

## THE LURE OF LACEDAEMON: A NOTE ON PATER AND MODERNISM

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### REJECTIONS

This essay is part of an intended longer study which purports to review the whole extent of Pater's contribution to English Modernism. As the years pass, that contribution looms larger and larger. Paradoxically, few of those who had taken significant doses of inspiration and an equally significant number of ideas from Pater were later ready to acknowledge their debt. T. S. Eliot, in "Arnold and Pater" (1930), a bad-tempered combination of hostility and condescension, practically writes him off as a critic. "His view of art, as expressed in *The Renaissance*, impressed itself upon a number of writers in the 'nineties, and propagated some confusion between life and art which is not wholly irresponsible for some untidy lives" (SE 392). Such a dismissal of Pater is part of a pattern which, by Eliot's time, had become fully established. The denials and denunciations, typically by writers who owed so much to him, started quite early. Some of the most enduring achievements of Henry James—*The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), the novels of the major phase: *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904)—are unthinkable without the Aesthetic Movement so closely associated with Pater. True, these novels offer a devastating critique of that movement, but James was at least as strongly attracted to as he was repelled by Aestheticism. Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle; Aunt Maud; those pleasure-seekers of fashionable Paris society, Chad Newsome and Little Bilham; Adam and Maggie Verver, all display the amoral tendencies inherent in the ideology of that movement. Yet Ralph Touchett, Milly Theale, Lambert Strether and Maria Gostrey, who ostensibly personify the moral standards that Victorian society professed but failed to observe, are also cast in the Paterian mould. In their relations with people and things, their love of

the beautiful is no less conspicuous than their adherence to the moral law. Not infrequently—and unnoticed by themselves—their aesthetic sensibility stands in the way of ethical considerations. Osmond’s impenetrable duplicitousness, his propensity to look upon people as things, as *objets d’art*—qualities most useful in his entrapment of Isabel—find a powerful “objective correlative” in his Florentine villa, which has a front with “heavy lids, but no eyes,” and an interior which is like a private museum (*PL* 209-10, 224). But then Ralph Touchett, who, to all intents and purposes, epitomizes the moral seriousness so flagrantly ignored by Osmond, also experiences an aesthetic thrill in trying to shape Isabel’s life, as is aptly demonstrated by the metaphor he employs when at one stage he reviews his evolving relationship with his cousin: “He surveyed the edifice from the outside, and admired it greatly; he looked in at the windows, and received an impression of proportions equally fair. But he felt that he saw it only by glimpses, and that he had not yet stood under the roof” (*PL* 59). The incongruity of the traits that go into the character of Ralph—the sense and cult of the beautiful, the moral seriousness *as well as* the acquisitiveness—seems less surprising if we bear in mind that, along with the highly respectable company I have just named, he is the creation of an author who in a few years time, in “The Art of Fiction,” would solemnly declare that the novel is first and foremost “a personal, a direct impression of life,” and would define experience as an “immense sensibility,” or “the atmosphere of the mind” (*SLC* 54-56)—terms that echo Pater’s controversial “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*. A similar duality is observable in Yeats: Michael Robartes, who owes his literary inception and birth to “Rosa Alchemica” (1896), Yeats’s most “Pateresque” story, in “The Phases of the Moon” (1918) is embarrassed rather than delighted by the connection: “He [that is, Yeats] wrote of me in that *extravagant* style / He had learnt from Pater” (*AV* 60, emphasis added). And despite the immense debt she owed to Pater in “Modern Fiction” (1919)—to mention only the most obvious case—Virginia Woolf was no more grateful. What Fanny Wilmot, the reflexive consciousness of “Moments of Being: ‘Slater’s Pins Have No Points’” (1926), recalls about Julius Craye—Walter Pater in disguise—is that “there was something odd about” that character (*CSF* 216). Arthur Symons, an outstanding minor poet and critic of English Decadence and Symbolism, who once maintained friendly ties with Pater and in his poetry gave veritable object lessons in Pater’s sensationalist aesthetics, felt no less inclined to prevaricate. Pater was not a great but only a “rare artist,” although, Symons added, he was also “so much more interesting, to many, than the very greatest” (*R* xi).

As his title indicates, Eliot posits a fundamental identity between Arnold and Pater. He feels justified in doing so because to him the latter is part of the process which led to profound changes in English attitudes to religion and art. He describes this process as the “dissolution of thought and sensibility,” “the isolation of art, philosophy, religion, ethics and literature,” and deeply regrets it (*SE* 392-93). The date of his essay is significant: it is the year of the publication of the complete *Ash Wednesday* (1930), which was preceded by Eliot’s conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927 and by the publication of *For Lancelot Andrewes* in 1928, which may in part, but only in part, account for the summary dismissal of Pater. What Eliot finds particularly objectionable is that with Arnold “literature, or Culture, tended to usurp the place of Religion” (*SE* 385), or that for Pater “religion was a matter of feeling, and metaphysics not much more” (*SE* 390). But although he lumps the two writers together because of their resemblance and occasional spiritual kinship, Arnold in-

curs less of his ire, which may well be due to the fact that Arnold no longer posed a threat or a challenge. “We go to him for refreshment and for the companionship of a kindred point of view to our own, but not as disciples” (SE 383); “Arnold is rather a friend than a leader. He was a champion of ‘ideas’ most of whose ideas we no longer take seriously” (SE 384). Unexpectedly after so much condescension, Eliot finishes his essay with something like an accolade when, as a parting gesture, he sums up Pater’s significance in words which Pater himself had used about Coleridge: he represents “that inexhaustible discontent, languor, and home-sickness [...] the chords of which ring all through our modern literature” (SE 393). But there is no inconsistency in the apparent change of tone, unexpected as the last words may be to us. For Eliot, in 1930, “discontent,” “languor,” “home-sickness” and “modern” had a definitely negative ring about them.

#### ROMANTIC OR MODERN?

Changes in the nineteenth-century English mind can of course be described in ways very different from Eliot’s, which does not necessarily mean a refutation of the facts on which he rests his case, but only the adoption of a different line of reasoning and a different form of discourse. In our case, the discourse and the reasoning are those of literary history, in whose stricter terms Pater personifies the transition from Romanticism to Modernism or, with a slight shift of the accent, stands as an iconic figure of Modernism as well as an anticipation of Postmodernism. Literary history has its own set of values; less philosophically speaking, it has its own likes and dislikes which, like everything under the sun, are subject to change. Owing to the revisionist spirit and the new methodologies of recent decades, the modern element in Pater—so obnoxious to Eliot—has received a good deal of sympathetic attention. That there is a shift of emphasis is indicated by the very titles of representative books. It was still a matter of course for Graham Hough to include Pater in his *The Last Romantics* (1949), along with Ruskin, Rossetti and Morris. Almost half a century later, in his *The Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm* (1986), F. C. McGrath, presents Pater as a pivotal figure in the rise of Modernism and makes a convincing case for that position by a detailed analysis of Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). A similar repositioning is performed by Kenneth Daley, whose *The Rescue of Romanticism: Walter Pater and John Ruskin* (2001) highlights the subversiveness and precocious modernity of Pater’s treatment of Romantic ideas (esp. 124-32). It is only fitting that recent publications should include *Aestheticism and Deconstruction: Pater, Derrida, and de Man* (1991) by Jonathan Loesberg, whose objective, among others, is the construction of some kind of bridge, with assistance from Pater, between Deconstruction and New Historicism. Loesberg is not on entirely new ground: his deconstructionist rereading of *The Renaissance* was anticipated in the mid-seventies by J. Hillis Miller, who, emboldened by the basically autotelic nature of *l’art pour l’art* aesthetics, called Pater “a precursor of what is most vital in contemporary criticism” (qtd. in Freedman 30). Paradoxically, what caused most trouble once, Pater’s aestheticism, is now the measure by which the absurdity of any cult of the beautiful in fiction after the cataclysm of World War Two is demonstrated (Rosenfeld 360-64).

Expressive as these new approaches are of the shifts of focus in the study of Pater, they do not really signal radical revaluations; they are just that: shifts of focus. For these critics, Pater is a star firmly in the Modernist-Postmodernist constellation, where, unnoticed, he has always been. Preceding the explosion in theory by decades, Hough was mainly concerned with the transition from Romanticism to Modernism. McGrath, while taking note of the Romantic side, is understandably more interested in Pater's part in the evolution of the Modernist consciousness, and in doing so he also looks ahead:

To the extent that he acknowledges and at times contemplates the terrifying silence of infinite space, [Pater] anticipates the post-Modern temper epitomized by Beckett; but to the extent that he tries to assert against the void the highest products of an integrated human organism, the "fruit of quickened, multiplied consciousness," he anticipates the Modernist temper epitomized by Yeats, Eliot, or Joyce. (20)

And then Loesberg, somewhat contrary to the implications of its title, sets out to prove not that deconstruction is inherent in aestheticism, but only that deconstruction only restores what had once been discovered by aestheticism (3-4). As a corollary to this, the idea of non-linear time, that Derridean hobby-horse, has also been found latent in Pater (Miller in *Fellows XIII*)—witness his analysis of the Shield of Achilles in "The Beginnings of Greek Sculpture" (1880) (*GS* 193-203), while his (far from original) doctrine in "Wordsworth" (1874) that a life of contemplation, as opposed to a life of action, "is the principle of all the higher morality" (*TNT* 428) has also been accorded new uses recently as the key to resolving "the problem of unity with ourselves" (Mao 432).

The impetus behind such shifts of emphasis comes from Pater himself. While his achievement in imaginative writing and style has little appeal today, the interest in his theoretical and critical writings—notwithstanding, or perhaps because of, the absence of a system—is as keen as ever. At the outset, his *oeuvre* held out the promise of a radical break with established thinking, but it had never completely fulfilled that promise, which explains why the indelible imprint Pater left on literature is traceable mainly to the writings of that early phase. Paradoxically, the butt of Eliot's criticism is not the aspiring young man of the sixties and early seventies, but the more sedate philosopher who had renounced his youthful heresies and was seeking some kind of spiritual and intellectual accommodation with the established order, embracing values and professing ideas perfectly compatible with Eliot's own brand of conservatism. The same applies to the method he employed in the pursuit of that aim in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), another book that failed to get Eliot's approval. "T. S. Eliot thought the book incoherent, 'a number of fresh starts,'" Denis Donoghue writes, "forgetting that his own poetry exhibited the same method and made a virtue of it" (192). The fact that the eponymous hero of that novel is so deeply affected by the poetry in early Christian, that is, Roman Catholic, ritual, and that, as a result, he succumbs to the new religion in all but name, offers close analogies with Eliot's own position in *Four Quartets* (published as a whole in 1943): that, ideally, poetry should point the way to God. Had Eliot considered Pater in greater depth, he could not have dismissed him as lightly as he did.

The real challenge for any student of Pater is to trace his changing view of the acquisition and nature of knowledge; of order or the absence of order in reality; and, in-

separable from all this, of art and beauty. This is beyond the scope of my essay; let me, therefore, content myself with the reiteration of what I have just said: that Pater has left no coherent philosophical system and is riddled with contradictions. I must also note that his contradictions and inconsistencies are not the residue of some spectacular intellectual development, however tempting such an assumption might be. What happened was what happens to most people: as he grew older, the latent conservative tendencies of his mind became more accentuated. Occasionally, experience gave him new insights, but his writings do not add up to an unbroken curve of intellectual development in which each constituent piece represents some advance on the preceding one. For this reason, I will adopt a tri-directional thematic approach in (re)assessing Pater's significance, with *epistemology*, *religion/faith* and *art* providing the avenues.

### EPISTEMOLOGY

As F. C. McGrath notes, the intellectual foundations for Modernist art were laid by Hume and Kant, who “effectively shifted the focus of philosophy from issues of substance and ontology [...] to issues of function and epistemology” (8). Looking for Pater's philosophical forebears, we cannot ignore Schelling and Hegel either. When it comes to acknowledging debts and obligations, however, Pater is as much of a “Hellenist” in philosophy as he is in his imaginative creations and his art criticism; in other words, he constructs the conceptual frame for his apparently novel ideas with the help of Greek philosophy: of Heraclitus, of the Cyrenaic Aristippus and, inexplicably at a superficial first sight, of Plato. Apparently, he has little use for the Greeks in some of his seminal early essays—in “Coleridge” (1865), in “Aesthetic Poetry” and the „Conclusion” to *The Renaissance* (1873), the latter two originally forming one longer piece of writing, “Poems by William Morris” (1868).

It would be unfair to suggest, as has been done, that after 1873 Pater had nothing new to say, yet the fact of the matter is that his most important ideas had all taken shape by that date. Central among them is the principle of relativism:

Modern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the “relative” spirit in place of the “absolute.” Ancient philosophy sought to arrest every object in an eternal outline, to fix thought in a necessary formula, and the varieties of life in a classification by “kinds,” or *genera*. To the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions. The philosophical conception of the relative has been developed in modern times through the influence of the sciences of observation. (“Coleridge,” *TMT* 431)

Relativism described in such general terms may have seemed just a matter of philosophical speculation. The sensationalism inherent in its preference for “the world of form, colour, and passion” and the rejection of “vague scholastic abstraction” were innocuous propositions in themselves. Relativism became a challenge to Victorian orthodoxies when, in no negligible degree through the agency of Pater, it penetrated the domain of truth and morality, that is, when its implications were spelt out in unmistakable terms. “The

faculty for truth,” Pater continues, is “a power of distinguishing and fixing delicate and fugitive detail”; more precisely, as things exist in a complex web of relations, truth is “the truth of these relations that experience gives us, not the truth of eternal outlines ascertained once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change” (*TMT* 431-32). By the same token, as “[t]he moral world is ever in contact with the physical,” “the relative spirit has invaded moral philosophy from the ground of the inductive sciences” (*TMT* 432). As DeLaura puts it, “Pater at once announces a new frontier in the advancement of the modern spirit. He redefines Arnold’s ‘modern spirit’ as the ‘relative spirit,’ and what it is relativizing is, precisely, *morality*” (192-93). For my part, I would add that in order to relativize morality, the relative spirit first had to relativize truth.

Underlying the epistemology that Pater is advocating when he redefines *truth* in the spirit of “the sciences of observation” (that is, the natural sciences) is the acknowledgment of the ubiquitousness of change. The Coleridge essay makes this quite explicit, but it is the “Conclusion” that gives it the provocative prominence that, along with its distressing implications, earned Pater such a bad name. “The whole physical life,” runs the opening statement of the essay, is “but a combination of natural elements” or, rather, as old combinations are constantly replaced by new ones, the physical life is “a perpetual motion of them.” Motion and change are the all-pervading principles of life, and anything suggestive of permanence is a construct of the mind: “[t]hat perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours, [...] a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it” (*TMT* 217-18). But the mind itself is in a constant state of change (“if we begin with the inward world of thought and feeling, the whirlpool is still more rapid”), so reflection can only succeed in reducing experience to “a group of impressions,” those of the percipient individual, with no possibility for verification, “each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world” (*TMT* 218). Sensationalism as an aspect of the “relative spirit” is narrowed in these passages to impressionism, which in turn reveals itself to be a form of solipsism and, in the final analysis, of epistemological scepticism.

None of these interlocking terms, which in fact denote different aspects of the same thing, had positive connotations to the Victorians, but they were still safely within the realm of speculation. Pater crossed the boundary line between thought and life and strayed into forbidden territory when he completed the course of reasoning that he had embarked upon in “Coleridge.” Although he makes no explicit pronouncements to the effect that in a life in which the only certainty is the certainty of fleeting, transient impressions, the God of Christianity is an abstraction at best, an absurdity at worst, that idea is inherent in his arguments. Such being the case, established views of the end of life just will not do, either. Emboldened by the courage of his convictions in this instance, Pater does not mince his words: given the contingent nature of reality, we are wise only if we live for the sake of living. The memorable programmatic statement: “[n]ot the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end,” is no more and no less than the endorsement of life as sensation. Ideally, we should strive to have a “quickened sense of life,” attainable through some great passion, which, in turn, will produce “a quickened, multiplied consciousness.” In sorting out the activities in which we may have a passionate involvement, Pater arrives at another programmatic formulation: the passion that gives “the highest quality to our moments as they pass” is “the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake”

(*TMT* 219-20). It must be noted that the wording quoted is that of the final text of the 1893 edition; in previous editions the sentence had not “love of art for its own sake,” but “*love of art for art’s sake*” (emphasis added).

I am aware that in discussing how Pater relativized truth and morality I skirted the problem of religion, and that with this manifesto of *l’art pour l’art* I have moved into Pater’s theory of art. There is, however, still a good deal to be said about his epistemology. Without the “Conclusion,” *The Renaissance* would not be the book it is. The individual essays on Pico della Mirandola, Botticelli, Leonardo, and others, with all due acknowledgment of their respective merits, would seem pretty harmless affairs, were it not for the aura they retrospectively gain from that controversial piece of writing. It was not by accident that Pater decided to omit it in the second edition of the book in 1877 (*TMT* 217) and that he restored it only in the 1888 edition “with some slight changes” such as the substitution of “abstract theory” for “abstract morality” in one particularly offensive passage (Donoghue 66-67). Neither is it an accident that for more than a decade he had published no sustained, book-length piece of prose, and when *Marius the Epicurean* came out he dressed his ideas in a new garb but did not significantly modify them. The new clothes in which the old ideas are wrapped are the philosophy of Heraclitus and Aristippus:

[F]or Marius, under the guidance of that old master of decorous living [that is, Aristippus], those eternal doubts as to the *criteria* of truth reduced themselves to a scepticism which developed the opposition between things as they are and our impressions and thoughts concerning them—a possibility, if an outward world does really exist, of some faultiness of our apprehension of it—the doctrine, in short, of what is termed “the subjectivity of knowledge.” (*M* 112)

The wisdom this scepticism teaches Marius is not unlike the wisdom of the “Conclusion”: “[*I]ife as the end of life,*” and “the desirableness of refining all the instruments of inward and outward intuition [...] till one’s whole nature became one complex medium of reception” (*M* 115, emphasis in the original).

On the evidence of this book, there seems to be little real development in Pater’s philosophy and a far too noticeable ebbing away of youthful enthusiasms. For all that, the seriousness with which Marius conducts his philosophic quest, his tentative reconciliation at the end of the story with the idea of some kind of Hellenized Christian God (thus the intimation that the “absolute” may not be pure abstraction), besides lending the book a charm and an appeal that few intellectual or spiritual autobiographies have, leave a lot of important questions unresolved and thus heighten the expectations with which we approach *Plato and Platonism* (1893). How will Pater the relativist and sensationalist come to terms with the Greek philosopher who believed in the primacy of the idea, and to whom the physical world was mere shadow? That coming to terms is performed with disarming ease. With Plato, as with a number of other people before, he takes all the liberties necessary to turn the Greek thinker into a version of Walter Pater. Not that he denies that the pivotal elements in that system of thought are *the Absolute, the One, permanence* and—witness the doctrine of the ideas—*abstraction*. The doctrine of the ideas, however, admits the notion of *the Many* into Platonism, Pater argues. “[F]or Plato the true Being, the Absolute, the One,

does become delightfully multiple, as the world of ideas” (*PP* 46). The multiplicity of ideas mirrors the multiplicity of experience; the ideas are inaccessible to the senses, but the imperfect copies we have of them in things of this world are not. Plato’s view of the way in which we acquire knowledge, his dialectic, is presented by Pater as an anticipation of his own epistemological premises. It is through “person dealing with person [...] or intelligence with intelligence” that we approach truth, yet

to the very last falsehood will lurk, if not about truth itself, about this or that assent to it. The receiver may add the falsities of his own nature to the truth he receives. The proposition which embodies it very imperfectly, may not look to him in those dark chambers of his individuality, of himself, into which none but he can ever get, to test the matter, what it looks to me, or to you. [...] Place, then, must be left to the last in any legitimate dialectic process for possible after-thoughts [...]. (*PP* 189-90)

“Plato inclines his reader to think,” Pater writes by way of preparing the ground for the above generalization,

that truth, precisely because it resembles some high kind of relationship of persons to persons, depends a good deal on the receiver; and must be, in that degree, elusive, provisional, contingent, a matter of various approximation, and of an “economy,” as is said; that it is partly a subjective attitude of mind:—that philosophic truth consists in the philosophic temper. (*PP* 187)

The Platonic dialogue is the “objectification” of this attitude: the disputants, teacher and learner, are “fellow travellers” in their search for truth, engaged, in the spirit of sincerity and freedom, in a co-operative effort to achieve their common objective. The dialogues never end conclusively as there always remains something to be added. If the participants finish their dispute at all, they do so only because time has run out (*PP* 190). Pater thus finds plenty of justification, if not for his scepticism, then for his relativism and solipsism. He also finds in Plato a sufficient amount of material for at least a partial endorsement of his own sensationalism. Plato, he believes, is not to be identified with his master, Socrates, who detested matter and the body, in conformity with what Pater, anachronistically, regards as the “Manichean” or “Puritan” strain in his philosophy. The aim of education is, for Plato, the unity of the body, “in its utmost fairness,” with “the fair soul.” The austerities of Socrates “correct the sensuous richness of [Plato’s] genius, but could not suppress it,” and he carried “into the world of intellectual vision, of θεωρία, all the associations of the actual world,” whereby Platonism has contributed largely [...] towards the vindication of the dignity of the body” (*PP* 145-46).

#### FAITH, RELIGION, AND THE QUESTION OF IDEALISM

By steering clear of the snags that might have caused complications in my review of Pater’s epistemology, I have deliberately made it appear plain sailing for the uninitiated reader. The

issues involved become less transparent if we do not avoid those snags but try to sail among them, as we should, to see the full historical significance of Pater. As I have stated before, his philosophy, whatever that term may mean in the context, challenged traditional Christian orthodoxies concerning the nature of existence or the attainability of truth. But it posed a challenge, indeed a threat, to Christian morality as well. Pater, of course, did not act in isolation: the discoveries of the natural sciences—biology and geology in the first place—and the concomitant revival of rationalism had shaken traditional Christian doctrine about God, creation, and man to its very foundations (DeLaura 174-75). Then there was Arnold, who, under similar pressures, had already done a fair amount of theoretical groundwork. But Pater was more radical than Arnold: sensationalism and scepticism do not necessarily deny transcendence, but they do not necessarily accommodate it either, and in his epistemological speculations Pater drifted dangerously close to acknowledging the primacy of matter, as is amply shown by the “Conclusion” and *Marius* (“the individual is to himself the measure of all things”—*M* 110). Scandalous as such ideas may have appeared, they were as nothing to the principal heresy, the relativizing of morality. What “Coleridge” and the “Conclusion” (in its original wording) had to propose on this, we have already seen. “Winckelmann,” which in its inception preceded the latter and was also included in *The Renaissance*, is, in a sense, the most audaciously outspoken of the early writings: without any ceremony, it brings morality under the sway of nature. “The chief factor in the thoughts of the modern mind concerning itself,” the essay contends, “is the intricacy, the universality of natural law, *even in the moral order*” (*TMT* 215, emphasis added). Strangely enough, Pater left this sentence unaltered in later editions, although potentially it might have given as much offence to Victorian sensibilities as the passages in the “Conclusion” that he thought it prudent to tamper with. If the prospect of a world without God was frightening, that of a world without morality was even more so. Donoghue cites a letter that John Wordsworth, a colleague at Brasenose College (Fellow as well as chaplain and tutor) wrote to Pater in April 1873:

After a perusal of the book I cannot disguise from myself that the concluding pages adequately sum up the philosophy of the whole; and that philosophy is an assertion, that no fixed principles either of religion or morality can be regarded as certain, that the only thing worth living for is momentary enjoyment and that probably and certainly the soul dissolves at death into elements which are destined never to reunite. (55-56)

George Eliot, herself an agnostic, called the book “poisonous” (Donoghue 58). In reaction to it that Leslie Stephen, another agnostic, thought it timely to reassert the importance of the moral quality of art, hence his famous “Art and Morality” (1875) (Meisel 2-3). As a matter of interest it may be mentioned that, owing to Stephen’s paternal anxieties, the young Virginia Woolf had very limited access to Pater in her father’s library, which contained only the relatively innocuous *Imaginary Portraits* (1887) and *Plato and Platonism* (Meisel 16-17).

The reception of an author’s work is one thing, although a most important one. How he himself reacts to that reception need not bother us much unless a consideration of it produces clues to the work which we would not find elsewhere. Pater’s reaction to the

storm raging about him may occasionally provide us with such clues. I have already called attention to instances of prudence and retraction on his part, exemplified by the chequered history of the “Conclusion.” He always kept the dubious virtues of prudence and retraction within easy reach, to exercise them when the need arose. Consequently, there is in Pater’s philosophical inquiries a wave-like pattern of bold propositions and placatory counter-propositions. For Marius, the death of the soul becomes a fact when his friend Flavian dies—a distressing discovery. In time it will, however, be balanced by the inner harmony that the Emperor Marcus Aurelius almost succeeds in achieving when, seeking solace and peace of mind, he reads “some select passages of Plato, which bear upon the harmony of the reason, in all its forms, with itself.” The question Aurelius asks is: “Could there be *Cosmos*, that wonderful, reasonable order, in him, and nothing but disorder in the world without?” As his answer is in the positive, “there would be [...] no more quite hopeless death” for Aurelius (*M* 194). Marius, who is present at the time, notices “the wonderful expression of peace, of quiet pleasure” on the face of the Emperor. Not accidentally, he will also attain this state of mind when, before his own death, he obtains first-hand experience of Christianity—the kind of Christianity that incorporates the Greek ideal, “the best in paganism,” in that it assumes the essential unity of body and soul, in conformity with the overtly Hellenizing tendencies of the book. The novel thus performs an act of self-correction: the last stage of the intellectual and spiritual development of the hero obliterates, or at least undercuts, the scepticism of the earlier ones. The same cautious balancing act characterizes *Plato and Platonism*. That “redemption of matter,” “of the world of sense,” “the vindication of the dignity of the human body” that Pater attributes to his favorite Greek philosopher, will, he insists, be cherished through the centuries not only “by art, by all right education,” but—to avoid the impression that he means anything heretical—also “by the creeds and worship of the Christian Church” (*PP* 146).

His scepticism, thus, causes Pater as much discomfort as did his Christian faith, and he cannot wholly commit himself to either. The state in which he would feel fully comfortable is idealized Greek antiquity, where the unity of body and soul, man and man, man and nature, so tragically missing from modern life, was, he believed, a reality. His periodic returns to God, his postulation of a close kinship between early Christianity and Greek paganism, between the Renaissance and early Christianity, express his desire for compromise in the face of mounting hostility. In other words, despite the many memorable cases of outspokenness which make him so fascinating to us today, he did not always have the courage of his convictions and made amends, hence the dualism of his work. This, however, is not the whole story: his inconsistencies spring not only from anxieties bred by social or cultural—that is, external—pressures.

Before I come round to the question of what other pressures there were, a few more remarks about the moral implications of Pater’s philosophy are necessary. On second thoughts, and in the light of the whole *oeuvre*, George Eliot’s or Leslie Stephen’s irritation at what they believed was Pater’s tendency to relativize, at best to trivialize, morality rests on less certain foundations than at first it seemed. *Marius* and *Imaginary Portraits* abound in beautifully quotable sentences to the effect that in a fundamentally contingent reality hedonism—even though of the elevated, aesthetic variety—is not the only, not even the most commendable, attitude. “[T]he only principle, perhaps, to which we may always safely trust is a ready sympathy with the pain one actually sees,” Marius concludes after

much exposure to irredeemable human suffering, and the spirit in which he does so has nothing to do with moral relativism (*M* 274). Yet, sincere as such meditations are, they play a comparatively minor part in the evolution of his mind, and cannot really offset the charge of moral relativism. Even “Sebastian van Storck” (1886), in *Imaginary Portraits*, a story expressly concerned with morality, fails in this respect. It ends with an unexpected display of sympathy and self-sacrifice, yet that very moral act is just tagged onto, and not fused with, the action. Still, both instances, along with a host of possible others, provide evidence that Pater was trying to temper his hedonism and what was inherent in hedonism: individualism, and not necessarily for practical prudential reasons, but—as I am going to show—out of genuine convictions. For clues enabling us to resolve the matter we have to consider his aesthetic theory as well.

#### ART: THE LIMITATIONS AND THE MEANING OF L’ART POUR L’ART

Pater’s sensationalism, his position that all we know of the world is reducible to a bunch of unreliable impressions, had far reaching consequences for his aesthetics. But the consequences of the half-hearted nature of that sensationalism were equally significant. For a brief while, at the very start of his career, he approached works of art as sensuous phenomena, sources of *impressions*, distinguished from other objects of sense-perception by the greater intensity of the experience they yield. In “Aesthetic Poetry” William Morris wins his approval because “[d]esire [in his poems] [...] is towards the body of nature for its own sake, not because a soul is divined through it” (*TMT* 525). The hymnic words in the “Conclusion” about the “desire of beauty,” “the love of art for its own sake” (“the love of art for art’s sake”) as the passion best able to heighten the quality of life, do not even remotely suggest that there is a spiritual dimension to beauty. But *The Renaissance*, besides the controversial last essay, is introduced by a “Preface” of a somewhat later date (1873), and this already betrays a marked departure from sensationalism. Echoing Arnold, Pater lays down at the outset that the true critic, who is also the aesthetic critic, should “see the object as in itself it really is,” which is only a different way of saying that he should “know [his] own impression as it really is” (*TMT* 71), and which is perfectly compatible with his earlier sensationalist premises. But then, in making it also the aim of criticism to ask the question “In whom did the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period find itself?” (*TMT* 73), he is back where the Romantics were: “desire here is towards the body of nature” not at all “for its own sake,” but “because a soul is divined through it.” Clearly, there is a new orientation in the “Preface,” a shift from pure sensationalism to Romantic idealism, with Hegel as Pater’s spiritual mentor.

The distance between the idea of beauty in the essay that closes *The Renaissance* and the one that opens it is not “rupture” caused by some sudden cataclysmic intellectual event. The popular “Leonardo da Vinci” (1869), chronologically almost half-way between the two, shows the same Romantic disposition as the “Preface.” The analysis of *La Gioconda*—in addition to describing Mona Lisa in terms more appropriate for that favourite subject of Decadence, the *femme fatale*—has plenty of interest as an example of the tenacity of older concepts of art and criticism. “Set it [the portrait] for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be trou-

bled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed!” (*TMT* 150). The context leaves no doubt that beauty as the reflection of the soul—the physical as the manifestation of the spiritual—is a positive quality. Having almost reached the outer edges of philosophical materialism in his epistemology, Pater swung back to pure idealism. From the vision of a world where God did not exist and morality was a matter of convenience, he quickly passed on to the vision of a universe ruled by order inherently divine. Now, in constructing his aesthetic theory, he recoils from sensationalist extremes in the same manner. The swing back is not final: the pendulum will continue to move in both directions throughout his career. Conventional wisdom tells us that because his thought is full of contradictions of this kind, he deserves our disapprobation. But there is another, more generous as well as more pragmatic way: while we do not play down the seriousness of his failures, we judge him by his achievement: by the powerful brush-strokes he left on the canvas of modernity. And then we shall see him for what he really is: a seminal influence on the best of English literature for at least half a century. To accomplish that objective, however, we have to consider more of what he had to say on art.

One of the added benefits, I promised, of the study of Pater’s aesthetics would be a better understanding of his stance, or stances, on life and art, art and morality. The ineffectual pieties of *Marius* or “Sebastian van Storck” that I have cited are no help in rectifying the less-than-fair judgments one occasionally encounters even today. Neither does “Style” (1888), one of his best known essays, make much difference: the distinction he draws here between good (aesthetically satisfying) art and great art (not merely good, but “devoted to [...] the increase of human happiness”) (*TMT* 413) is trite. *Plato and Platonism* is, however, an altogether different affair in this respect, too. Admittedly, as in discussing Plato’s metaphysics, in interpreting his aesthetics Pater converts the Greek philosopher into an early version of himself (here is a choice bit: Plato “anticipates the modern notion that art as such has no end but its own perfection, ‘art for art’s sake’”) (*PP* 168). For all that, or perhaps because of that, his comments on Plato’s aesthetics (not necessarily those that we find in the last chapter, which he nominally appointed for the purpose) have a special relevance to the issue under review. Considering the passage about beauty in *Phaedrus*, he notes that

while visible beauty is the clearest, the most certain thing, in the world (lovers will always tell you so) real with the reality of something hot or cold in one’s hand, it also comes nearest of all things, so Plato assures us, to its eternal pattern or prototype. For some reason, the eternal idea of beauty had left visible copies of itself, shadows, antitypes, out of all proportion, in their truthfulness and adequacy, to any copy, left here with us, of Justice, for instance, or Equality, or the Perfect State. (*PP* 171)

I cite the passage as evidence of the unique position that—according to Walter Pater—Plato attributed to Beauty, and also as evidence of the same in Pater, as indeed he himself makes it quite clear when he argues that the “reality of beauty” has a special function to fulfil in the world of men:

The loveliness of virtue as a harmony, the winning aspect of those “images” of the absolute and unseen Temperance, Bravery, Justice, shed around us in the visible world for eyes that can see, the claim of the virtues as a visible representation by human persons and their acts of the eternal qualities of “the eternal,” after all far out-weigh, as he [that is, Plato] thinks, the claim of their mere utility. (*PP* 268)

What these lines emphasize—and what Pater fully shares—is that in the practical application of the Platonic idea of Beauty there is “some close connexion between what may be called the aesthetic qualities of the world about us and the formation of moral character, between aesthetics and ethics.” (*PP* 269)

Connecting aesthetics and ethics has special significance not so much for Plato as for Pater (I am still assuming the close affinity of the two thinkers). That significance becomes obvious when the question of *mimesis* is raised, which, according to the book, takes place not only in the work of art (when we are on the stage as actors), but also in our actual experience of art (when we are spectators). Now, if we are surrounded by things of beauty; furthermore, if beauty is an inalienable part of morality, the aesthetic experience is also a positive moral experience, thus art is a powerful social force. In practical terms: if the *sine qua non* of imitation by means of art is the creation of beauty, in other words, of harmony; if the aesthetic experience is imitation—the imitation of the harmony we find in art, harmony being defined as “the subordination of the parts to the whole,” then art is a moral and social agent because it cultivates in us the qualities which produce harmony in human life: co-operation, discipline, and love of order.

This reading of Plato’s aesthetics by Pater makes two things clear. First, that *l’art pour l’art* does in no way advocate a separation of art from morality; and that what it advocates is that art should respect its own laws and no alien ones. Second, that if art succeeds in preserving its autonomy and integrity, it will, by its very nature, become an aid to morality.

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*Plato and Platonism* tells a cautionary tale intended for the Victorians. Of all the Platonic dialogues he has time for, it is *The Republic* that Pater holds in highest esteem. He reads it as an anti-individualist manifesto, glorifying collectivist, authoritarian Lacedaemon (Sparta), the model of society for Plato that Athens, that hotbed of individualism, should adopt to avoid disintegration. The book, using its ostensible subject as the occasion, suggests that humanity stands a better chance of survival by following the Apollonian ideal than it does by obeying the Dionysian impulse. The pendulum does indeed swing, to the very end of Pater’s career, between contrary attractions of the new and the old. Yet in this book, the last to be published in his lifetime, it seems to have come to a halt at the conservative pole, which suggests that after so much wavering Pater finally arrived at some kind of resolution. Eliot, among other things, ignored this as well, and we may only wonder why, as it is exactly the kind of conservative turn that he himself had performed a few years before he wrote his essay on Arnold and Pater. The tenor of much of his writing after *For Lancelot Andrewes* is that modern societies are sliding into anarchy, which can be averted

only if man's disruptive tendencies are checked by external controls—a state of affairs only an authoritarian and hierarchical society can bring about and enforce. Walter Pater had had the same experience and the same vision more than three decades before. Why that vision failed to appeal to Eliot may be the subject of another essay.

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