Transfigured World

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Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism.

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Figural Strategies
in The Renaissance

Pater's volume of Renaissance essays was his first major experiment in the "poetics of revival." In that volume he attempts to stage a revival of the historical period preeminently known for its own revival. Pater's choice of period was easily recognized (even at the time) as a subtle but sweeping polemic against Ruskin's "Gothic." Pater chose instead to "throw into relief" the age when classical art seemed to bring "the mind of man" back to its senses after the dark night of Christian asceticism. The perspective of The Renaissance—Pater's volume, like his imagination of the period—asserts a disengagement from the "medieval mind," but it also identifies with the Middle Ages (though here again, against Ruskin) by recognizing in it another period of romantic inwardness, like his, yearning for the "sense of escape."

As every critic of Pater has pointed out, Pater's definition of the Renaissance extends finally to include both the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century. His definitive period is famously and flagrantly inclusive, finally co-extensive with Western history in general. Abstracting the shape of time described in the Renaissance volume yields as usual a three-term sequence, as well as the additional level of a framing perspective in the late nineteenth century which is implicitly identified with each of the three past ages. Thus, from Pater's perspective, aesthetic history takes the familiar romantic form of unity-in-

diversity, achieved this time specifically as partial, historical "periods" together forming an overarching, "composite" whole. The modernity of Pater's volume depends on this vision of history, which I examine in more detail in the pages to come. Like Morris's "aesthetic poetry," a "strange second flowering after date," Pater's Renaissance attempts to represent not just a revival but a revival of a revival.

Because the issue of difference between classical and Christian traditions was raised so graphically, the Renaissance is characterized in part by an intensified consciousness of history. For Pater, Renaissance art reveals "the mind of man" first faced with the problems of historical representation: the difficulty of drawing a relation between a past age and the present, the aesthetic choice of representative figures, the delineation of difference, and the projection of continuity. Certainly Pater recognizes in the Renaissance the beginning of his own modernity, with its sense of difference not from one past but from two or more. Renaissance art presents Pater with an ideal occasion to consider a fundamental question: how can art formally represent the sense of historical context? In the Renaissance, Pater recognizes the emergent recognition that art must be understood historically, but in his own late nineteenth century he saw the need for an additional level of reflexivity. For art to be understood historically, history itself must be regarded aesthetically.

His contemporaries were not accustomed to such reflexivity. Pater's treatment of the "historical element" was attacked on many grounds and in many voices. As we have seen, Pater responded to these charges by changing the title in the second edition, from Studies in the History of the Renaissance to The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry. But this change did not amount to a recantation any more than did his temporary removal of the "Conclusion." Just as some of Marius's "sensations and ideas" deal "more fully with the thoughts suggested" by the "Conclusion," so the form of Marius the Epicurean deals more fully with problems of historical representation raised in The Renais-

2. Again, see Jerome J. McGann, The Romantic Ideology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), for a trenchant critique of such romantic self-representations as "unity-in-diversity." McGann's doubly historical argument also explores the persistence of these self-representations in the criticism of the romantics. Perhaps it is clear that in my view Pater's work falls squarely within the "Romantic ideology" as McGann has defined it.


In each of his works, Pater continues to consider these same problems and to generate responsive literary forms.

Pater's first volume displays his characteristic play between historical and "imaginative" styles of discourse. He bluntly juxtaposes passages of documented cultural history or biographical detail against passages of interpretive analysis, legend, and symbolic reverie. These stylistic shifts seemed more objectionable in *The Renaissance* than in his later works, I believe, largely because this first volume is less clearly rationalized as a genre than the "imaginary portraits," the "Greek studies," the historical novels, and the lectures on Plato and Platonism that succeeded it. Those later works also mix levels of representation in striking ways, but they do so within ingenious and to some extent original literary forms that more overtly and more thoroughly organize or encode their relative claims both to factuality and to aesthetic recreation. But in *The Renaissance*, Pater's shifts from fact to fiction do not seem as fully integrated in a comprehensive discursive or literary plan. Did he mean his essays to be read as "studies" of "history" or of "art and poetry"? Pater's change of title in the second edition (from *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*) may be taken to signal his consideration of a more integrative approach to genre, and his works after this first volume certainly announce more clearly what they take themselves to be.

Pater's extraordinarily mobile critical stance, though it made *The Renaissance* vulnerable to attack from the historical point of view, is an indispensable feature of his "poetics of revival." Each of the representational styles along the spectrum between fact and fiction marks a certain distance taken by the aesthetic critic in relation to his object, as he undergoes the passionate identification and dispassionate separation that enables aesthetic recognition. Pater's constant repositioning represents an effort literally to "revive" or "animate" his subject "by keeping it always close to himself" and at the same time to indicate historical distance by throwing the past age "into relief." In *The Renaissance*, as in his other works, Pater takes up documented facts and converts them into strategies of perception, making knowledge a mobile and relative matter, letting facts as well as ideas fall away as soon as their "service" of startling the mind to "constant and eager observation" has been performed.

5. The recent reclamation of Pater has been based on a defense of his "imaginative sense of fact." See, e.g., Gerald Monsman, "Criticism as Creation," in *Walter Pater's Art of Autobiography* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 9–36.
The Renaissance is one of those Victorian works which "appear to be histories, but in fact create historical myths." In this case, the historical myth created is at once a myth of "actual" history, a myth recollecting other historically specific myths, and a myth of History in the abstract and "spiritual" sense of that word. The volume, then, is both mythological (in the sense that it recounts and reinterprets myths from the past) and mythopoeic (in the sense that it generates a new myth out of the old ones). In Pater's work, the sense of a unifying power inherent in the external world, a sense absolutely necessary for mythopoeic art, is grounded not in nature but in his sense of history. Indeed, as I have argued, the conception of history restores his very sense of objectivity or externality in the first place, as well as his belief in a power of imaginative reunification. The work of aesthetic historicism mobilizes creative consciousness and history to stabilize and nourish each other. In the final analysis, but only in the final analysis, the mythopoetic element predominates over the historical, but it is generated in the first place by the historical sense, which must not be overlooked in an interpretive plunge toward the mythopoetic element. To take that interpretive plunge too precipitously would be to elide the very value of the work as neither myth nor history, but precisely as literature.

I · Legend and Historicity

Like Botticelli, Pater was a "visionary" who "lived in a generation of naturalists." He is quite clearly characterizing his own method when he describes Botticelli's:

The genius of which Botticelli is the type usurps the data before it as the exponent of ideas, moods, visions of its own; in this interest it plays fast and loose with those data, rejecting some and isolating others, and always combining them anew. (R, 53–54)
