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Excerpt
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Introduction: an initial reading

In the biographical sketch with which Pater began his early essay on Winckelmann (1867), the central motif is that of a journey. Intellectually, Winckelmann was like Columbus, relying on intuition rather than science to reach a new world. From the “tarnished intellectual world of Germany” he passed “with a sense of exhilaration almost physical” into “the happy light of the antique” and the “full emancipation of his spirit.” Dreaming for years of visiting Italy and Greece, he finally journeyed to Rome in 1755. The journey itself is compared to Dante’s entrance into light from the “darkness of the Inferno.”¹ The motif of the journey recurs in Pater’s late fiction “Apollo in Picardy” (1893). For the sake of his health the learned Prior Saint-Jean is sent from the protective confines of the monastery in which he has been raised to a remote grange under the control of his order. In the countryside of Picardy, where pagan traditions still survive, he falls under the influence of a herdsman of strikingly noble appearance, actually the Greek god Apollo in disguise. Although recovered in body, Prior Jean becomes deranged in mind. Supposed guilty of the death of his young attendant, he is placed in confinement, where he dies, the treatise to which he devoted his life unfinished.

These two journeys appropriately introduce a study of the relation between Pater’s later and earlier work. Most readers would agree that Pater changed with the passage of time and would describe the change in much the same way. Grown seemingly distrustful of the impulses that motivated his earlier work, Pater attempted to retract or severely modify his earlier positions.² The change has been attributed variously to intimidation, weariness, conformity, a *retour du soi*, and guilt (homosexual or parricidal). But whatever the explanation, the distance that separates the older from the younger Pater may conveniently be measured by the contrast between the liberating voyage through which Winckelmann

attained to blithe and confident maturity and that fitfully illuminated excursion for which Prior Jean paid so dear a price.

These journeys introduce the idiom as well as the subject of this study.³ Throughout Pater's work the language and imagery of motion is employed to represent the liberation of the mind, of the senses, and of the imagination, but whereas his early essays urged a more mobile life, his late work exhibits a distrust of motion and often seems to commend a condition from which all signs of it have been excluded. Despite this shift in perspective the topics that engaged Pater early engaged him at the end: art, religion, philosophy, and, more generally, the relation of the individual to a larger collective order, and of later to earlier periods of culture. With these topics as our points of reference, it thus becomes possible to measure the changes in Pater's thought by describing the extent to which in his later writings he opposes those expressions of mobility he once encouraged.

In the early essays that he collected under the title *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater was much concerned with the conditions under which art is generated and regenerated. The most necessary of these conditions is movement in one or another sense of the word. Greek art, Pater tells us in "Winckelmann," originated in connection with Greek religion, but religion itself never functions as a stimulus to art and becomes a source of artistic motifs only under the influence of some external impulse. In the case of Greek art that impulse was provided by mythology:

While the cult remains fixed, the aesthetic element, only accidentally connected with it, expands with the freedom and mobility of the things of the intellect. Always the fixed element is the religious observance; the fluid, unfixed element is the myth, the religious conception. ("W," p. 93)

The condition of the birth of art is also the condition of its rebirth. The Renaissance itself is a "movement," a "complex, many-sided movement," an "outbreak of the human spirit," a "breaking down of those limits which the religious system of the middle age imposed on the heart and the imagination" (*REN*, pp. xxii–xxiii). It represented a "desire for a more liberal and comely way of conceiving life," a rediscovery of "old and forgotten sources" of enjoyment as well as the divining of "fresh sources," "new experiences, new subjects of poetry, new forms of art" (*REN*, pp. 1–2). In the Renaissance, as in ancient Greece, art arises through a differentiating movement that separates it from the static and inflexible traditions of religious life.

As a formal quality of the art work itself, mobility reappears in what we might call the formal aesthetic of the *Renaissance* essays. In the Winckelmann essay Pater summarizes, on the whole quite faithfully, Hegel's philosophy of art, but in a characteristic gesture he represents Hegel's view of artistic development as a progressive increase in mobility. Architecture, the earliest of the arts, corresponds to a state in which humanity's thoughts were preoccupied with the "unseen" world. Sculpture, once it "ceased to be merely decorative and subordinate to architecture," is the next art to emerge, and with Greek sculpture begins the representation of movement in art. Confining itself necessarily to "suggested motion," it nevertheless exhibits "a vital mobile individuality," and "in the best Greek sculpture, the archaic immobility has been thawed, its forms are in motion." Of the arts of the modern world, painting, music, and poetry, poetry in particular has the capacity to recall color, form, and sound "together with the profound, joyful sensuousness of motion" ("W," pp. 98, 99, 101, 97).

A second discussion of aesthetic philosophy occurs in the essay on Giorgione. This essay, published for the first time in 1877, was not included in the first edition of *The Renaissance* but may have been drafted as early as 1872.⁴ Here Pater's source is not Hegel's *Aesthetik* but Lessing's *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*, in which Lessing distinguished the mode of artistic representation proper to painting from that proper to poetry on the grounds of the inherent differences between the plastic and the literary arts. Pater accepts Lessing's argument that poetry is suited to the representation of motion or action in a way in which painting is not, but his own interest in this essay is in those instances in which an art is able to some extent to overcome its own limitations and "to pass into the condition of some other art." And to the extent that art gets rid of "its responsibilities to its subject or material" and obscures the distinction between matter and form, it aspires to the condition of music, which may thus be considered "the true type or measure of perfected art" (*REN*, pp. 105, 108, 109). Once again, however, Pater's language suggests that this artistic tendency is also an aspiration towards greater mobility. Venetian art originated, according to Pater, as a form of Byzantine architectural decoration: "And throughout the course of its later development, always subordinate to architectural effect, the work of the Venetian school never escaped from the influence of its beginnings" (*REN*, p. 110). But Giorgione represents a late and innovative stage in this development:

He is the inventor of *genre*, of those easily movable pictures which serve neither for uses of devotion, nor of allegorical or historic teaching . . . Those spaces of more cunningly blent colour, obediently filling those places, hitherto, in a more architectural scheme, Giorgione detaches from the wall. He frames them by the hand of some skilful carver, so that people may move them readily and take them with them where they go, as one might a poem in manuscript, or a musical instrument. (*REN*, pp. 110–111)

Of such paintings music is not only the condition but also the subject, “music” being taken to represent all those experiences which are essentially transitory because their existence is, like that of music itself, purely temporal:

In these then, the favourite incidents of Giorgione’s school, music or the musical intervals in our existence, life is conceived as a sort of listening – listening to music, to the reading of Bandello’s novels, to the sound of water, to time as it flies. (*REN*, p. 119)

Thus, in the early aesthetic of Pater, art is represented as detaching itself from the static condition of architecture and from its religious associations and thereby attaining the mobility and fluidity of poetry or of music.

Something very like the reverse of this process can be observed in Pater’s later writings on art. These include the series of papers undertaken in the last years of his life, “Notre Dame d’Amiens,” “Vézelay,” and a manuscript fragment “Notre Dame de Troyes,” as well as a projected study of the Parthenon, for which manuscript fragments and notes survive. These studies reflect an interest not only in architecture but in architecture as the physical context in which the other arts find their appropriate place. Indeed, in Pater’s later work architecture sometimes seems to replace music as the type of art. In “Style” (1887), for example, Pater speaks of the structure of a literary composition as the “architectural conception of work, which foresees the end in the beginning and never loses sight of it, and in every part is conscious of all the rest.” Evidence of this conception indicates the presence of “*mind* in style” (*AP*, p. 21). In *Plato and Platonism* Pater illustrates the “direction of Platonic aesthetics” by asking us to recall not only Doric temples but also Gothic cathedrals and their “stern sort” of “loveliness”:

The rigid logic of their charm controls our taste, as logic proper binds the intelligence: we would have something of that quality . . . feel, under its influence, very diffident of our own loose, or gaudy, or literally insignificant, decorations. “Stay then,” says the Platonist . . . “Abide,” he says to youth, “in these places, and the like of them, and mechanically, irresistibly, the soul of them will impregnate yours.” (*PP*, pp. 279–280)

The conviction of the younger Pater that Christianity is something “the human spirit has done with” is emphatically articulated in the first essay he published, “Coleridge’s writings,” which appeared in the *Westminster Review* in 1866.⁵ To defend traditional Christianity, as Coleridge attempted to do, is to resist the movement of mind. It was his intellectual tragedy that he was afflicted with a “passion for the absolute, for something fixed where all is moving.” In religion, as in other areas, Coleridge was insistently “scheming to apprehend the absolute,” “to stereotype one form of faith, to attain, as he says, ‘fixed principles.’” “He had determined, that which is humdrum, insipid . . . shall yet stimulate and inspire” (“CW,” pp. 108, 132, 112). Although he avoided bibliolatry, Coleridge nevertheless “committed a kind of intellectual suicide by catching at any appearance of a fixed and absolute authority.” He often gives the “true historical origin of a dogma, but with a strange dulness of the historic sense, he regards this as a reason for the existence of the dogma now, not merely as a reason for its having existed in the past” (“CW,” pp. 130, 129). Consumed with his “passion for the absolute,” he was impervious to the relative spirit and to the historical method, which is the fruit of that spirit. He could not conceive a moral or a physical world where all is “change, growth, development” or value an intellectual method that dwelt “constantly on the more fugitive conditions or circumstances of things” and gave “elasticity to inflexible principles” (“CW,” p. 131).

“Coleridge’s writings,” like “Winckelmann” and “Poems by William Morris” (1868), was published in the intellectually progressive, and even radical, pages of the *Westminster Review*; in his later years Pater became a regular contributor to *The Guardian*, a conservative Anglican periodical. This circumstance is only one among many indications that as he aged Pater revised his early view of Christianity. The testimony of those who knew Pater in his last years is consistent on this point. Edmund Gosse noticed that as he aged Pater’s interests became “more and more theological” and supposed that had he lived he would have taken orders.⁶ Around 1891 Pater told an undergraduate: “I read very little now except the Bible, the Prayerbook, and the Missal.”⁷ Frederick William Bussell, Chaplain of Brasenose and a close friend of Pater in his last years, recalled: “He was never happier than when discussing with child-like simplicity and submission some of the cardinal mysteries of the Faith, and I well recall how he would reprove any symptom of Rationalizing spirit.”⁸

Such personal testimony is confirmed by the evidence of Pater’s

published and unpublished writings. But our interest at this point is less in the depth of Pater's religious convictions than in their characteristic quality. The "fearless spirit" that Coleridge lacked, the spirit that will "wait patiently the complete results of modern criticism," is no more apparent in the later Pater than in Coleridge himself ("CW," p. 131). Pater does not look, as Jowett did, to a Christianity of the future, purged of the residues of primitive thought; rather he looks determinedly backward. His interest is in the more traditional and orthodox forms of Christianity and in those forms precisely because they are traditional. In a review of *Amiel's Journal* written for *The Guardian* in 1886, Pater regrets that Amiel was unable to see "that the old-fashioned Christianity is itself but the proper historic development of the true 'essence' of the New Testament" or to bring his religious hopes "into connection with the facts, the venerable institutions of the past – with the lives of the saints" (*EG*, p. 33). Two years later, writing in the same paper, Pater reviewed Mrs. Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere*. He is critical of the religious position of Ward's protagonist, who resigned orders because of doubts about "historic Christianity" and observes that the church or chapel which he founded would be "to us a most unattractive place of worship" (*EG*, pp. 65, 69).

The traditional historic church is also a principal topic of two of Pater's manuscript studies, "The writings of Cardinal Newman," and "Art and religion." The second of these essays contains several remarkable exhortations: "Assent, accept and out of it may grow a religio[n] to console you, a ch[urch] to minister to you."⁹ Speaking of that "visible, tangible body," the church, he writes: "why pick & choose, in what grows <has grown> so wonderfully together – assent to the matter in its wholeness, entirety" ("AR," p. [5]). The essay describes the church in language very similar to that of the Newman essay: a "morality," a "trad[ition]," a "body of custom," "historical in its nature, as it were an actual product or result of historic life," growing up in connection with "a g[rea]t actual, very visible concrete society" ("AR," p. [35]). What Pater appears to affirm in these passages – a historical church, theological formulas fixed by orthodoxy, ritual practices inherited from the past – are the very evidences of inflexible religious tradition that, for the youthful Pater, would in time be irresistibly disrupted by the progressive movement of mind.

It is perhaps in the area of philosophy that Pater's early interest in the phenomena of mobility is most explicit. Pater begins the argument of the Coleridge essay by making a firm distinction between modern and

ancient thought, a distinction he consistently represents in terms of a contrast between motion and stasis. Assuming that knowledge must be knowledge of the “absolute,” ancient philosophy “sought to arrest every object in an eternal outline, to fix thought in a necessary formula, and types of life in a classification of ‘kinds’ or genera” (“CW,” p. 107). Modern thought, committed to the “relative” spirit, recognizes “not the truth of eternal outlines effected once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change.” Acknowledging that types of life evanesce “into each other by inexpressible refinements of change” and that things “pass into their opposites by accumulation of indefinable quantities,” it considers the faculty of truth to be “a power of distinguishing and fixing delicate and fugitive details” (“CW,” pp. 107, 108).

In philosophy, as in religion, Coleridge attempted to resist the relative spirit and to reaffirm the absolute. He was therefore engaged in a “struggle against the increasing life of the mind itself.” By means of rigorously established definitions and firmly framed distinctions, Coleridge hoped to secure a knowledge independent of those forces of movement and change that constitute the actual conditions of our mental as of our physical life. Such an effort was futile, and it is for Pater a sign of its futility that the character of Coleridge’s philosophic prose is inert and lifeless. A philosopher who attempts to survey “every mode of the inward life” must “not seek to stereotype any one of the many modes of that life” but must “hold ideas loosely in the relative spirit” (“CW,” pp. 108, 110–111). Coleridge’s language is

forced and broken, lest some saving formula should be lost – distinctities, enucleation, pentad of operative Christianity – he has a whole vocabulary of such phrases, and expects to turn the tide of human thought by fixing the sense of such expressions as reason, understanding, idea. (“CW,” p. 111)

The thought of an intelligence in nature, which in Wordsworth was no more than “sentiment” or “instinct,” has in Coleridge “stiffened into a formula” and “frozen into a scientific or pseudo-scientific theory” (“CW,” p. 109). Pater quotes Coleridge’s remark, “I was driven from life in motion to life in thought and sensation” (“CW,” p. 112). And speaking of Coleridge’s aesthetic philosophy, Pater observes, “Here, too, Coleridge’s thought required to be thawed, to be set in motion” (“CW,” pp. 123–124).

Pater’s most comprehensive assertion of the pervasive power of movement and change occurs in the final paragraph of “Poems by William Morris” (1868), a passage which Pater later adapted to serve as

the “Conclusion” to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. To the revised version Pater added an epigraph from Plato: “[Heraclitus] says ‘All things are in motion and nothing at rest,’” and the “Conclusion” may be, and has been, read as a modern translation or reading of Heraclitus’ philosophy of motion.¹⁰ According to Pater’s well-known argument (which I cite in the earlier version) nothing in our experience is even for a moment preserved from the invasive movements of change and alteration. Our physical life is a “perpetual motion” of elements, “broadcast” “far out on every side of us” and “driven by many forces.” And in the “inward world of thought and feeling” we encounter a “still more rapid whirlpool,” a racing “midstream.” The water imagery in particular is reminiscent of Heraclitus, as is Pater’s repeated insistence that what appears most stable in our experience is in fact in a state of incessant motion. The “clear perpetual outline of face and limb” is only “an image of ours.” Although in “apparent rest,” the water “flows down indeed.”¹¹

This dissolution of the appearance of permanence in our experience is, according to Pater, accomplished by the activity of philosophic reflection. The concluding section of the Morris review is introduced with the acknowledgment that it is a “strange transition from the earthly paradise to the sad-coloured world of abstract philosophy” but nevertheless proposes that we see “what modern philosophy, when it is sincere, really does say about human life and the truth we can attain in it.” When “reflection” acts upon them, the objects of our experience are “dissipated” and their “cohesive force is suspended like a trick of magic.” The solidity with which language invests them is dissolved, disclosing a play of “unstable, flickering, inconsistent” impressions (“WM,” pp. 309, 310). “Analysis” goes further, revealing that these impressions themselves are in

perpetual flight, that each of them is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also, all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is . . . It is with the movement, the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off, that continual vanishing away, that strange perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves. (“WM,” p. 311)

In a world in which “all things are in motion and nothing at rest,” it can not be the function of philosophy to demand acquiescence in “a facile orthodoxy” of Comte and Hegel or to require the sacrifice of any part of our experience in the name of some abstract or conventional interest. Rather, in such a world the function of philosophy is “analysis,” both in

the literal sense of “releasing” or “unloosing” and in the sense implied in Pater’s quotation from Hugo: “Philosophy is the microscope of thought.” And the function of philosophic ideas is to serve as “points of view” or “instruments of criticism,” rousing the intelligence to vigilance and versatility (“WM,” p. 312).

A quite different view of the history and function of philosophy becomes apparent in Pater’s later writings. Among Pater’s manuscripts is an untitled philosophic essay of uncertain date. However, on the first page of the manuscript, there is a note in Pater’s hand indicating that he considered incorporating the essay in *Marius the Epicurean*. Since he did in fact include material from the essay in the third part of *Marius*, we may conclude that the ideas of the essay reflect the state of Pater’s philosophic opinion at the time he was composing the novel. The essay speaks of “a constant tradition in philosophy” “at least from the time of Plato,” of certain “permanent” or “persistent” thoughts or “directions of mind,” of a “tradition in speculative philosophy,” and of “a thread of unity” amid the changes of philosophic opinion. The particular tradition of concern to Pater in this essay is that of the “greater reason,” “a common intelligence to remove from which is insanity and death.” It is “permanent” while the individual is “transient” and represents “the continuity of <the world> <things> through their incessant change.”¹² Whereas the youthful Pater emphasized the decisive break between ancient and modern thought, the older Pater is more interested in evidences of continuity in the history of philosophy. And whereas the youthful Pater advocated a flexible organ of knowledge as alone capable of apprehending the shifting nature of things, the older Pater attempts to identify a faculty somehow cognate with a principle of permanence in things.

More summarily, the revision of Pater’s philosophic opinions may be illustrated from his treatment of the two ancient philosophers he most often cites, Heraclitus and Plato. In the “Conclusion,” the perpetual flux of Heraclitus represents the last word of philosophy on our experience of the world. But Pater’s later writings on philosophy give the impression of starting from the point at which *The Renaissance* concluded. It is with Heraclitus’ philosophy of motion that *Marius* begins his study of philosophic literature and that Pater begins his account of the history of Greek philosophy in *Plato and Platonism*. That account concludes of course with Plato, to whose metaphysical theories Pater seems to have been drawn with the passage of time. We may thus contrast Pater’s “apology for general ideas” in *Plato and Platonism* with his allusion to Plato

in “Coleridge’s writings” (*PP*, p. 159). Discussing the argument of the *Phaedrus*, he had asked who would change “the colour or curve of a roseleaf” for Plato’s “*οὐσία ἀσχημάτος, ἀναφής* [being colorless, formless, intangible]” and called ontology the misconception of a “backward school of logicians” (“CW,” p. 108; *Phaedrus* 247C).

Art, religion, and philosophy do not exhaust the centrifugal tendencies of culture as Pater conceived them. Their activity extends, Pater tells us, to all areas of social life, where they appear as an “assertion of the principles of individualism, of separatism,” and where they encourage the “development of the individual in that which is most peculiar and individual in him” (*PP*, p. 103). Since, as Pater reminds us in “Emerald Uthwart,” a “school is not made for one,” it is presumably not in school that the centrifugal virtues are taught (*MS*, p. 210). In fact, Pater consistently represents education as the process by which the individual is conformed to the collective will of his culture. Consequently, we hear less about formal education in Pater’s earlier work than in his later work, and what we do hear does not suggest that he placed a very high value upon it. He notes that Coleridge spent his depressed youth at a “rough school” in London, where his “fine external nature” was “repressed, wronged, driven inward” (“CW,” pp. 112, 113). Joachim du Bellay had no formal classical education, but it was precisely “through this fortunate shortcoming in his education that he became national and modern; and he learned afterwards to look back on that wild garden of his youth with only a half-regret” (*REN*, p. 131). We hear most about the schooling of Winckelmann. He spent his childhood “in the dusky precincts of a German school hungrily feeding on a few colourless books,” and his university education is a subject, Pater notes, of which Winckelmann

always speaks with scorn, claiming to have been his own teacher from first to last. His appointed teachers did not perceive that a new source of culture was within their hands. “*Home vagus et inconstans*,” one of them pedantically reports of the future pilgrim to Rome, unaware on which side his irony was whetted. When professional education confers nothing but irritation on a Schiller no one ought to be surprised, for Schiller and such as he are primarily spiritual adventurers. But that Winckelmann, the votary of the gravest of intellectual traditions, should get nothing but an attempt at suppression from the professional guardians of learning, is what may well surprise us. (“W,” pp. 80, 81)

Appointed conector of a school at Seehausen, Winckelmann found the work of teaching “very depressing,” and his career as a schoolmaster was “the most *ennuyant* period of his life” (“W,” p. 81).

If the spiritual adventurers of Pater’s later work are not irritated by the