Walter Pater

An Imaginative Sense of Fact

A Collection of Essays

Edited by Philip Dodd

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Contents

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Introduction
On Reading Pater

Reviewing Walter Pater's 1873 *Studies in the History of the Renaissance,* Mrs Mark Pattison complained that its title was "misleading" because "the historical element is precisely that which is wanting, and its absence makes the weak place of the whole book." The work, she found, lacked "true scientific method" and "is in no wise a contribution to the history of the Renaissance."[1] Mrs Pattison implicitly assumed here an intrinsic distinction between imaginative fiction and nonfictional prose, the latter having an obligation to convey factual material objectively. As history, Pater's *Studies* was clearly nonfiction—thus Pattisonian objectivity, prosaic and nonpoetic, must be its special form of Truth. But for Pater, prose and fiction did not deal in different sorts of truths. Taking his stance on a radical relativity (one lesson he clearly did learn from modern science), Pater denied any form of absolute or wholly objective knowledge. No historical account ever can be scientifically objective; no description ever will capture reality whole. Pater's relativistic, anti-mimetic stance grounded itself in a subjective poetics of prose which insists that all literary use of language will be self-expressive. Although Pater did not require an aesthetic response from nonliterary texts—scientific-technical writing, newspaper journalism, or 'antiquarian' research—he did imply that literary prose, like fiction, uses language expressively and imaginatively. Inevitably, Pater's self-expressive stance dictated those art-for-art's-sake (or art-for-the-artist's-sake) theories in *The Renaissance* that elevated the aesthetic-expressive qualities of language above the ostensible argument and its external referents.

One of Pater's most interesting statements concerning historical writing is found in the opening sentences of "Hippolytus Veiled", from his *Greek Studies:*

> Centuries of zealous archaeology notwithstanding, many phases of the so varied Greek genius are recorded for the modern student in a kind of shorthand only, or not at all. Even for Pausanias, visiting Greece before its direct part in affairs was quite played out, much had perished or grown dim—of its art, of the truth of its outward history, above all of its religion as a credible or practicable thing. And yet Pausanias visits Greece under conditions as favourable for observation as those under which later travellers, Addison or Eustace, proceed to Italy.... Had the opportunities in which Pausanias was fortunate been ours, how many haunts of the antique Greek life unnoticed by him we should have peeped into, minutely systematic in our painstaking! how many a view would broaden out where he notes hardly anything at all on his map of Greece![2]

One could seize on the single word, "painstaking," as a kind of clue as to how to read the whole of this passage. In his essay on "Style," Pater remarks that "in all science, the functions of literature reduce themselves eventually to the transcribing of fact" and, therefore, "the excellences of literary form in regard to science are reducible to various kinds of painstaking."[3] Pater wishes, indeed, that Pausanias had been more "painstaking" in his collection of facts. He would like to know more, but the more he knows the more he will still want to know; he can never know enough, can never absorb enough details to reach that point at which he can say he has arrived at Truth.[4] Nevertheless, Pausanias' failure to perform as a scientific historian does not prevent Pater from interpreting Greek life; that is, scientific truth has limitations inherent in its objective mode of explanation, such that in "Hippolytus Veiled" Pater can dispense with factual data in his interpretation of the origin of Greek art. Even with fuller data on the emergence of Italian renaissance art —and Pater here longs to have for his study of Greek art the equivalent of Joseph Addison's *Remarks on Italy* (1705) or J.C.Eustace's *Tour Through Italy* (1813)—Pater does not use his facts scientifically in *The Renaissance*; he employs corrupt texts, legends, fanciful associations. What one might want to have in terms of historical detail is thus not what one needs to have to re-create early Attic demi-life. To give life to an unliving past, Pater must throw its "sensations and ideas" (the subtitle of *Marius*) into relief against his own life; and although he gives "Hippolytus" an essay-like subtitle, "A Study from Euripides," Pater's historical reconstruction of the antique tragedian's tale will really veil a portrait of himself.

Pater's shift away from the dominant Positivist-Utilitarian philosophy of prose, away from fact and toward what he called the author's "imaginative sense of fact,"[5] constituted in 1873 a startling reaffirmation of romantic doctrine. From Sainte-Beuve, Pater had learned how inevitable was the indirect reflection of the author himself in the style and imagery, choice and arrangement of materials, and how inevitably criticism loses its objectivity to become a form of creation in its own right. And out of the nostalgia of Charles Lamb's "Dream-Children," "Mackery End," and "Blakesmore in H----shire," Pater then crafted such subjectively confessional prose pieces as 'The Child in the House." The seemingly hybrid nature of Pater's historical novel, *Marius the Epicurean,* is immediately resolved if one regards its hero, like Florian of "The Child in the House," as a sort of Elian figure designed to mask and reveal the author simultaneously. When in 1885 Pater published this work, he did so fully aware that the current prejudice in favour of factual accuracy could be challenged by an "imaginative sense of fact" that would be compatible with artistic design. Utility and rhetorical fervour as Victorian prose ideals ultimately yielded to the latent Romanticism of this expressionist mode that cele brated the specialness of the author's "vision within"[6]—a glimpse of the self hidden yet central to the artistic design. In all of this, Pater remains, of course, solidly imbedded in his age; for throughout the Victorian era, the utilitarian prose ideal never effectively eclipsed those uncategorizable works in which personal themes were central but submerged in the ideational content. The only reasonable explanation for history's vindication of the 'poetics' of Pater's prose is that his writings are informed by this subjective authorial presence: his unhistorical work survives whereas Mrs Pattison's voluminously documented tomes have long since been superseded in scholarly use. In the fiction of his contemporaries, Meredith and

James, later in the prose and/or fiction of Yeats, Conrad, Joyce, and Woolf, Pater's ordered and delicate words, with their self-expressive intent, live.

For about a half-century, between the 1920s and the 1960s during which those born a generation or so after him were both in his debt and clamorous to deny what they owed to him, Pater's reputation was greatly diminished. The reasons had to do with the sense of nonfictional prose as a vaguely defined area, barely a literary kind at all; with the preoccupation of the dominant New Critical methodology with verse (although Pater's texts yield a wealth of meaning under close reading); and with the conflict(s) in Pater's own personality that alienated and confused readers and perhaps created personal or literary anxieties about his influence upon them. But any reader approaching Pater innocent of preconceptions would have found him, as an experimentor with problems of self and time, and as a forerunner of the twentieth-century 'psychological' novelists, considerably more than an unmarried, unchurched, prosaic version of Coventry Patmore (whose name invariably follows Pater's in alphabetical listings). Yet after the First World War it became increasingly difficult to take Pater seriously. His name seemed to elicit (at best) a mild derision— except, perhaps, from those elderly friends of one's youth who recalled his reputation from the pre-1920s. Pater was not merely neglected; he was, until the early sixties, misunderstood with wilful intent. But in the sixties, at least on the Continent and in a certain few American and British institutions, new critical methodologies better able to make sense of Pater were forged and applied (first the phenomenological method; then, later, modified and somewhat humanized versions of post-structuralism); also, sexual nonconformity was more easily introduced into open discussion and treated as a legitimate part of the author's artistic expression; and, finally, as Levine and Madden pointed out in 1968 (reviving Oliver Elton's forgotten assertion of 1920): "Victorian literature is the first for which the claim might reasonably be made that its prose non-fiction surpasses its poetry, not only in bulk but in artistic achievement."[7] (As to the reasonableness of this last, I won't take sides, since such a prose-over-poetry claim seems to consign Victorian fiction to the outermost fringes.)

Although it took fifteen years of paddling to bring Pater to shore, first against and then with the current of turning critical opinion, today his relevance and genius are past question. Yet Pater could be cited even as recently in 1975, in Miriam Allott's review of *Victorian Prose: A Guide to Research,* as "'without a doubt the most inadequately served by biographers, scholars, and critics.' Pater is certainly the least widely read and understood of any of the Victorian critics and creative writers, though there are signs of a coming revival of interest in him; his importance in linking Victorianism and modernism is beginning to impress itself on students of both these subjects."[8] Now, a half dozen years later, it seems perfectly clear that the revaluation of his reputation and the current vigorous upsurge of Pater studies that began so tentatively in the early 'sixties has not peaked; scholarship on Pater is increasing at an exponential rate. One need only scan Robert Seiler's bibliography of Pater studies since DeLaura's *Victorian Prose* to sense an enormous activity in Pater studies in the last decade—in particular in the last two years. As a straw in the wind, the first international conference devoted exclusively to Pater was held at Brasenose College in July 1980, the essays in this special issue of *Prose Studies* representing a harvest of that gathering.

Each of the discussions included in this issue devoted to Pater touches, in some significant way, on his "imaginative sense of fact," on his struggle with the objective 'givens' of experience (ideas or individuals), and on his efforts to co-opt or turn that Other into a reordered reflection of his own image. Ian Small in a challenging essay notes that one type of critical statement Pater makes depends "upon a theory of perception and so upon a psychology of personality." Like Caesar's Gaul, all commentators on Pater find themselves divided by Small into three parts—and all alike are subjugated by "the historicist methodology." Small's own method is to propose two different models for Pater's literary and art criticism: a psychological and a sociological model. He surmises that "Pater's failure to achieve a successful synthesis of these two positions had nothing to do with the compatibility or incompatibility of the theories in themselves, but with the tensions between the opposing models of human activity from which (for the nineteenth-century mind) they derived their validation." Whatever any future discussions of Pater's sense of art as a social phenomenon (as sketched by Small) may show, the recognition of an expressive component in Pater's critical theory(ies) is sound. In the epistemology of Pater's beloved Romantic poets, the mind both is coloured by what it beholds and, in turn, colours the objects of its perception; eye and ear, says Wordsworth, "half create." Billie Andrew Inman's wide-ranging and original dissection of Pater's diverse philosophic and scientific sources for the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* presents just this reordering by Pater of the givens that constitutes perception as a significant act of cognition *qua* creation. Discussing a quotation from Hugo's *Les Misérables,* Inman remarks: "But as in the case of Novalis, Pater sets the quotation from the source into a context that places a new interpretation upon it." Inman's sense of Pater's fusing or melding of scientific data to achieve his image of the gemlike flame is particularly striking. Though I myself still prefer the analogue of starlight to that of Inman's limelight (or, for that matter, to the burning glass or the Bunsen burner), the condensing and reordering of data that she adduces is certainly highly typical of Pater's method of operation and has a certain cogency. All in all, Inman cites upwards of two dozen significant influences upon the thought and imagery of the "Conclusion." What saves Pater's finale from being merely "a pastiche of other writers' ideas" is, of course, the half-creating "imaginative sense of fact" that synthesizes a divergent welter of sources into the most powerful personal manifesto of its generation.

As against the authority of a repressive parent, Pater struggled *contra* both Ruskin and Jowett. With the enormous prestige each wielded, the Slade Professor and the Master of Balliol were not unlike the empirical data of science or the authoritative philosophic and literary texts of the past. One way or another, the author who would assert his own creative originality must neutralize them. Harold Bloom has written that "Pater suffered under Ruskin's influence, though from the start he maintained a revisionary stance in regard to his precursor.... Ruskin is ignored, by name, in the books and essays, yet he hovers everywhere in them, and nowhere more strongly than in *The Renaissance*."[9] J.B.Bullen's essay points out that within six months of each other Ruskin and then Pater presented contrasting portraits of Michelangelo. Discussing Ruskin's "Michel Angelo and Tintoret," Bullen learnedly roots their debate over Michelangelo's place in art history in past and contemporary discussions of his reputation. Pointing to a "number of thematic similarities" in their two views, Bullen notes that Pater neither cites Ruskin nor attacks