious in-between quality. This short essay confines itself to

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summing up the features of this quality, leading into a metaphorically fashioned thesis that Pater represents the contrast between 'broadcloth' and 'apple-green silk tie',[13] which is meant to explain the juxtaposition indicated by the subtitle. Edmund Chandler's meritorious study (1958) deals mainly with the textual history of *Marius*, bringing out the discrepancy between Pater's demands in his essay on style and his actual practice.

This brief survey of Pater criticism necessitates a few words on the problem of method. Clearly the historical approach, focusing on motives, parallels, and influences, lacks criteria that would enable us to assess Pater's work comprehensively. For the most part it is descriptive, ignoring the distinction between influence and appropriation, which is after all the hallmark of Pater's relation to the past. It uses categories inherited from the positivistic tradition in order to define a form of writing whose main thrust is to break down all cognitive pigeon-holing. It is only in more recent studies that we find a fruitful search for a new and more adequate method. The need is summed up by Norman Foerster's *cri de coeur*: 'The tradition of aestheticism running from Keats to Wilde needs fresh exploration, fresh evidence, and, above all, a fresh critical insight.'[14]

The present study is an attempt to meet this need, to the extent that Pater's work is an important and representative landmark in aestheticism. There would be little point in adding to the list of descriptive and historical studies; it will therefore be assumed that the reader is familiar with Pater's writings, and the quotations – sometimes given at length – are meant only to facilitate an understanding of the argument.

The problems to be dealt with here have scarcely been touched on in earlier studies, and so there will be relatively little discussion of other positions. Our concern instead will be to work out the nature of aestheticism, asking first what were the conditions that led to art being hypostatised and endowed with ultimacy, and then how to conceive of the autonomous art which arose out of this transfiguration. If art becomes the ultimate value of finite human existence, it can never be subservient to any reality outside itself. This claim, however, gains credence only when there is sufficient evidence to support it, and so art stands in need of being 'sanctioned'. It is surprising how often Pater uses this term. 'The sanction of so many ages of human experience'[15] is the basis of his doctrine, and as autonomous art cannot be subjected to any normative concepts, he finds his 'sanction' in history and myth. Chapters 3 and 4 will examine this idea in detail. Above all, our aim will be to show the limitations of this concept, and it is in his fiction that Pater shows his awareness of the deficiencies of the historical and mythical sanctions. Thus the final chapter will seek to grasp the nature of aesthetic existence by way of an interpretation of *Marius the Epicurean* and *Imaginary Portraits*. Human life that is orien-

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tated by art will experience the insecurity of this basis through continually changing moods which will only resolve themselves in death.

In examining the nature of Pater's ideas, we shall not merely be interpreting but will also be striving after an analysis of the aesthetic. Indeed, since Pater's writings are representative examples of aestheticism, we shall be aiming for a definition of the aesthetic whose validity will extend beyond Pater. Since neither condemnation nor adulation can capture the evanescence of the aesthetic, what is needed is a dispassionate study, and it is in this spirit that we shall endeavour to formulate concepts which will help us to distinguish between different manifestations. The order of the chapters should not be construed in terms of development, for aestheticism is not an ordered phenomenon. The chapters deal successively with ideas that preoccupied Pater simultaneously, and for this reason the chronology of his writings is also of minor significance.[16] We are first and foremost concerned with an investigation of the aesthetic, and it is this analysis that has conditioned the sequence of the chapters.

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2 Historical preliminaries

Art as creation

The following observations are in no way meant as an account of nineteenth-century English aesthetics, for this would be a major task in itself. We are concerned only with those trends that will lead to a better understanding of Pater's point of departure. Although there have been a few revealing studies,[1] no one has yet produced a comprehensive analysis of nineteenth-century aesthetics, and indeed the highly significant replacement of rhetoric by aesthetics at the end of the eighteenth century still stands in need of a theoretical explanation. In this respect Burke is an important figure, marking a juncture not to be overlooked, for with him aesthetic feeling frees itself from given rules and aesthetic objects and becomes a subjective quality of the percipient.[2]

It was Young whose doctrine of the genius broke with traditional poetics, but it is only with Blake that this change took on a revolutionary fervour. The passionate claim that 'To Generalize is to be an Idiot'[3] marks the final break with the old Aristotelian function of art as mimesis.[4] But this break is just the starting-point for Blake's attempt to formulate what is for him the true meaning of art. In *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* there is a revealing passage in which the visionary author is dining with Ezekiel and Isaiah and discussing the existence of God:

> Then Ezekiel said: The philosophy of the east taught the first principles of human perception: some nations held one principle for the origin, and some another: we of Israel taught that the Poetic Genius (as you now call it) was the first principle and all the others merely derivative, which was the cause for our despising the Priests & Philosophers of other countries, and prophesying that all Gods would at last be proved to originate in ours & to be the tributaries of the Poetic Genius.[5]

Blake's concept removes not only the hallowed distinction between art and nature, but also that between art and life. For him the Poetic Genius is a universal principle. There are two vital elements in Blake's aesthetics. First there is the radical repudiation of mimesis; secondly there is a visionary drive towards a hitherto inconceivable notion of art. This new idea, ushered in with concomitant revolutionary pathos, is marked by a high degree of subjectivity. Traditional concepts can no longer embrace the function of art, and so subjectivity replaces them. Blake's approach is

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typical of the nineteenth century. The greater the emphasis on subjectivity, the swifter the changes in principles of art, for now the yardstick is individual intention and not universal convention. Hence the variety of concepts that arise during the nineteenth century in the attempt to give art an irrefutable foundation.

Blake also seeks to consolidate his concept by representing the Old Testament prophets as harbingers of the Poetic Genius; they invoke the artist as the new God, they perceive the origins of the world in him, and they regard all other gods as enslaved to him. This subjugation of biblical figures to a totally alien purpose shows just how far Blake's concept of art is to be taken, for it embodies the very substance of the world and is the beginning and the end of all things. 'The Poetic Genius may overthrow the bounds of "finite organical perception". The artist in society strives to regain Eden for all men, to leave behind that state of delusion characterized by Lockean nature and spiritual forms fallen into material. Art is thus prophetic in the religious sense.'[6]

The moment art is freed from its traditional function, it is defined as the creation of the world. Its forms are those of prophecy, which forces Blake to invent a myth whose purpose is the regaining of the Paradise that lies behind the duality of the world as mythicised by him. He defines art in terms of the attributes of God, and thus leads the way into the nineteenth century, which began to transfer the attributes of God to the world itself.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Samuel Taylor Coleridge confessed: 'I do not like history.'[7] Instead he loved poetry, metaphysics and dreams. In this respect he is closely akin to Blake, but it is the differences between the two that are most revealing. The visionary character of Blake's aesthetics is cast in cognitive language by Coleridge, which allows for the difference to be perceived in their respective conceptions of art. From German transcendental philosophy Coleridge derived the following definition of art in its relation to nature:

> In the objects of nature are presented, as in a mirror, all the possible elements, steps, and processes of intellect antecedent to consciousness, and therefore to the full development of the intelligential act; and man's mind is the very focus of all the rays of intellect which are scattered throughout the images of nature. Now so to place these images, totalized, and fitted to the limits of the human mind, as to elicit from, and to superinduce upon, the forms themselves the moral reflexions to which they approximate, to make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature, – this is the mystery of genius in the Fine Arts. Dare I add that the genius must act on the feeling, that body is but a striving to become mind, – that it is mind in its essence! In every work of art there is a reconcilement of the external with the internal; the conscious is so impressed on the unconscious as to appear in it.[8]

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Nature for Coleridge is not an independent entity of the human mind – it rather embodies a stage on the journey towards self-consciousness in which the mind has not as yet recognised its ultimate aim. Nature is the sum of the mind's unconscious forms. The old Aristotelian concept of nature, which was still adhered to in the eighteenth century, is subverted by exposing nature as nothing but a condition of the mind – it fades away in proportion to the mind's consciousness of itself. Thus the dividing line disappears between nature and thought, thereby ensuring the predominance of the creative genius. Coleridge identifies the process of becoming conscious with art, whose perfection lies in the final removal of the supposed differences between nature and mind. The mastery of art is to be seen in the merging of external and internal, of nature and thought, and by means of art nature becomes a mirror for the mind to see itself as *natura naturans*.[9] 'Art . . . is the mediatress between, and reconciler of, nature and man.'[10]

For Coleridge art, as an abstract entity, is a dialectical concept, and in this respect he diverges from Blake's Poetic Genius, for while the latter is the origin preceding all opposites, Coleridge's art only achieves unity once it has bridged the cleft of opposites. Thus art as 'mediatress' and 'reconciler' presupposes awareness of opposites which provide the starting-point for its efficacy. Blake's visions therefore fade into terms of abstraction, and his revolutionary fervour gives way to heightened reflection. Art, then, for Coleridge is no longer a prio:i, but a posteriori. While Blake mythologises the world through his revelations, Coleridge seeks to come to grips with essence or being in terms of German idealism. Blake's Poetic Genius is a divinity, but for Coleridge art is the means whereby the totality of what is can be made tangible, and so Blake's art as origin gives way to Coleridge's art as a process of unending mediation. For Coleridge, art serves the 'great eternal I AM'.[11] 'In other words, it is a subject which becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself; but which never is an object except for itself, and only so far as by the very same act it becomes a subject.'[12] Art for him is not the ultimate,[13] because it serves to make visible the efficacy of the self-creating mind – unlike Blake's Poetic Genius, which *is* the ultimate reality.

The Platonism of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* and his concepts of 'Reason' and 'Imagination' tie up with Coleridge's aesthetics,[14] but despite this idealistic basis, Shelley's main concern is the task and the achievement of the poet. Even if this shift of emphasis is attributable to the apologetic origins of the treatise, one cannot help being struck by the extraordinary definition of the poet which he offers at the end: 'Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and

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feel not what they inspire . . . Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.'[15] This priestlike function of the poet suggests that he has contact with some supernatural reality that speaks through him. But he is not a passive medium, merely passing on sacred inspiration – he activates the unworldly reality within the world. He is the legislator because the ethos of the world grows out of the discoveries of the poet,[16] who creates an indestructible order out of chaos, forms language, drafts laws, and so with his fellow poets becomes 'founders of civil society'.[17] These for Shelley are the consequences of the poet's role as mediator between Platonic transcendence and reality.

A substantial part of the *Defence of Poetry* consists of the evidence for this idea. Shelley finds it in history, for it is in history that the spirit of poetry is given tangible form by the poets.[18] Poetry needs the chaotic and the transient in order to take effect, precisely because it gives permanence to the transitory. Shelley is aware of his own obsession with history, and pulls himself up short: 'But let us not be betrayed from a defence into a critical history of poetry and its influence on society.'[19] From the past he moves to the poet's revelations of the future, for the poet's access to another world enables him to step beyond the temporal limitations of this world. Shelley's concept of poetry differs from that of Coleridge principally through the fact that it is historical rather than abstract, providing social orders rather than mirrors for the mind. His preoccupation with poetry's impact on reality is illustrated by his much-quoted claim that 'Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man.'[20] But art as redemption does not refer to man's liberation from pedestrian reality, as is the case with Pater later on; for Shelley, art ensures the restoration of the divine within a disfigured world order. Yet the very fact that the divine is threatened with decay shows the degree of significance now assumed by the historical world. For both Coleridge and Shelley, then, art is a process of creation, but for the one it is conceived normatively, and for the other historically.

Thomas Carlyle's pronouncements about the hero as poet are perhaps not directly related to aesthetics, but they do bring out some of the consequences implicit in Shelley's concept: ' . . . the Hero can be Poet, Prophet, King, Priest or what you will, according to the kind of world he finds himself born into'.[21] This dependence of the hero on historical circumstances takes Shelley's ideas on the relation between art and history one step further, for history virtually determines what the hero is to do (since his task is to change history). For Carlyle, history ceases to be a neutral arena in which poetry can display its powers, because historical situations must be resolved by the redeeming and healing qualities of the 'great man'. Instead of creating human order by virtue of his contact with another

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world, the poet now restores, through his moral resolve, the orderliness and totality that have been shattered by history. Carlyle's poet is a being 'once more, in earnest with the Universe, though all others were but toying with it'.[22] This 'once more' shows the poet's opposition to a decaying world, and only he 'communicates an Unendlichkeit'.[23] Shelley's legislator now becomes the hero who must restore meaning to the universe.

This hero for Carlyle is the 'Man of Letters'. But the writer is forced into the position of the apologist, for he lives in a 'godless world',[24] where he must bring out 'the True, Divine and Eternal, which exists always, unseen to most, under the Temporary'.[25] What transforms the man of letters into a hero are his efforts to withstand and to counteract the 'paralysing scepticism' of the modern world. Earnestness and uprightness become essential qualities of the hero, whose incorruptible sincerity alone elevates him to the ranks of genius.[26]

The more art is related to history, the less important becomes the idea of art as creation. Instead it turns into a haven promising redemption from the growing malaise of ordinary reality. Thus the man of letters is now less the creator than the healer of the sick historical world.

Carlyle's view of the great man as hero contains two highly significant aspects: (1) man becomes a hero by overcoming the historical world; (2) his designation as hero entails possible failure, in which case the great man is a potentially tragic figure. Writers, who must endure the 'paralysing' modern world, are therefore potentially heroes and tragedians.

With Carlyle the concept of art as creation reaches a point of crisis: art no longer builds the world but instead can only restore what has been lost; its function is no longer to create but is to overcome existing reality.

Art as mimesis

The traditional concept of art as imitation of Nature was in no way discarded by the conception of art as creation, let alone by the assumption that it originated in the inspired genius. It was a concept that – in spite of changing definitions – survived long into the nineteenth century, though it was to undergo considerable changes. William Wordsworth's '*Note on Ode. Intimations of Immortality*' contains an interesting observation. Recalling his childhood, he says: 'I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality.'[27] This attitude is different from Coleridge's in that Wordsworth has to save himself by reaffirming the physical existence of the outside world. For him, Nature is a reality,[28] whereas for Coleridge it was an unconscious form of the mind. The child's

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