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Concluding or Occluding Gestures: How Appropriate is Pater's "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*?

With an appropriateness that I hope will become manifest in the course of my argument, this discussion of Walter Pater's seminal study *The Renaissance*¹ is a self-constituted *doppelgänger*: it is "twin-born," to borrow Pater's term (*Renaissance* 109), in order to highlight the competing preoccupations—esthetic criticism and the criticism of life—which inform the text as a whole. This is not to suggest, however, that *The Renaissance* is hopelessly self-divided. The student of Pater must, out of necessity, become a student of Heraclitus—and the pre-Socratic sage teaches that only from the conflict of elements can true harmony arise. *The Renaissance*, I will argue, achieves such a "picturesque union of contrasts" (37), but the nature and degree of union cannot be ascertained until the contrasts are understood.

The "Conclusion" figures prominently in such a project because it seems, at first glance, to derail Pater's carefully-crafted *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*—to pursue new, tangential avenues of thought and expression rather than summarize the essays which precede it. With its gem-like flames, moments of vision, and appeals for ecstasy, the "Conclusion" is a brilliant bravura performance, a frank and engaging response to the "forces" of modern life as Pater knew them. At face value, however, the personal philosophy of flux and response articulated in the "Conclusion" tells us a great deal about Walter Pater the man and his sense of the *zeitgeist*, but little about his knowledge of Renaissance culture. It seems to occlude, to obstruct, our appreciation of the earlier essays; the discrimination and clarity of "Leonardo" and "The School of Giorgione" give way to a darkling scepticism and hedonism of experience "for its own sake" (190).

Take away the "Conclusion," one could argue, and what remains is a highly selective, thoughtfully idiosyncratic aesthetic study, one in which each chapter may be read as an episode in Pater's dramatic and self-dramatizing quest for meaning through art. Each artist or con-

noisseur presented—della Robbia, da Vinci, or Winckelmann—re-enacts this aesthetic adventure. “Take away” the final pages of *The Renaissance* was precisely the hue and cry of many of its first readers—remove them, destroy them, keep them away especially from impressionable young people. An Oxford bishop, John Fielding Mackarness, denounced the pages publicly², as did the *London Quarterly Review*³; George Eliot’s declaration that they, along with the whole book, were “poisonous” was typical of numerous private responses (Haight V:455). (These vehemently negative views recall the initial reactions of Christian ascetics when the “relics” of classical art resurfaced in the Middle Ages: it was, to quote the “Winckelmann” essay, “as if an ancient plague-pit had been opened” [180].)

When revising his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in late 1876 and early 1877, to prepare a second edition, Pater bowed to the pressures of censure (and the threats of Benjamin Jowett) and removed the “Conclusion.” His official “reasons” for doing so are noted in the third and fourth editions: “This brief ‘Conclusion,’” he explains, “was omitted in the second edition of this book, as I conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall” (186n).

Did this most careful and fastidious of writers then write a new conclusion for his book? He did not. This may have been, in part, a political gesture: he had allowed himself to be partially silenced, but would draw attention to the censorship by leaving the work conclusionless. Nevertheless, the second edition, as it stands, seems to substantiate the claim that Pater’s *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (its new and abiding name) is perfectly coherent and unified without the “Conclusion.” It is still a tribute to “the susceptible and diligent eye” of artist and critic alike; it remains an accomplished aesthetic study which performs the double-natured theory of perception articulated in its “Preface” (what is the object “as in itself it really is,” what is this object “to me?”). After all, the “Preface” claims that the “true student of aesthetics” will “define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible” (xix). Yet the “Conclusion” delineates, in highly abstract terms, what “the spirit need[s] in the face of modern life” (184); the “desire of beauty” is only mentioned in the penultimate sentence as one example of the “great passions” that will bring “the highest quality to your moments as they pass” (190).

Should this, then, be our final position on the “Conclusion,” words to the effect that, captivating and rebellious as it is, this late-Victorian *cri de coeur* wrenches the reader from the glories of the Renaissance to

the problems of modernity; it obscures the carefully-nuanced considerations of specific artists and individual works by invoking both the disturbing truths of contemporary science (Spencer, Darwin, Tyndall) and the distressing conjectures of post-Renaissance philosophy (Hume, Kant, Hegel, Fichte).⁴ Such a view, I would suggest, implies that *The Renaissance* is a single-minded, single-purposed text, one which surveys the past solely for the pleasures of its artifacts. Pater's project, however, is much grander and multifaceted. Overtly, he challenges then-contemporary notions of historiography, the need to fix dates and delineate historical "periods," by dissolving periodization: he identifies instead a Renaissance *impulse* which can be traced as far back as twelfth-century France ("Two Early French Stories") and as far forward as late eighteenth-century Germany ("Winckelmann"). Covertly, he reinvents the framework within which we are to experience and evaluate all of Western culture. His explicit topic is The Renaissance, but his implicit subject is the rebirth, the revival of Hellenism—the history of its "strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving" throughout the fabric of Western civilization.

He *is* writing a history, but history as enactment, not "mere antiquarianism." The spectre of "antiquarianism" is invoked throughout *The Renaissance* (14-15, 78, 101, 143) to describe a sterile, specialized, non-participatory process of cataloguing the past, organizing its dates, anecdotes, and artifacts. A "busy" antiquarian produces records and Gradgrind-like "facts"; a true historian "vitalizes his subject" and brings it within the realm of the reader's experience (Pater, "William Morris" 146). The latter phrase appears, not in *The Renaissance*, but in Pater's October 1868 review of "Poems by William Morris." What Pater especially lauds in Morris is his resourcefulness in revivifying both the Middle Ages and the "antique" classical world. In this way, the nineteenth-century "aesthetic" artist becomes a renaissance man: one "who, while he handles an ancient subject, never becomes an antiquarian, but vitalizes his subject by keeping it always close to himself" (Pater, "William Morris" 146). He is, in fact, a "Hellenist of the middle age" (146).

"Poems by William Morris" is not only an early workshop-essay in which Pater ponders aesthetic theory and articulates his methodology, it is the originative moment of *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. The "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* is actually a revised version of the final seven paragraphs of "Poems by William Morris." From the outset, then, Pater was shaping his essays, his studies, in terms of history as the manifestation of a shared—that is, Hellenistic—

sensibility, an “outbreak of the human spirit” (Pater, *Renaissance* xxii) possible at any propitious time, in any receptive culture.

Systems and dogmas were anathema to Pater; a systematized, rigidly proscribed view of history he particularly decried. “Two Early French Stories,” the first essay in *The Renaissance*, sounds the alarm concerning the “ignorant worship of system for its own sake” (6); the “Conclusion” echoes and amplifies the warning:

The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of . . . experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or of what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us. (189)

However, if the Hellenistic-Renaissance “spirit” cannot be reduced to abstract theorems, how are we to judge a true “outbreak” from a false? In the “Preface” Pater introduces his notion of an active, affective principle which resides within the object, “the virtue by which,” he insists, “a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure” (xx-xxi). The responsive critic, he believes, internalizes the “primary data” of impressions and sensations, and exposes them to the subjective influences of his or her cognitive processes. This conflation of memory, reason, imagination, emotion, “discrimination and analysis” (xx) then results in a new level of aesthetic “consciousness.” Subsequent to this “interfusion” of a work’s virtue and the individual’s perceptive faculties, the critic reconstitutes the experience verbally and thereby renders it accessible to a sensitive reader. From this deduction, Pater generalizes further: not only does each object have such a virtue, each cultural experience embodies an “essential truth, the *vrai verité*” (122). Therefore, at strategic points throughout *The Renaissance*, Pater pauses to identify the virtues of Hellenism as they are revived throughout Europe.

Each such revival, one could say, constitutes a privileged cultural moment, a moment when, through *ascesis* (refinement) and *aesthesis* (sensory perception), the “hard gem-like flame” of Hellenism is rekindled. Pater’s essays celebrate these temporally-flexible, always exhilarating “moments” of “intense consciousness,” “exquisite pauses in time, in which, arrested thus, we seem to be spectators of all the fullness of existence, and which are like some consummate extract or quintessence of life” (118). The “Conclusion” then reiterates, with hectic and hypnotic urgency, the need to cherish and cultivate such moments, to grasp “at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to

knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free" and achieve, however fleetingly, a "quicken sense of life" (189-190).

Pater's vision of Hellenism reborn is expressed in two ways in *The Renaissance*: mythically, through a subtext which synthesizes Heraclitus and Coleridge; and metaphorically, through a painting of Botticelli. Mythically, this unified and unifying cultural experience is figured as an "under-current," an inspirational stream which has as its source the sacred "waters of Castalia" on Mt. Parnassus (157). This "river [which makes] glad" (157) any receptive city or citizen is, however, essentially Heraclitean: in the words of the "Conclusion," it displays not "the movements of the shore-side, where the water flows down indeed, though in apparent rest—but the race of the mid-stream, a drift of momentary acts of sight and passion and thought" (187). Reassuringly, though, this Hellenistic stream also has a Coleridian aspect, as we might expect from a man whose first publication, in January 1866, was a review of "Coleridge's Writings." Like "Alph, the sacred river" of Xanadu, the stream of universal Hellenism sometimes flows through "caverns measureless to man," only to resurface, unexpectedly, in local fountains throughout Europe. Each new spring refreshes and "quickens" the lives of those who drink from it. What the "Conclusion" promises, despite its "whirlpool" of scientific and philosophical near-chaos, is that this "interfusion" of universal virtues and local sympathies can occur in the "modern" world—the world of late nineteenth-century England.

Pater's visual and verbal "correlative" for this promise of rebirth and renewal is Botticelli's painting, "The Birth of Venus." (The layering and conflation of time in this splendid passage is particularly revealing.)

[One finds the] most complete expression [of Botticelli's artistry, Pater writes, in the] Venus rising from the sea, in which the grotesque emblems of the middle age, and a landscape full of peculiar feeling, and even its strange draperies, powdered all over in the Gothic manner with a quaint conceit of daisies, frame a figure that reminds you of the faultless nude studies of Ingres. At first, perhaps, you are attracted only by a quaintness of design, which seems to recall all at once whatever you have read of Florence in the fifteenth century; afterwards you may think that this quaintness must be incongruous with the subject, and that the colour is cadaverous or at least cold. And yet, the more you come to understand what imaginative colouring really is, that all colour is no mere delightful quality of natural things, but a spirit upon them by which they become expressive to the spirit, the better you will like this peculiar quality of colour; and you will find that quaint design of Botticelli's a more direct inlet into the Greek temper than the works of

the Greeks themselves even of the finest period. Of the Greeks as they really were, of their difference from ourselves, of the aspects of their outward life, we know far more than Botticelli, or his most learned contemporaries; but for us long familiarity has taken off the edge of the lesson, and we are hardly conscious of what we owe to the Hellenic spirit. But in pictures like this of Botticelli's you have a record of the first impression made by it on minds turned back towards it, in almost painful aspiration, from a world in which it had been ignored so long; and in the passion, the energy, the industry of realisation, with which Botticelli carries out his intention, is the exact measure of the legitimate influence over the human mind of the imaginative system of which this is perhaps the central subject. (*Renaissance* 45-46)

Impression, passion, energy, an "almost painful aspiration"—the words enter the mind quietly at first, but accrue force and meaning with each new essay, gathering strength from such congruent terms as consciousness, fusion, flux, and the moment. The crescendo of signification is heard in the "Conclusion," when Pater dislodges the reader from the comfortable position of armchair aestheticism. (It is very easy to think of *The Renaissance* as a Palace of Art, and each essay as a separate collection of artifacts within that palace or gallery.) Pater disrupts any complacency, any dispassionate non-involvement with his words, by stripping away the illustrations and confronting us instead with the spartan, chastening text: "we are all *condamnés*," the "Conclusion" reminds us, "we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve" (189). Aesthetic criticism has resurfaced as the criticism of life; we are once again conscious of what we owe to the Hellenic spirit. The "Conclusion" is not a mirror-image of the preceding essays, but their *doppelgänger*; an "inward similitude" (7) ensures that "every thought and feeling" of the "Conclusion" is "twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol" in the essays proper (109).

As a manual for aesthetic criticism, the success of *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* depends on the reader's willingness to respond to Pater's impressions and observations. As a manual for living in the "modern" world, the success of *The Renaissance* depends on the reader's willingness to respond to and then act upon Pater's vision of Hellenic regeneration. His strategy of bringing together the abstract entreaties of the late 1860s with the concrete fruits of those speculations—essays written from 1867 to 1877—underlines, I would suggest, both the continuity and the boldness of Pater's vision. The decision to grant his entreaties the last word in *The Renaissance* signals the urgency of his mission. Nonetheless, the act of entitling the final paragraphs "Conclusion" reveals the perverseness of Pater's

penetrating wit. The text as a whole invites the reader—compels the reader—to acknowledge that Hellenism lives. It was not some episode in the pageant of human history that has long since concluded. On the contrary it is, Pater insists, an abiding virtue of the human spirit, “the greatest number of vital forces unite[d] in their purest energy” (*Renaissance* 188).

Pater was a great reader of Francis Bacon—and Bacon, he knew, spoke of “conclusions” in terms of inclusiveness, and new experiments. Many of those who would praise, in isolation, the rhetoric and substance of the “Conclusion” find its position, if not its presence, in *The Renaissance* illogical. But Pater, the product of Oxford’s rigorous, if old-fashioned, classical training, was schooled in logic. He knew that a conclusion, in the latter sense, was the last of three propositions forming a syllogism. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* is a historical syllogism. The first proposition is Hellenism; the second, the Renaissance. The third and most comprehensive proposition, the concluding gesture which springs from its antecedents, is “modern life.”

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NOTES

1. Although the “standard” edition for all Pater texts is the 1910 Macmillan Library series, most commentators agree that the best extant version of *The Renaissance* is to be found in Donald Hill’s presentation of the 1893 (that is, the fourth) edition. My argument, therefore, takes as its copy-text the fourth edition of *The Renaissance*, the last version which Pater saw through the press. The evolution of *The Renaissance* is pertinent to my argument. When *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* was published in 1873, it contained: “Preface,” “Aucassin and Nicolette,” “Pico della Mirandola,” “Sandro Botticelli,” “Luca della Rob-

bia," "The Poetry of Michelangelo," "Leonardo da Vinci," "Joachim Du Bellay," "Winckelmann," and the "Conclusion." The second edition of 1877 was renamed *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*; a title which Pater then retained. The second edition did not include the "Conclusion"; "Aucassin and Nicolette" had been substantially revised, and renamed "Two Early French Stories." The "Conclusion" was restored in the third edition of 1888, and "The School of Giorgione" was added. The fourth edition of 1893 consisted of: "Preface," "Two Early French Stories," "Pico della Mirandola," "Sandro Botticelli," "Luca della Robbia," "The Poetry of Michelangelo," "Leonardo da Vinci," "The School of Giorgione," "Joachim Du Bellay," "Winckelmann," and the "Conclusion." The essays should also be considered in their order of composition and/or original publication: "Winckelmann" (October 1867), "Conclusion" (originally, the concluding paragraphs of "Poems by William Morris," October 1868); "Leonardo da Vinci" (November 1869); "Sandro Botticelli" (August 1870); "Pico della Mirandola" (October 1871); "The Poetry of Michelangelo" (November 1871); "Luca della Robbia," 1872; "Aucassin and Nicolette," 1872; "Joachim Du Bellay," 1872; "Preface," 1873; "The School of Giorgione" (October 1877).

2. Mrs. Humphry Ward recalls "very clearly the effect of [*The Renaissance*] . . . of its entire aloofness also from the Christian tradition of Oxford, its glorification of the higher and intenser forms of aesthetic pleasure, of 'passion' in the intellectual sense—as against the Christian doctrine of self-denial and renunciation. It was a doctrine that both stirred and scandalized Oxford. The bishop of the diocese thought it worth while to protest. There was a cry of Neo-paganism, and various attempts at persecution." (Ward I:161).
3. For a complete survey of the initial reviews, consult Seiler, 47-112.
4. For a survey of the reading which Pater synthesizes in his "Conclusion," see Inman.