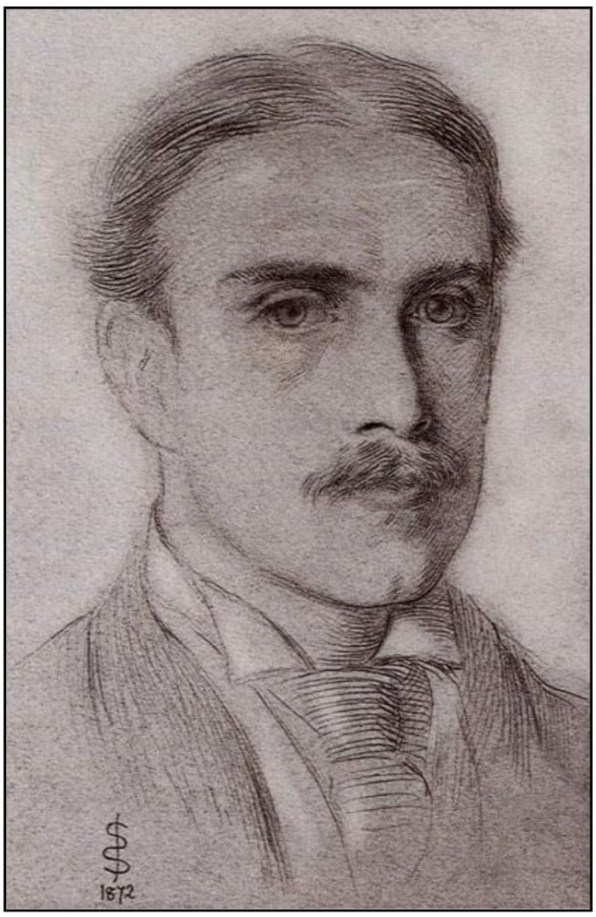
Frost and Sun



In 1873, Walter Pater, a fellow at Brasenose College in Oxford, published *Studies in the History of the Renaissance.* The book contained some previously published papers and several new essays on the poets, painters and philosophers of the Renaissance. The concluding chapter reworked some comments from an earlier paper on the poetry of William Morris to provide a summary of Pater's aesthetic philosophy. This combined a skepticism about anything beyond our immediate sensations, an agnosia about any higher power or any life beyond our present mortal span, and a delight in the pleasure that comes from experiencing beauty. The goal in life was to enjoy each moment as fully as possible:

> Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, –for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?
>
> To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain

> this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes two persons, things, situations, seem alike. While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the sense, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend. Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening. (Pater, 1893, pp. 188-189)

The conclusion ends with the rallying cry of "art for art's sake" (Gautier's *l'art pour l'art,* Prettejohn, 2007), though in later editions Pater attenuated this to "art for its own sake:"

> Well! we are all *condamnés*, as Victor Hugo says: we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve –*les hommes sont tous condamnés à mort avec des sursis indéfinis*: we have an interval, and then our place knows no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passion, the wisest, at least among "the children of the world", in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us a quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which comes naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion –that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you

> proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake. (Pater, 1893, p. 190)

Reviewers of the book complimented the author on his refined sensibility and elegant prose. The book contributed significantly to our understanding of the Renaissance. The chapter on Botticelli was the first consideration of this painter in the English language. Pater's sympathetic descriptions of the poems and the paintings were models of aesthetic interpretation.

However, the conclusion caused a scandal. To the Victorians life was serious. One was taught to think of the future and not the moment, to consider salvation before enjoyment, and to experience art for its meaning rather than its pleasure. John Wordsworth, grand-nephew of the poet and Pater's colleague at Brasenose, wrote to him that he considered the philosophy of the conclusion dangerous in that it might lead young minds to believe

> 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 or certainly the soul dissolves at death into elements which are destined never to reunite (Heiler, 1988, p. 62).

Pater's former tutor W. W. Capes preached a sermon:

> That is a poor philosophy of life which would concentrate all efforts upon self, and bid us console ourselves amid our short-lived pleasures, so they be only intense and multitudinous enough. (quoted in Donoghue, 1995, p. 58)

Soon after the publication of the book, Pater was involved in other scandals. In March, 1873, his friend Simeon Solomon, who had drawn the sketch used at the beginning of this post, was convicted in a London court of attempted sodomy. Pater was not involved in any way, but the event highlighted the fragility

of his homosexual life. A year later, homoerotic letters from Pater to a young student at Balliol College were given to Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol, who had tutored Pater and fostered his early academic career (Inman, 1991). The undergraduate, William Money Hardinge, was a talented poet and such an overt homosexual that he was known colloquially as the "Balliol Bugger." Hardinge was sent down, and Pater was reprimanded. The letters were never published, but Pater's progress at Oxford never went beyond his fellowship at Brasenose. Pater had been considered the next in line for the University Proctorship, but he was passed over and the appointment went to John Wordsworth.

Ethics and Aestheticism

Pater believed that his aesthetic philosophy had been misinterpreted. He removed the Conclusion from the 1877 edition of the book, though he replaced it in the later editions with a warning that its ideas should be treated with caution. Pater insisted that he did not condone the simple hedonism of Aristippus and the school of Cyrene (O'Keefe, 2002). In a chapter in his 1885 novel *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater considers the Cyreniacs and finds that the simple search for pleasure was insufficient.

> *Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!* – is a proposal, the real import of which differs immensely, according to the natural taste, and the acquired judgement of the guests who sit at the table … the soul, which can make no sincere claim to have apprehended anything beyond the veil of immediate experience, yet never loses a sense of happiness in conforming to the highest moral ideal it can clearly define for itself. (Pater, 1885, p. 116)

Pater and Marius were more comfortable with Epicurus, who acknowledged that virtue can bring happiness, and who

considered tranquility (*ataraxia*) more important than immediate satisfaction (O'Keefe, 2005). In his essay on Winckelman in *The Renaissance*, Pater had advocated the serenity (*Heiterkeit,* p 176) that could come from the contemplation of Greek art. Both Pater and Epicurus were concerned with mortality and looked for some way to alleviate the fear of future death by living as intensely as possible in the present. Marius pointed out (p. 120) how these ideas resonate with Ecclesiastes 9:10:

> Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

Nevertheless, a theory of ethics is not easily derived from aesthetics (Hext, 2013; Tucker, 1991). The good and the beautiful are not necessarily related. Virtue is more associated with the ascetic than the indulgent. The appreciation of beauty can perhaps lead to morality by its cultivation of the self, educating the mind in sensitivity and empathy. Schiller (1794) and Arnold (1869) had both proposed that culture could replace religion in the education of the young and the promotion of the virtuous life.

Yet the aestheticism of Pater was far too individual to lead to social norms. He kept himself separate from society, in part because of his shyness, and in part because of his homosexuality. He was far more concerned with the refinement of his perceptions than with the progress of the world. His is an ethic more passive than active – a sympathetic attention to the human lot as portrayed in art rather than any compassionate action to alleviate that lot. Nevertheless, Pater's concentration on the individual remains a defense against any hijacking of art to support social norms. Who is to say that mainstream culture is correct?

Pater proposed that ethical sensibility derives from the sensual pleasure of contemplating the beautiful. For Pater

morality was empirical rather than theoretical:

> With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy. (Pater, 1893, p. 189)

However, the relations between the good and the beautiful are tenuous at best. This is especially true if the beautiful is judged on the pleasure that it brings to the senses. The good may require sacrifice. What is the primary goal of action? Should we be good because the good is beautiful or only when the good is beautiful? (Hext, 2013, p. 177)

Pater's stress on the aesthetic moment – the intense experience of the here and now – attenuates any consideration of the consequences. This can be ethically problematic since the experience of beauty, especially in its Dionysian sense, can lead to evil. As Kate Hext (2013) points out

> sensual 'ecstasy' may become uncontrollable, obscuring all distinctions between good and evil as the individual, intoxicated by his desire for greater and greater sensations, becomes aware only of his own pleasure (p. 178).

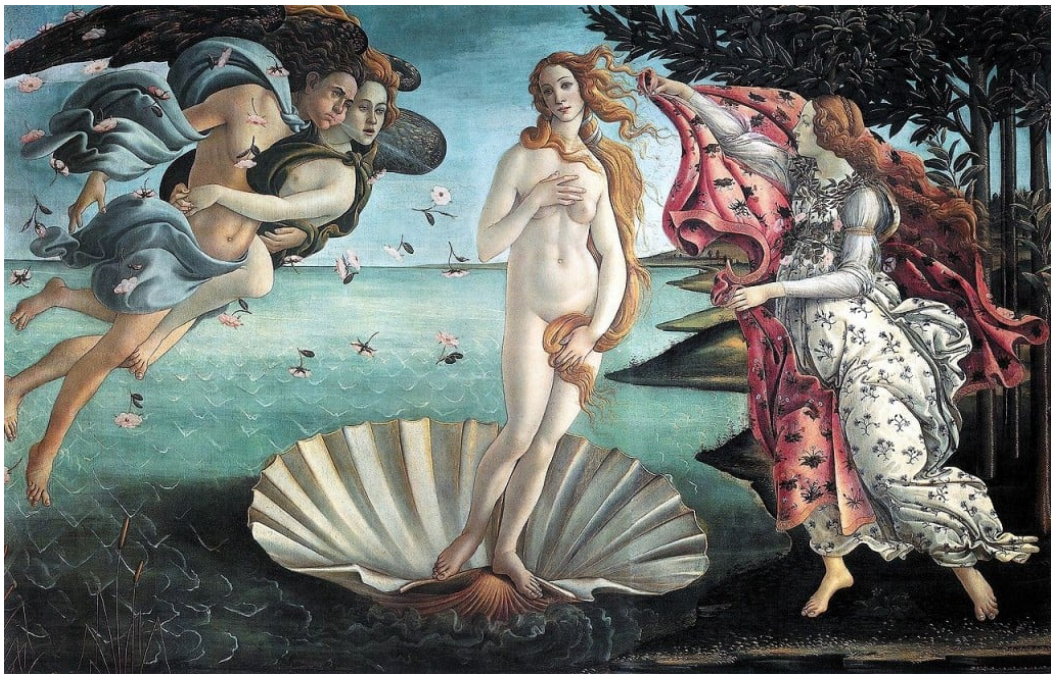
This may be too sharp a criticism. Pater was adamant that the proper appreciation of the beautiful leads to sympathy and compassion for our fellows. The experience of beauty is the way we can escape the fear of death, a fear we share with all others. In his description in *The Renaissance* of the paintings of Botticelli, he finds

> a blending in him of a sympathy for humanity in its uncertain condition, its attractiveness, its investiture at rare moments in a character of loveliness and energy, with his consciousness of the shadow upon it of the great things

> from which it shrinks. (Pater, 1893, p. 47)

These ideas are particularly prominent in Pater's description of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*:

> The light is indeed cold—mere sunless dawn; but a later painter would have cloyed you with sunshine; and you can see the better for that quietness in the morning air each long promontory, as it slopes down to the water's edge. Men go forth to their labours until the evening; but she is awake before them, and you might think that the sorrow in her face was at the thought of the whole long day of love yet to come. An emblematical figure of the wind blows hard across the grey water, moving forward the dainty-lipped shell on which she sails, the sea "showing his teeth," as it moves, in thin lines of foam, and sucking in, one by one, the falling roses, each severe in outline, plucked off short at the stalk, but embrowned a little, as Botticelli's flowers always are. Botticelli meant all this imagery to be altogether pleasurable; and it was partly an incompleteness of resources, inseparable from the art of that time, that subdued and chilled it. But this predilection for minor tones counts also; and what is unmistakable is the sadness with which he has conceived the goddess of pleasure, as the depository of a great power over the lives of men. (Pater, 1893, pp. 46-47)



Modernism

Pater's contribution to our understanding of art was disparaged by T. S. Eliot in his 1930 essay on "Arnold and Pater" (Eliot, 1951):

> 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. The theory (if it can be called a theory) of 'art for art's sake' is still valid in so far as it can be taken as an exhortation to the artist to stick to his job; it never was and never can be valid for the spectator, reader or auditor.

The essay was written soon after Eliot's formal conversion to the Church of England. It reflected a view that religion is revealed rather than discerned, that ethics are given rather than proposed, and that art without religion is incomplete. Eliot wished for the days when religion played a more essential role in our society:

> When religion is in a flourishing state, when the whole mind

> of society is moderately healthy and in order, there is an easy and natural association between religion and art.

The reader of the essay might long for the earlier Eliot who found no such simple truths. Eliot was actually much influenced by Pater. The narrator of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (Eliot, 1917) is related in many ways to Walter Pater. He shares his aesthetic sensibility and his painful reticence. Indeed he may even share some of his words. Prufrock's "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" may derive from Pater's essay on Shakespeare's kings: No! Shakespeare's kings are not, nor are meant to be, great men" (Fleissner, 1966)

Pace Eliot, Pater's ideas had far-reaching consequences. His immediate followers were the Decadents of the 1890s – Wilde, Johnson, Dowson, Symons – who lived for the emotions of the moment without thought for the morrow. Yet Pater had more a deeper and more lasting influence on the Modernist movement in art, literature and philosophy (McGrath, 1986). His concentration on the individual experience – the here and now – led to the stream of consciousness of the novelists Joyce and Madox Ford. His idea of the intense emotional experience triggered by the beautiful became the idea of epiphany in poets such as Eliot and novelists such as Proust. Pater eschewed the absolute and found his home in the personal imagination: everything is relative to the perceiver. The Modernist version of the world is as much created in the mind as it is given in the world. McGrath (1986) quotes Nelson Goodman about the changes brought about by Modernism

> The movement is from unique truth and a world fixed and found to a diversity of right and even conflicting versions or worlds in the making. (Goodman, 1978, p. x)

It is therefore fitting that W. B. Yeats chose as his first poem in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) a sentence from Pater's description of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*,

presented in the form of free verse (Rubin, 2011):

> She is older than the rocks among which she sits;
> Like the vampire,
> She has been dead many times,
> And learned the secrets of the grave;
> And has been a diver in deep seas,
> And keeps their fallen day about her;
> And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;
> And, as Leda,
> Was the mother of Helen of Troy,
> And, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary;
> And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,
> And lives only in the delicacy
> With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,
> And tinged the eyelids and the hands.



References

Arnold, M. (1869, reprinted 1889) *Culture and anarchy*. London: MacMillan.

Donoghue, D. (1995). *Walter Pater: Lover of strange souls*. New York: Knopf.

Eliot, T. S. (1917). *Prufrock and other observations*. London: The Egoist.

Eliot, T. S. (1951).*Selected essays*. London: Faber and Faber. (Arnold and Pater, pp. 431-443)

Fleissner R. F. (1966). “Prufrock,” Pater, and Richard II: Retracing a denial of princeship. *American Literature, 38*, 120-123. Pater’s essay on Shakespeare’s English Kings is reprinted in Pater W. (1989). *Appreciations with an essay on style*. London: MacMillan

Goodman, N. (1978).*Ways of worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett

Hext, K. (2013). *Walter Pater: Individualism and aesthetic philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Inman, B. A. (1991). Estrangement and connection: Walter Pater, Benjamin Jowett, and William M. Hardinge. In Brake, L., & Small, I. (Eds). *Pater in the 1990s*. Greensboro, NC: ELT Press.

McGrath, F. C. (1986). *The sensible spirit: Walter Pater and the modernist paradigm*. Tampa: University Presses of Florida.

O’Keefe, T. (2002). Cyrenaics*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*

O’Keefe, T. (2005). Epicurus (341-271 BCE). *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Pater, W., (1873, revised 1893, edited with textual and explanatory notes by Hill, D. L., 1980). *The Renaissance: Studies in art and poetry: the 1893 text*. Berkeley: University of California Press. The original1873 version *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* is available online.

Pater, W. (1885, edited by Levey, M., 1985). *Marius the Epicurean*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books.

Prettejohn, E. (2007). *Art for art’s sake: Aestheticism in Victorian painting*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.

Rubin, R. A. (2011). *Some heroic discipline: William Butler Yeats and the Oxford Book of Modern Verse.* Doctoral Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (pp. 63-67). The thesis also deals with other idiosyncrasies in the anthology, such as Yeats' refusal to include any of the poets of the Great War and his cutting from Wilde's Ballad of Reading Goal its most memorable lines.

Schiller, J. C. F. von (1794, reprinted from Harvard Classics, 1910). *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man.*

Seiler, R. M. (1980). *Walter Pater, the critical heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Tucker, P. (1991). Pater as a "Moralist." In Brake, L., & Small, I. (Eds). *Pater in the 1990s*. Greensboro, NC: ELT Press.

Yeats, W. B. (1936). *The Oxford book of modern verse, 1892-1935*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.