PART I

Walter Pater and the culture of the *fin-de-siècle*

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The antinomian Pater: 1894–1994

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In the first chapter of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* Pater speaks of a Renaissance in France at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century, 'a Renaissance within the limits of the middle age itself – a brilliant but in part abortive effort to do for human life and the human mind what was afterwards done in the fifteenth'.[1] A few pages later he ascribes to this medieval Renaissance a certain force of conviction:

> One of the strongest characteristics of that outbreak of the reason and the imagination, of that assertion of the liberty of the heart, in the middle age, which I have termed a medieval Renaissance, was its antinomianism, its spirit of rebellion and revolt against the moral and religious ideas of the time. In their search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination, in their care for beauty, in their worship of the body, people were impelled beyond the bounds of the Christian ideal; and their love became sometimes a strange idolatry, a strange rival religion.[2]

Pater explains this assertion of the liberty of the heart by reference to one of his favourite notions, the survival of the pagan gods, a notion he received from Heine's essay 'The Gods in Exile'. In *The Renaissance* Pater speaks of 'the return of that ancient Venus, not dead, but only hidden for a time in the caves of the Venusberg, of those old pagan gods still going to and fro on the earth, under all sorts of disguises.'[3] The survival of the pagan gods in an otherwise Christian world accounts, he says, for the love of Abelard and Eloïse, the legend of Tannhäuser, the Albigensian heresy, the Order of St Francis, and the prophetic writings of Joachim di Fiore. Only the survival of the old gods could explain these; explain Joachim's Everlasting Gospel, for instance, according to which a third and final dispensation will come about in which Law, imposed by the Father, and Discipline, by the Son, will be superseded by Love, the Freedom lavished by the Holy Spirit.

Pater chose these examples rather casually, it appears. There is no evidence that he studied forms of antinomianism closer to home, the Muggletonianism that E. P. Thompson has described in *Witness against*

the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law (1993) or the other English forms of dissent discussed by A. L. Morton in *The Everlasting Gospel* (1958) and *The World of the Ranters* (1970), and by Christopher Hill in *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972). Nor did he show any interest in the theological bearing of antinomianism, the claim of 'free grace' its adepts advanced, or the sanction they found in St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians 3.24–25: 'The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.'[4] It was sufficient for Pater that he divined a spirit of antinomianism at large in the medieval Renaissance: he was not under a scholarly obligation to trace it to a source.

Pater noted that the forms of antinomianism he had in mind were in rebellion against Christian doctrine, but he was reluctant to leave the matter there. He disliked presenting a conflict as if it were fixed in that character: it was a mark of his temper to see conflicts as mostly unnecessary. In this respect he was Wordsworthian: in one of the 'Essays upon Epitaphs' Wordsworth spoke of 'the best feelings of our nature; feelings which, though they seem opposite to each other, have another and a finer connection than that of contrast'. It is a connection, Wordsworth said, 'formed through the subtle progress by which, both in the natural and in the moral world, qualities pass insensibly into their contraries, and things revolve upon each other'.[5] Pater thought that strong institutions should find it in their power to admit dissent even to the degree of heresy and to be liberal on principle. 'Theories which bring into connexion with each other,' he says, 'modes of thought and feeling, periods of taste, forms of art and poetry, which the narrowness of men's minds constantly tends to oppose to each other, have a great stimulus for the intellect.'[6] Pater's feeling for the Renaissance is largely his pleasure in finding such oppositions mitigated. The student of the Renaissance, he says,

> has this advantage over the student of the emancipation of the human mind in the Reformation, or the French Revolution, that in tracing the footsteps of humanity to higher levels, he is not beset at every turn by the inflexibilities and antagonisms of some well-recognised controversy, with rigidly defined opposites, exhausting the intelligence and limiting one's sympathies. The opposition of the professional defenders of a mere system to that more sincere and generous play of the forces of human mind and character, which I have noted as the secret of Abelard's struggle, is indeed always powerful. But the incompatibility with one another of souls really 'fair' is not essential; and within the enchanted region of the Renaissance, one needs not be for ever on one's guard. Here there are no fixed parties, no exclusions: all breathes of that unity of culture

in which 'whatsoever things are comely' are reconciled, for the elevation and adorning of our spirits.[7]

It is typical of Pater to assume that antinomian values are spiritually and aesthetically superior to the law they oppose: they exhibit 'that more sincere and generous play of the forces of human mind and character', and they attract one's sympathy by being fair and comely. It follows that Pater, unusually sensitive to transitions and processes, does whatever he can to make the objects of his attention quietly give up their insistence: he is never pleased to see a force or an institution maintain its privilege. If the terminology of conflict seems unavoidable, he likes to separate the rival parties and to give the antinomian one its due if minor independence; ascribing to it the perfection of standing aside. In the chapter from which I've been quoting, he incurs the risk of contradicting himself for the sake of saying that Abelard 'prefigures the character of the Renaissance, that movement in which, in various ways, the human mind wins for itself a new kingdom of feeling and sensation and thought, not opposed to but only beyond and independent of the spiritual system then actually realised'.[8] Abelard 'reaches out towards, he attains, modes of ideal living, beyond the prescribed limits of that system, though in essential germ, it may be, contained within it'.[9] 'Ideal' and 'essential germ' in that sentence have much work to do: they have to suggest that those men who were in charge of the system could not imagine a culture finer than their own and therefore had an inadequate sense of the system as it might and should be. Pater warms to the antinomian motives not as lost causes he knows to be lost – that is the obvious way of dealing with them – but as values more refined than those of the system they rebelled against. In a passage found only in the first two editions of *The Renaissance* he writes:

> The perfection of culture is not rebellion but peace; only when it has realised a deep moral stillness has it really reached its end. But often on the way to that end there is room for a noble antinomianism.[10]

Pater recognizes that in any society there is likely to be a body of law, whether we call it power, Christianity, the state, or whatever other institution defines reality and demands that it be obeyed. And there are likely to be forces in conflict with the law and planning to oppose it. But he is especially tender to those feelings which do not attack the law directly but turn aside from it and hold quietly, if they can, to their independence. He thinks these feelings are likely to be the most refined, the most beautiful. So we recognize in Pater's temper a triple rhythm,

a desire to move from power through conflict to stillness; from an apparently low degree of refinement to a higher and then an even higher one. I will try to clarify this rhythm in the movement of two essays.

The first is 'Diaphaneitè,' an essay he gave as a talk to the Old Mortality in July 1864. He did not publish it, but he retained much of its spirit and several of its sentences for the essay on Winckelmann and the last chapter of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. The essay was published posthumously in *Miscellaneous Studies* (1895), the book prepared for the publisher by his friend Charles Shadwell.

Pater did not invent the word *diaphaneitè*, he merely interfered with it by displacing the grave accent, a gesture Shadwell allowed to stand. The word came into French in the fourteenth century and English in the seventeenth; in both languages it means the state of being pervious to light. Air, crystal, and shallow water are instances of it. David de Laura has shown that Pater's 'Diaphaneitè' is much indebted to Arnold's *Essays in Criticism*: each marks an attempt to develop a concept of culture toward certain images of its embodiment. But Pater is more inventive than Arnold in this respect. Arnold appeals to one's best self as a moral quality independent of one's social class. Pater does not ask people to aspire toward their best or ideal selves in any moral sense: he is concerned with spiritual quality and is willing to let morals look out for themselves. In 'Diaphaneitè' he distinguishes three human types. The first is worldly, it coincides with material interests and enjoys their success. Thriving upon fixity and definition, this type has the quality of men who govern. Or, extending the type toward Yeats's discrimination of literary types in 'The Tragic Generation', it marks the type of writer who enjoys the companionship of his fellows by sharing a common sense of reality. Pater's second type is alien to the first, but related to it by this alienation: it is exemplified by the saint, the artist, and the sage. People of this second type are 'out of the world's order,' but they work 'in and by means of the main current of the world's energy'. Their right to live is easily conceded. Such people are useful to the world: 'as if dimly conscious of some great sickness and weariness of heart in itself, it turns readily to those who theorise about its unsoundness'. The second type speaks for the conscience of the first and is intermittently allowed to be audible. If it presented a serious risk of undermining the first type, it would have to be suppressed, but there is no risk. Similarly the writers of Yeats's 'tragic generation' are given space in which to express themselves and to run amok if they must. Pater says of these two types that in each 'a breadth and generality of character is required',

presumably because one type owns the world and the other lives by the irony of rebuking the vulgarity of that empire. The two are related by contrast and conflict, statement and counter-statement, assertion and denial.

Pater's third type is neither broad nor general but rare:

> It does not take the eye by breadth of colour; rather it is that fine edge of light, where the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point. It crosses rather than follows the main currents of the world's life.[11]

This is male homosexual code. The subject of the first sentence, 'It', refers back to 'another type of character'. But the clarifying sentence – 'rather' – doesn't continue describing the type, it identifies it with 'that fine edge of light, where the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point'. 'Refine themselves', not 'are refined'; as if this self-refining were spontaneous, in the course of such a type. The type is as elemental as light, and is indistinguishable from its supreme property, 'that fine edge of light'. Nothing is yet described. The light is not in landscape, it comes into general nature when the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point. Every detail from 'that fine edge of light' through 'refine themselves' to 'the burning point' would be recognized by Pater's Oxford friends as an allusion to the flame of male homosexual love in Plato's *Symposium*. The type is recommended by being associated not with nature but with the free grace of an ideal nature.

The sentences I have quoted are the earliest version of Pater's most famous motif, that of burning with a hard, gem-like flame. In 'Diaphaneitè' he protects the examplars of this third type by saying that the world 'has no sense fine enough for those evanescent shades', it cannot classify them or engage with them as it engages with saints, artists, and sages. In the essay on Winckelmann 'that fine edge of light' becomes 'a sharp edge of light' and is attributed not to the few but to 'the supreme Hellenic culture'.

This third type may seem to be merely the embodiment of Arnoldian disinterestedness. Not so. Disinterestedness in Arnold's account is a quality of one's attention to images and objects at large. As in criticism: a good critic silences the dialogue of his mind with itself while he judges particular objects and actions in the light of the best ideas he can find. The critic should raise his mind above the bias of his standard interests and especially above his preoccupation with himself. He should pay attention to each object as he comes upon it and he should discriminate

one object from another. Disinterestedness is the quality of one who is alert in the world, conscientious, morally responsible. But Pater's third or diaphanous type does not observe this duty: such a person is not concerned with the world, he hardly prefers one part of the world's life to another. He looks to a higher consideration than any implied by such words as culture, society, and civility: he 'seeks to value everything at its eternal worth', and quietly claims to be the most sensitive judge of that. But 'seeks' is misleading. The distinctive quality of this third type is simplicity; it is a happy gift of nature, such that it appears to issue from the higher order of grace, it comes 'without any struggle at all'. A person of this type treats life in the spirit of art and finds that as he comes nearer to the perfection of the type – with Pater it is always 'he', not 'she' – 'the veil of an outer life not simply expressive of the inward becomes thinner and thinner'. He lives a transparent life, indifferent, beyond confusion, as if exempt from the exacerbation of meeting qualities in the world different from his own.

'Diaphaneitè' is a difficult essay, because it affronts one's common sense according to which more is better: the more life, the better. In Pater's sense of life, more is likely to be crass. A life is better the more refined it is, the more it dispenses with what the mob deems enrichments. Pater takes a common adjective of plenitude, cancels it, and presents its trace as supreme value. He lavishes praise upon one's willingness to do without. So we have his choice words: 'colourless', 'unclassified', 'sexless', 'impotence', 'ineffectual', each of which regards as precious a temptation to plenitude, set aside. Pater urges his fellows to live in the emptied space between 'neither' and 'nor'. He speaks tenderly of reserve, the tact of omission, and even of the ultimate reserve, death.

Diaphaneity is exemplified first by Dante's Beatrice, then by Raphael, 'who in the midst of the Reformation and the Renaissance, himself lighted up by them, yielded himself to neither, but stood still to live upon himself'. It is also embodied in the hermaphrodites of Greek sculpture: 'the statues of the gods had the least traces of sex'. But the strangest instance of the type is Charlotte Corday. Pater recalls Carlyle's description of her in *The French Revolution*. It is hard to see her as diaphanous, but Carlyle presents her as complete, her energy 'the spirit that will prompt one to sacrifice himself for his country'. More to Pater's point, Carlyle describes Corday as 'still': 'of beautiful still countenance'. Pater quotes the first part of this passage:

> What if she, this fair young Charlotte, had emerged from her secluded stillness, suddenly like a Star; cruel-lovely, with half-angelic, half-daemonic splendour; to gleam

for a moment, and in a moment be extinguished: to be held in memory, so bright complete was she, through long centuries! – Quitting Cimmerian Coalitions without, and the dim-simmering Twenty-five millions within, History will look fixedly at this one fair Apparition of a Charlotte Corday; will note whither Charlotte moves, how the little Life burns forth so radiant, then vanishes swallowed of the Night.[12]

Marat's assassin, brought out for execution, 'wears the same still smile'. Pater shows no interest in the deed, or its moral quality, but he invokes Corday in Carlyle's image of her: entirely still, complete, self-possessed, her momentary gleam, her extinction, the afterimage of her in our mind. She appears to be the cause of herself.

The main source of 'Diaphaneitè' is clear. Gerald Monsman has emphasised the bearing of Fichte's transcendental idealism on this aspect of Pater's early work. To the idealist, as Fichte says in the 'Second Introduction to the Science of Knowledge', the only positive quality is freedom, 'existence, for him, is a mere negation of freedom'. The self begins with 'an absolute positing of its own existence'.[13] To posit oneself and to be are one and the same. Fichte then declares that the self's mode of existence in the world is moral – in this he differs from Pater – its duty is to participate as finite being in the Absolute or Divine Idea. As if he anticipated Arnold's concept of culture and proposed an alternative to it, Fichte says:

In every age, that kind of education and spiritual culture by means of which the age hopes to lead mankind to the knowledge of the ascertained part of the Divine Idea, is the Learned Culture of the age; and every man who partakes in this culture is a Scholar of the age... The true-minded Scholar will not admit of any life and activity within him except the immediate life and activity of the Divine Idea... he suffers no emotion within him that is not the direct emotion and life of the Divine Idea which has taken possession of him.... His person, and all personality in the world, have long since vanished from before him, and entirely disappeared in his effort after the realization of the Idea.[14]

This doesn't seem to differ much from Arnold's appeal, in *Culture and Anarchy*, to one's best self, but it does, because 'best' in Arnold always means the best that public, historical life has produced, it refers to an accredited value, though one that is often ignored. Fichte does not appeal to a civic or accredited value: his Divine Idea has no more veridical existence than Wallace Stevens's Supreme Fiction, each is a name for the extreme reach of an idealist desire. Pater, too, derives his values, in 'Diaphaneitè', from within: not the best but the most transparent self. But he does not invoke a Divine Idea in any sense distinct from the self at a given moment. He placed the Divine Idea within the self and declared its realisation to be the achievement of diaphaneity. 'Simplicity in purpose and act', Pater says, 'is a kind of

determinate expression in dexterous outline of one's personality.' 'Determinate' is Fichte's word: *Bestimmtheit*. Simplicity is sign of one's self-culture. Pater speaks of 'a mind of taste lighted up by some spiritual ray within'. The diaphanous person recognizes by instinct those elements in the world which are his, and will have nothing to do with any other:

> It is just this sort of entire transparency of nature that lets through unconsciously all that is really lifegiving in the established order of things; it detects without difficulty all sorts of affinities between its own elements, and the nobler elements in that order.[15]

Pater's 'really' is always his answer to Arnold's claim in using the same word, that he knows the difference between appearance and reality. 'Nobler' introduces a rival principle of choosing the things in the world that should concern the scholar, in Fichte's sense of scholar. Arnold is again alluded to and refuted, the Arnold of *Essays in Criticism* and 'The Scholar Gypsy'. Pater uses a phrase from the poem without naming it or its author. Having described the fulfilment of diaphaneity, he says that 'This intellectual throne is rarely won.' In 'The Scholar Gypsy' Arnold writes:

> And then we suffer! and amongst us one,
> Who most has suffered, takes dejectedly
> His seat upon the intellectual throne....

Arnold urges the gypsy, who has sequestered himself 'with powers / Fresh, undiverted to the world without', to remain apart from that world, 'with its sick hurry, its divided aims'. Pater's diaphanous type is his version of the scholar gypsy – Arnold, sublimed by Fichte – with this difference, that he calls upon him to come into the world and to maintain his autonomy there, as the perfection of standing still. The virtue to be practised is always stillness, held against the force of circumstance and 'one's own confusion and intransparency'. It is Pater's highest tribute to Raphael that he 'stood still to live upon himself'. Hence 'the heroism, the insight, the passion, of this clear crystal nature'. Nearly thirty years later, in a lecture at Oxford on 2 August 1892, Pater thought it worthwhile to note that in the Blenheim Madonna in London Raphael has given the Baptist 'a staff of transparent crystal'.[16] Charlotte Corday, too, stood still in her being. It appears not to matter that Raphael painted masterpieces and Corday knifed Marat to death.

But the most complete exemplar of diaphaneity is not mentioned in Pater's essay. When he came to read Winckelmann in the light of Hegel

and Goethe, he observed the signs of his diaphaneity, his sense of affinity to Plato, his 'happy, unperplexed dexterity', his 'transparent nature, with its simplicity as of the earlier world'. But the clearest proof of Winckelmann's diaphaneity was the instinctive certitude with which he knew himself. As if to prepare the reader to recognize Winckelmann as a Fichtean scholar, Pater quotes Corday's words before the Convention: 'On exécute mal ce qu'on n'pas conçu soi-même.'[17] Twenty pages later Pater says of Winckelmann:

> To the criticism of that consummate Greek modelling he brought not only his culture but his temperament. We have seen how definite was the leading motive of that culture; how, like some central root-fibre, it maintained the well-rounded unity of his life through a thousand distractions. Interests not his, not meant for him, never disturbed him. In morals, as in criticism, he followed the clue of instinct, of an unerring instinct.[18]

The source of Winckelmann's instinct is nature, the root-fibre: the 'motive', according to the second sentence in that passage, is the force of nature, the certainty of its affiliation to Winckelmann. There is no need to enquire further. Not only Winckelmann but his interests and the sculpture to which he felt such destined kinship speak of diaphaneity: the Panathenaic frieze as 'the highest expression of the indifference which lies beyond all that is relative or partial'. Indifference is another word for antinomian completeness. Pater speaks of the Hellenistic bronze in Berlin, the 'Boy Praying': 'Fresh, unperplexed, it is the image of man as he springs first from the sleep of nature, his white light taking no colour from any one-sided experience.' The boy is 'characterless, so far as *character* involves subjection to the accidental influences of life'.[19]

The claim Pater makes for diaphanous people could hardly be larger: the world has no use for them till it needs a scapegoat, hero, or sacrificial victim:

> Poetry and poetical history have dreamed of a crisis, where it must needs be that some human victim be sent down into the grave. These are they whom in its profound emotion humanity might choose to send.[20]

The essay ends with a prophetic conceit as wild as Joachim's:

> People have often tried to find a type of life that might serve as a basement type. The philosopher, the saint, the artist, neither of them can be this type; the order of nature itself makes them exceptional. It cannot be the pedant, or the conservative, or anything rash and irreverent. Also the type must be one discontented with society as it is. The nature here indicated alone is worthy to be this type. A majority of such would be the regeneration of the world.[21]

No writer is on oath in his last paragraph, but Pater can hardly expect to see a society founded on diaphaneity. Yeats's equivalent of that