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Wolfgang Iser
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European Studies in English Literature

Walter Pater

Wolfgang Iser's study of Walter Pater (1839–94) was first published in German in 1960. It places the English critic, essayist and novelist in a philosophical tradition whose major exponents were Hegel and Coleridge, at the same time showing how Pater differed crucially from these thinkers to become representative of a late Victorian culture critically poised in transition between Romanticism and Modernism. Professor Iser broadens the aesthetic context from Plato through to twentieth-century writers such as Virginia Woolf, illustrating Pater's ideas with detailed examples from his critical and fictional work. Pater's new definitions of 'beauty' and 'style' in art, his doctrine of 'art for art's sake', his preoccupation with aesthetic existence, his fascination with periods of balance and historical transition – between 'medieval' and 'Renaissance', 'Classical' and 'Romantic' – are seen in the light of his scepticism towards all systematisation and his view of art as countering human finiteness by capturing the intensity of the moment. In practice, Pater's fiction acts out the problems inherent in any attempt to sustain an aesthetic existence, and it shows his awareness of the questions thus raised both for aesthetics and for culture generally.

This important book, which remains as illuminating now as when it first appeared, should be read by those interested in philosophy and aesthetics, as well as by those concerned with the Victorian novel and with nineteenth- and twentieth-century criticism, whether theoretical or art-historical. For the Pater specialist, it provides the first English version of a major landmark in the field.

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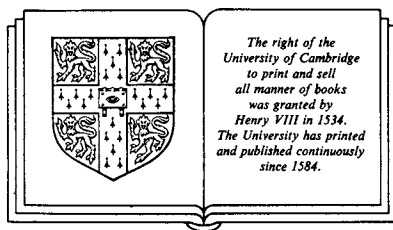
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Foreword

The translation of a book that was written almost thirty years ago is bound to cause mixed feelings in its author. If he is no longer satisfied with what he wrote, then he will feel that, despite its occasional reappearance in quotations and references, it should be left buried in the peace and quiet of bibliographies; if he agrees to its resurrection, however, he cannot help viewing his own text as something alien. This need not necessarily be because his interests have changed; the passage of time alone causes a shift in focus, giving the text a different slant. The temptation, therefore, to reshuffle portions of the book is hard to resist. But alterations of any kind would have resulted in a disturbing juxtaposition of viewpoints.

Literary criticism serves to translate a past into terms of a present, and so it is inevitable that present interests should govern and indeed condition the framework of interpretation. These interests in turn are an offshoot of past approaches, which still function negatively by denoting those approaches which are now blocked. The mid 1950s saw the eclipse of the history of ideas and the life-and-letters model as guidelines for criticism, and witnessed in their wake the flourishing of New Criticism with its devotion to close reading which was as widespread then as Deconstruction is now.

In the 1950s a monograph on an author's complete works entailed using the classic form of scholarly positivism in order to bring out one's own intention by shattering the conventions of the genre. Instead of an accumulation of factual information, more often than not compiled for its own sake, and a record of the history and environment of an author and his sources, the focus shifted to the aesthetic dimension of the work. If the work itself came under scrutiny, then inevitably the interpretation veered towards a New Critical approach, which sought to strip the work of all such extraneous factors and grasp it as an autonomous object.

Caught between this Scylla and Charybdis of literary criticism, I found myself attracted to the figure of Walter Pater. An analysis of his work seemed to promise experience of what it meant to make Art the ultimate value of finite existence. Such an experience would bring to light the problems which New Criticism could not cope with, since it was no longer concerned with the consequences of the autonomous object. Pater dealt precisely with these problems, because for him Art was an ultimate value,

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enabling man to forget the pressure of finite human existence. For Pater autonomous Art and real life joined hands, as it were, under the table – a relationship that could only be anathema to the basic principles of New Criticism. And so by analysing Pater's work I hoped to uncover what had been glossed over by New Criticism and had thus ultimately caused its demise as a paradigm of interpretation.

Anyone whose life is devoted to Art lives aesthetically. Therefore, Pater's work can be read almost as a blueprint for the aesthetic existence which he is attempting to illuminate. I have borrowed the necessary heuristics from Kierkegaard, especially his *Either/Or* – that penetrating analysis of all Romanticism – though with the reservation that the aesthetic existence is not to be viewed as a sign or even as a preliminary stage of any other form of existence. In order to give shape to the constituent elements of the aesthetic life, I have tried to interpret Pater through Pater, by applying his own hermeneutic principle of the 'spiritual form' to himself. 'Spiritual form' is a kind of Aristotelian *morphē* which Pater seeks to detect in every phenomenon that interests him, so that he can grasp the perceivable aspects as a manifestation of this concealed form. It is a principle which he practices with great virtuosity, and by applying it to Pater himself I hoped to lay bare the 'spiritual form' of his own writings. This proved to be the aesthetic moment – the basic constituent of the aesthetic existence, which he so incessantly propagated and which, being the root of all his work, was something that he could not pull to the surface himself. For a transcendental stance towards oneself would mean transcending the aesthetic existence.

If with hindsight I can now say that my approach sometimes seems rather intrinsic, this is because I was striving not to impose a systematic and hence alien frame of reference on an unsystematic and richly faceted body of work. To have done so would have eliminated the vast range of nuances produced by the Paterian brand of repetition. The aesthetic existence, narcissistically turned in upon itself and yet unable to sustain this fixation, seems to require viewing from standpoints outside itself, but to do this would mean blotting out all inherent problems – especially if one were to use the Kierkegaardian reference of the ethical decision or the religious renunciation of self, not to mention the condemnation the aesthetic existence would have suffered if viewed from a sociological angle. Thus my focal point of interest was the aesthetic moment, and as a result I perhaps unjustifiably neglected those elements of the work that might be taken as pointers to the cultural situation of Pater's time.

In historical terms, then, my monograph may be taken to reflect the problems of literary criticism in the 1950s. On the one hand, I was trying to free literature from being taken as evidence for anything other than itself, so that I could focus on its own specific qualities; on the other, I

wanted to show through Pater's work what was entailed in the concept of autonomous art.

Today these aspects have faded into the background, and what was at the time not of prime significance for me now seems to link my 30-year-old study with an aspect whose importance is far greater than I had envisaged – namely, the idea of legitimation. Pater's urgent need to legitimise autonomous art sprang from the instability of the aesthetic existence, which he was eager to underpin. Even though the aesthetic existence is nowadays identified with aestheticism – the final fling of a now all but defunct bourgeois culture – the idea of legitimation is still a burning issue. Its current actuality differs, however, from crises of legitimation in the past by its compulsion to grapple with its own necessity. This becomes all the more obvious through a postmodern attitude, which rejects the idea of legitimation altogether. This outright rejection separates it from High Modernism, which regarded Performance as the legitimation for cultural activities. For Pater, legitimation was still not abstract but concrete, since he believed that history and myth were guidelines that gave solid foundations to the enhanced moment. His very search for such legitimation shows that he had anticipated a problem that was to become crucial for the twentieth century, with its crises of legitimation spreading further and further afield, and plaguing social and ideological orders as well as the arts. Pater's concern, though, was to remove instability, and to this end he mobilised the entire past. His invocation of history and myth sought to elevate the intensified moment into a life-line for the aesthetic existence, thus indicating a change in the function of legitimation. In the past, world pictures provided the orientation, whereas Pater sets out to justify both the transitoriness and the in-between state of the aesthetic existence by making the totality of the human past subservient to this end, thus inverting the idea of legitimation. Instead of providing a framework to which cultural and social activities have to be subsumed, legitimation now applies itself to private longings.

It is this aspect of Pater's work rather than his elucidation of the aesthetic existence that makes him more interesting for us today. What haunts twentieth-century thought – a search for an all-embracing legitimation bearing out the diversified intellectual commitments, social requirements, and multiple ideologies – Pater had anticipated in his own way, and to this extent he is a figure of transition in a sense quite different from that which I had discerned thirty years ago.

Equally important was Pater's attempt to use literary fiction in order to overcome difficulties which had proved to be insurmountable for literary criticism. Criticism is hedged in by references to which its statements are to be connected, whereas literary fiction crosses the boundaries marked by these very frames. The boundary-crossing potential of fiction is actualised

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when referential writing runs up against its inherent limitations. This is borne out in Pater's writings: whenever he reaches an impasse regarding history and myth as sanctions for his ideas, fiction continues the thread, exploring the reasons for failure by imagining situations in which an aesthetic life might – but never does – achieve the longed-for unity with itself. Where cognitive criticism comes to an end, literature begins, for fiction alone can stage that which is inaccessible to referential discourse.

Although Pater remains deeply rooted in the nineteenth century, and so is usually classified as a Late Romantic, there can be no doubt that his work prefigured the problems that have become dominant in our time. And the parallels between his *fin de siècle* and our own fast-fading century make it all the more fitting that he should now emerge again from the shadows to which his aesthetic label has so long confined him.

Some reviews of the original German edition of this book objected that my systematic unfolding of the problem occasionally led me into departing from the chronology of Pater's work. It would indeed have been well worth combining my own scheme with the chronological one, for the resultant overlaps would have helped to convey the finer details of the structure of the aesthetic existence; the latter never finally rejects anything, and so by taking up earlier, problematic forms of legitimation and relating them to later solutions, I could have shown the extent to which the aesthetic existence is poised – though never stabilised – at the intersection of conflicting tendencies. However, this has been the main trend of my argument anyway, and it seemed to me that a pursuit of the nuances to be brought about by a strict observance of the chronological sequence might in the end have told more about Pater as a person than about the features of the aesthetic existence.

The intervening years have brought further research on Pater,* which made me doubt whether I should retain my introductory section on Pater criticism, as some of the items discussed have since been superseded. But when I wrote the book, a scholarly convention – long since abandoned – demanded that the starting-point of a monograph had to be mapped out by a critical discussion of what was extant on the subject concerned. This basically hermeneutic procedure served the purpose of outlining the chosen approach, which in turn was conditioned by the problems thrown up by previous research. My survey of existing Pater criticism served precisely this function, and so it would have been impossible to omit my introductory section without obscuring my starting-point.

* For a detailed bibliography of writings on Pater up to 1973, see Franklin E. Court's *Walter Pater. An Annotated Bibliography of Writings About Him*, De Kalb, Illinois, 1980.

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Finally, I should like to express my deep gratitude to David Henry Wilson, who not only translated my text, but also occasionally reshaped it for the sake of brevity and clarity.

W.I.

Konstanz, October 1985