

Introduction: Pater and English Literature

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In comparison with other Victorian critics, Walter Pater is, we could say, both too well known and barely known at all. ‘She is older than the rocks among which she sits’; ‘to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame’; ‘All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music’ – few critics are so instantly recognisable in fragmentary quotation. Oscar Wilde’s character Gilbert in ‘The Critic as Artist’ murmurs phrases from Walter Pater’s description of the *Mona Lisa* whenever he visits the Louvre, in antiphony with an unnamed friend; perhaps the implication is that any friend of an aesthete must have the passage by heart. W. B. Yeats divided the same passage into lines of free verse to print it as the first item in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), so that it becomes the initiating text for twentieth-century poetry. No aesthetic mantra is more vulnerable to caricature than the ‘hard, gem-like flame’ – unless it be the ‘condition of music’, so often taken simplistically (and anachronistically) as an endorsement of formalism.

Few authors of such obvious historical importance, on the other hand, have so high a proportion of their writings forgotten or neglected. These largely overlooked works include the essays on archaic Greek sculpture, the unfinished novel *Gaston de Latour*, Pater’s last book *Plato and Platonism* (significantly taken far more seriously in continental Europe than in Britain), not to mention such distinctly obscure pieces as that small-scale masterpiece, ‘Sir Thomas Browne’. Truly close analysis of Pater’s writings, complex and subtle and multi-dimensional as they are, tends to be confined to *The Renaissance* in particular and, to a lesser extent, the fiction.

Pater and English Studies

In nineteenth-century Britain, Classics was the premier university humanistic discipline dealing with matters literary. In the twentieth century, as everyone knows, it was replaced in that position by English.¹ Pater, though

himself a Classics don at Oxford who published widely on classical topics as well as art history, also wrote extensively about English literature (nine substantial essays on individual writers or works, plus others on literary topics, and a good number of short reviews). Pater collected most of his essays on English authors in *Appreciations* (1889). Although *Appreciations* is a central concern, our book is not just about that volume. Rather it explores the importance of Pater's writings on English literature in the context of literary criticism and educational developments more generally. And it shows how Pater's approach was radically informed by what we might call his 'cosmopolitanism', and why that mattered and still matters – perhaps more so today than ever.

In 1886 the *Pall Mall Gazette* – in connection with the campaign by John Churton Collins to establish a School of English at the University of Oxford – invited a number of leading intellectuals (including Matthew Arnold, William Morris, Max Müller, and Pater), and of the great and the good of the time, to comment on whether it might be desirable for universities to provide systematic instruction in English literature and, if so, in what form. In his response Pater, although in general liberal and progressive in educational matters, like several others sat on the fence, with three main arguments for maintaining the status quo. English as a university subject might kill off Classics (a prediction that indeed in the longer term proved correct); it might encourage lazy intellectual habits; examinations might destroy the students' natural enjoyment of their native literature. However, Pater's response shows his commitment to literary study broadly conceived, though still within the context of Classics (Churton Collins too argued that Classics and English should work closely together, and that classical texts should feature on an English syllabus). While insisting that the study of classical literature has proved 'effective for the maintenance of what is excellent in our own', Pater adds:

much probably might be done for the expansion and enlivening of classical study itself by a larger infusion into it of those literary interests which modern literature, in particular, has developed; and a closer connection of it, if this be practicable, with the study of great modern works (classical literature and the literature of modern Europe having, in truth, an organic unity); above all, by the maintenance, at its highest possible level, of the purely literary character of those literary exercises in which the classical examination mainly consists.²

One should note the insistent repetition of the word 'literary', and ask what precisely Pater might have meant by it in connection with 'the

Introduction

3

classical examination'. If we look at the papers for classical 'Mods' (Moderations, the first part of *Literae Humaniores*, focused on Greek and Latin literature) for the 1860s through to the 1880s, we find that most of them are devoted to a single author (in addition to literary figures, there are some historians, as well as Plato and Aristotle).³ In the earlier period there are just passages for translation and brief notes, but later general questions were added, some of them 'literary'. In due course more general papers appear, the first called 'Questions on Language and Literature', and subsequently a 'General Paper' and some topic papers (including 'History of Greek Drama', 'History of Roman Poetry', 'History of Greek Drama with Aristotle's *Poetics*', 'History of Augustan Literature'). There were also papers on philology, prose and verse composition, and the Bible. What one might call literary-critical questions are in the minority; questions tend rather to be about the text, manuscripts, metre, language, dialect, chronology, the life of the author, or factual details relating to the works. Examples of rather more 'literary' questions include these:

What constitutes originality in a poet? Discuss this with reference to Virgil. (1876)

'The Latin poets had all a strong sense of their own personality'. Show how this sense comes out in the various authors and account for the difference between the Greek and Roman writers. (1878)

'There is no morality in Homer' 'There is no chivalry in Virgil' Discuss these statements. (1886, from 'General Paper')

What are the most remarkable points in Sophocles's treatment of female character? (1887)

Poetry, says Milton, 'should be simple, sensuous, impassioned'. Would you regard the poems of Catullus as fulfilling the requirement of this dictum? (1888)

Interestingly there are some questions concerned with reception, or the classical tradition, or general literary issues, including these:

What are the chief points of contrast between the Greek epic and modern poetry? (1873)

Notice any traces of Virgil's influence on the greatest English poets (1886)

Compare classical Roman poetry with that of any modern nation as a vehicle for (1) sentiment (2) description (3) delineation of character (1887)

What fluctuations have there been in the esteem in which Virgil has been held from his own time down to the present day? Trace causes, where you can. (1888)

Pater also might well have regarded translation as a literary activity. He himself as a student at Queen's College 'every day . . . translated a page from some prose writer—Tacitus, Livy, Plato, Aristotle, Goethe, Lessing, Flaubert or Sainte-Beuve'.⁴ He continued the practice into later life, and included passages of translation (always in prose, even when translating verse), as elegant as they are accurate, in his publications. We can see this again as an aspect of his cosmopolitanism.

The arguments in Oxford around a School of English concerned not only its desirability but also its character if established, whether the emphasis should be on language and philology or literary criticism (famously derided by one opponent, Edward Augustus Freeman, Regius Professor of Modern History, as 'mere chatter about Shelley'). Churton Collins, appalled by the amateurish character of the Clark lectures given in Cambridge in 1884 by Pater's friend and biographer Edmund Gosse, wanted academic study that was both rigorous and literary, not merely linguistic.⁵ However, the holder of the first Merton Professorship of English Language and Literature at Oxford (created in 1885, before the School) was a philologist, Arthur Napier, later Rawlinsonian Professor of Anglo-Saxon; only from 1904 did Oxford have a Professor of English, Sir Walter Raleigh, whose primary concern was with literary criticism. Pater, while always interested in matters philological, would have been unlikely to favour any version of English that was philological only. In the event Schools of English were not established in Oxford and Cambridge until 1894 and 1917 respectively. In 1911 Cambridge, after an internal deliberation lasting more than thirty years, made a professorial appointment for 'English Literature from the age of Chaucer', intended to 'promote the study in the University of the subject of English Literature', and to 'treat this subject on literary and critical rather than on philological and linguistic lines'.⁶ In Pater's own day schools already existed in London (University College appointed a Professor of English in 1828, King's College in 1830) as well as in Scotland. And in due course Pater's prose was itself subjected to criticism of an academic kind. For example, in 1933 Vernon Lee, a writer whom Pater knew and admired, and who herself conducted a form of 'practical criticism' well before its 'invention' by I. A. Richards, selected a page from *Marius the Epicurean* for the closest of close reading, in what in effect was an addendum to her previous

Introduction

5

publication *The Handling of Words* (1923), a discussion of prose writing from De Quincey to Henry James.⁷

The passionate late-Victorian debate about English Studies and what form it should take if more widely established as a university discipline, along with the various modes of literary enquiry pursued in this period, had an obvious importance for the formation of the subject and how it was taught, and helps, at least to an extent, to account for the shape it takes today. How would an appropriate measure of rigour be assured? How far would English follow the lines long established for Classics (not a few of its first teachers had themselves been trained as classicists, and the first Professor of English at Cambridge was the classical scholar A. W. Verrall)? Would it focus on language and philology or on literature (in practice it rarely managed to do both satisfactorily)? Would it stress history or critical evaluation? Would it help to build a national identity and ensure a supply of national guardians and public servants; or encourage an understanding of Britain's relationship with the other literatures of Europe and the world? Would it pioneer new models for understanding? Would it develop an aesthetic temper, an ability to discriminate; or serve as a secular alternative to religion, a role for literary study envisaged by Matthew Arnold and others? (Pater's own views on Christianity are somewhat elusive, but he was always interested in the content and lifestyle and history and cultural embeddedness of Christianity and not just its 'aesthetics'.⁸) These are questions that are with us still.

Pater's essays on English Literature are better known than his most neglected writings, but they have scarcely received the close attention they merit as accounts of their subject. Collectively this volume's chapters demonstrate the importance of Pater as a major contributor to the serious study of English literature (just as he was with regards to Classics and Art History) and as, in the words of Jerome McGann, 'the strongest as well as the subtlest literary-critical intelligence of the High Victorian period'.⁹ While many of the chapters look closely at particular essays or groups of essays, they also collectively cast light on a number of broader issues: how Pater's way of writing about English literature relates to that of others, both at the time and later; the role he plays in the history of criticism and of English studies (histories that are much less closely intertwined in the nineteenth century than subsequently); and what reading Pater on a particular author tells us about reading that author more generally in the context of the author's reception history.

Appreciations, like its predecessor *The Renaissance*, is made up of essays previously published in periodicals, though carefully revised for their new

context in book form. And, again like its predecessor, it is not simply a random ad hoc assemblage in the manner of many Victorian collections, but a carefully contrived whole, in which the individual essays speak to each other and for an overall vision of English literature and its history (see Chapter 1). *Appreciations* comprises a series of essays on individual writers, but these are bookended by two pieces of general import: 'Style', which addresses the central question of what constitutes good writing in both prose and verse (see Chapter 6), and 'Postscript', a revised version of an essay originally called 'Romanticism', but which is rather a discussion of two significant literary phenomena, classicism and romanticism, and which takes us into important issues about literary history and periodisation (see Chapter 5). The word 'Romanticism' in its current valence to describe an early nineteenth-century literary movement that we might trace back to the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 (followed by a new edition in 1800, with Wordsworth's 'Preface') was a comparatively late import from Germany into the English critical lexicon. One of the first anglophone authors to use the continental category in this way was Thomas Budd Shaw in 1849, who argued that Scott was 'the type, sign, or measure of the first step in literature towards romanticism', and called Byron 'the greatest of the romanticists'.¹⁰ For Pater the word can be applied both to a particular period in English letters and to a general tendency in all periods, whenever there is 'the addition of strangeness to beauty' ('Postscript', *App.*, 246), a tendency that he is at some pains to approve and show as active in his own day. Pater is always interested in history and literary history, though not in the positivistic way demanded by many of his detractors both at the time and subsequently. In response to criticism by Emilia Pattison and others that it was not a responsible history,¹¹ Pater changed the title of his first collection from *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. Clearly in so far as they are 'histories', both *The Renaissance* and *Appreciations* are fragmentary histories (though the latter contains extended discussions of works from every post-medieval century except the eighteenth¹²); but it does not follow that Pater was not interested in history and its relation to art and literature. However, in both cases that interest co-exists with 'aesthetic criticism' (as the title *Appreciations* suggests). The 'Preface' to *The Renaissance* offers a succinct but exceptionally lucid account of what Pater means by 'aesthetic criticism', but it also makes apparent that he wishes to offer more general thoughts on the Renaissance as a historical phenomenon and how we might think about it (paragraphs 6–8); in his

words, the studies ‘touch what I think the chief points in that complex, many-sided movement’ (*Ren.*, xxii).

Pater’s Critical Project: Aesthetic Criticism

What, then, is Pater’s larger critical project, and why should we value it today? Pater’s detractors, who include T. S. Eliot and Eliot’s admirer Christopher Ricks, typically accuse him of two failings: a tendency to subjectivism amounting at times to solipsism; and an espousal of belletrism, vagueness, and lack of critical rigour. The two charges, in our view, miss their mark and they are linked; the answer to them lies partly in Pater’s philosophical commitments, and in particular his careful attention to the implications of philosophical aesthetics, then still a relatively youthful discipline with its origins in eighteenth-century Germany. One purpose of our earlier volume, *Pater the Classicist*, was to combat the view that Pater’s essays tell us little or nothing about his objects of study, only about what Ricks calls his ‘fugitive noosphere’.¹³ Eliot, in ‘Hamlet and his Problems’, makes a – moderately – effective joke, in his *de haut en bas* critical mode, about the matter. Having reprimanded ‘that most dangerous type of critic: the critic with a mind which is naturally of the creative order’ for finding in Hamlet ‘a vicarious existence for their own artistic realization’ and for substituting their Hamlet for Shakespeare’s, he concludes the paragraph: ‘We should be thankful that Walter Pater did not fix his attention on this play.’¹⁴ (While we may not agree with Coleridge’s characterisation of Hamlet, it surely says something significant about the work, and its representation of subjectivity, that so many readers have subsequently in effect declared ‘I am Hamlet’.) Even among Pater specialists some are too sympathetic to reading his work primarily as oblique autobiography. In particular, gay and queer studies have contributed a great deal to a more correct and nuanced evaluation of Pater; but there is also danger in concentrating too much on a writer’s supposed sexuality in interpreting his or her work – a version surely of the old ‘biographical fallacy’ (the view that a work of art is best explained in terms of the artist’s life and character).

One of the essays in *Appreciations*, ‘Charles Lamb’, is especially instructive in this regard (see Chapter 12). Here it is particularly clear that there is an unusual degree of identification, even elision, of author and subject. This is partly because of Pater’s admiration for Lamb as an essayist, since the essay – along with its fictional equivalent the ‘imaginary portrait’ – is always Pater’s preferred form. But there are also biographical

entanglements, not least Lamb's relationship with his sister Mary, close as was Pater's with his sisters, and places they lived. And there is the sense too in the writings of both of the mingling of joy and sorrow, of 'the fear of death intensified by the desire of beauty' ('The Child in the House', *MS*, 189–90; *CW*, iii. 141). In finding out what Lamb is like, Pater is also finding out what he himself is like; just so, when Ben Jonson imitates Martial or Horace, he is discovering himself, but this does not detract from his 'discoveries' about his classical models. In 'Charles Lamb' Pater praises his predecessor, in connection with his work on Shakespeare and his contemporaries, because 'he has the true scholar's way of forgetting himself in his subject' (*App.*, 111), pointing out beauties in his authors that the reader would not have noticed for him- or herself, which can itself be regarded as an oblique form of creation: 'to interpret that charm, to convey it to others—he seeming to himself but to hand on to others, in mere humble ministration, that of which for them he is really the creator—this is the way of his criticism' (112). But later in the essay Pater stresses that 'with him, as with Montaigne, the desire of self-portraiture is, below all more superficial tendencies, the real motive in writing at all—a desire closely connected with that intimacy, that modern subjectivity, which may be called the *Montaignesque* element in literature' (117). This is the 'formula', to use a word of Pater's, for Lamb.¹⁵ This combination – self-effacing scholarship and a desire for self-portraiture, however indirect – might seem a paradox, even a contradiction, but is evidently not so for Pater. That may be explained in part by Kant's equally paradoxical idea of 'subjective universality'. The judgement of taste is both subjective, the response of a subject to the object of attention, but also 'universal', because it 'imputes', without of course necessarily obtaining in practice, the agreement of others, unlike 'the judgement of the agreeable' (I like spinach or the colour green, you don't, but there is nothing to dispute about). That is to say it is communicable, and subject to contention or assent; in that sense it is emphatically not a form of solipsism.¹⁶

Eliot wrote of Pater: 'Being incapable of sustained reasoning, he could not take philosophy or theology seriously.'¹⁷ However, Pater's account of the job of the 'aesthetic critic', in the ten economical and elegant paragraphs of the 'Preface' to *The Renaissance*, while presented in a style appropriate to the essay, not the treatise (the term he uses for the form employed by Aristotle and alone approved for philosophical enquiry by analytic philosophers), is philosophically rigorous and assigns it three distinct phases. (One might compare the elegant clarity with which Pater summarises the complex arguments of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* in

Introduction

9

‘Winckelmann’.) The first two phases of the critical process show Pater’s complete understanding of the main characteristics of aesthetic judgement, ‘the judgement of taste’, as set out by Kant at length in his Third Critique, the *Critique of Judgement*. The ‘judgement of taste’, which takes the form ‘this painting or poem is beautiful’, begins with an encounter by the judging subject that is personal and singular. In Kant’s words, ‘I must present the object immediately to my feeling of pleasure or displeasure, and that, too, without the aid of concepts’ (if there were a definite prior concept, the judgement could be made a priori, without the need for the encounter). No prior authority is of any relevance: ‘There must be no need of groping about among other people’s judgements and getting previous instruction from their delight in or aversion to the same object.’ Appeals to even the greatest critic will make no difference:

If any one reads me his poem, or brings me to a play, which, all said and done, fails to commend itself to my taste, then let him adduce *Batteux* or *Lessing*, or still older and more famous critics of taste, with all the host of rules laid down by them, as a proof of the beauty of his poem; let certain passages particularly displeasing to me accord completely with the rules of beauty, (as set out by these critics and universally recognized): I stop my ears . . . I take my stand on the ground that my judgement is to be one of taste, and not one of understanding or reason.¹⁸

Pater gives an account of what this preliminary stage is like, emphasising the point about subjectivity:

What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? The answers to these questions are the original facts with which the aesthetic critic has to do; and, as in the study of light, of morals, of number, *one must realise such primary data for one’s self, or not at all.* (*Ren.*, xix–xx; emphasis added)

But there is a second stage for the aesthetic critic. For the Kantian judgement is, as we have seen, also ‘universal’; that is to say, it is communicable, although this may lead to contention, not agreement. And in this stage the job of the critic is, in Kant’s words, in relation to their judgements, not to provide ‘a universally applicable formula [*Formel*]—which is impossible’, but ‘the illustration, by the analysis of examples, of their mutual subjective finality, the form of which in a given representation has been shown above to constitute the beauty of their object’, what Kant calls the ‘art’ rather than the ‘science’ of criticism.¹⁹ Pater goes on to give

an account of what such an art of criticism might be like, followed by an example, not a ‘universal formula’ (Kant’s *Formel*) but ‘the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it’ – what, in the case of Wordsworth, he also calls ‘the *virtue*, the active principle in Wordsworth’s poetry’ (xix, xxii):

And the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced. His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue, and noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element, for himself and others. (xx–xxi)

The use of scientific metaphors here makes clear that the aim is precision and exactitude; there is nothing vague or woolly about such ‘impressionism’ – it is not in the least impressionistic (in the ordinary non-technical sense). And one should note the implication about communicability; the chemist disengages the virtue ‘for himself *and others*’ (emphasis added). Even this second stage is not the end of the matter, as we have already seen. The final paragraphs concern wider issues about the character of the Renaissance as a historical event; and Pater will go on to make transhistorical connections with later periods too. But the ordering is important. The historicising literary criticism *de nos jours* gets the process back to front, starting with ‘history’ and from there approaching the individual work. Pater begins at the beginning, with the ‘original facts’ and the ‘primary data’ (xx).

It is easy for a modern reader to ‘under-read’ so to say Pater’s writings, because his critical practice is in important respects unlike those with which we have become more familiar; the dominance of the now not-so-new ‘New Criticism’ may have been challenged during the theory wars, but many of its principal features remain firmly in place. Thus Pater in general does not engage in the kind of ‘close reading’ of a Christopher Ricks. This is not because he is incapable of it, as a couple of examples from *Appreciations* will show. Of Shakespeare’s lines from *Henry V*,

My cousin Suffolk,
 My soul shall thine keep company to heaven:
 Tarry, sweet soul, for mine, then fly abreast

Pater writes: ‘The complete infusion here of the figure into the thought, so vividly realised, that, though birds are not actually mentioned, yet the