

CHAPTER 12

The Historiography of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*

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THOUGH PATER'S *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* appeared in 1873, his interest in the Renaissance dates from as early as 1864. Within this decade the concept of "renaissance" was historiographically unstable and its status as a historical myth extremely problematic. Was it a historical period at all, and if so how did it stand in relation to the Middle Ages? Was it characterized by the sum total of its works in art and literature or was it more specifically a set of ideas, attitudes and values? Was it located geographically in Italy or did it extend to France and the rest of Europe? The most pertinent question, however, and the one which gave most trouble, was its relationship with modern culture. Was it, as Ruskin in England and Rio in France would have it, the source of modern materialism, infidelity and pride extending, as Ruskin put it, "from the Grand Canal to Gower Street," or was it, as Quinet and Michelet would have it, an ontological, antinomian revolution which laid the foundations for modern rationalism and free thinking? All those who addressed themselves to the issue were agreed that the Renaissance was in some way a subversive movement; they were united in the belief that it was in conflict ideologically with the period that preceded it, that it anticipated periods which followed, and that its influence was felt strongly in the present. Where they differed was in their interpretation of the nature of that subversion. Some saw it as destructive, others read it as creative. So when Pater applied himself to Renaissance history, the discourses available to him were highly polemicized. Whether he had chosen to side with Ruskin or with Renan, with Gautier or with Arnold, it was incumbent upon him to assess the period not only in terms of its own values, but more importantly, it was imperative for him to account for the way in which the Renaissance had contributed to the religion, the art, and the general culture of the nineteenth century.

"History," as Lévi-Strauss pointed out, "can never completely divest itself of myth,"¹ and in drawing on the contemporary myth of the Renaissance, Pater exploited those aspects of it which held most significance for the present. I want to show how Pater arrived at this

view of the Renaissance and how in two of the early studies studies of Leonardo da Vinci and Sandro Botticelli he adopted a mode of writing which was not simply descriptive of the past but actually acted out, within the text itself, a response to the past which was essentially modern.

In a key passage in his essay on style Pater described the activity of the historian. "Your historian," he says, "with absolutely truthful intention, amid the multitude of facts presented to him must needs select, and in selecting assert something that comes not of the world without but a vision within." "So," he goes on, "Gibbon . . . Livy, Tacitus, Michelet . . . each, after his own sense, modifies who can tell where and to what degree? and becomes something else than a transcriber . . . he becomes an artist, his work *fine art*."² There are two important elements here which bear directly upon *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. First, Pater suggests that historiography is not a matter of recording facts; for him it is an integral act of self-expression. Second, true historiography is not a mechanical task; it is a fine art.

As to the first point, Roland Barthes quotes Nietzsche as saying: "here are no facts *as such*. We must always begin by introducing a meaning in order for there to be a fact."³ In the same context Barthes comments that the modern historian is "one who collects not so much facts as signifiers and relates them i.e. organizes them in order to establish a positive meaning and to fill the void of pure series."⁴ In Pater's view, the historical fact the signified is of less importance than the "vision within." For Pater the chain of signification, or the form of historical discourse, takes precedence over the signified, the historical fact or the content of historical discourse. Pater's view on historical writing is further clarified by another remark from Barthes where he suggests that frequently in historical discourse there exists what he calls a second level, "that of a signified transcending the entire historical discourse transmitted by the historian's thematics, which we are thereby entitled to identify with the form of the signified."⁵ This second level of signification must surely be associated, in Pater's case, with what he calls "the vision within" or the personal imprint of the historian within his own work. Of all recent writers it has been Gerald Monsman who has shown how pervasive is the Paterian "self" within the writings, and when he points out that "Pater modifies his reader's conceptions of the past and creates his precursors anew in his own image"⁶ Monsman lends further weight to the notion that it is indeed that "self" which exists at the second level of signification within Pater's historical discourse.

Pater's second point, that true historiography is fine art, follows logically from the first as I have interpreted it. Fine art, as Pater understood it, is an expression of self. He says in *Marius the Epicurean* that to write well one must know, first of all "the true nature of one's impression . . . a true understanding of one's self being ever the first condition of genuine self."⁷ But for Pater art is also a system where form takes precedence over matter, or alternatively where the signifier takes precedence over the signified. Thus Pater

exploits the contemporary stress between past and present in Renaissance historical discourse by making his historiography an art-form. As Pater employs them, the details of Renaissance history become a chain of signifiers which point at one level to the past, i.e., to the historical period itself, and at the second level to the present where the "present" is defined most pertinently by the contemporary "self" of the writer.

Studies in the History of the Renaissance fulfills both criteria which Pater set out for the writing of history. It is the expression of a personal "self" and it is also a highly wrought work of literary art. Yet its early readers objected to it as orthodox history since it appeared to them to be disjunctive, incomplete and insubstantial. This feeling of light-weightedness derives in part from the high coefficient of selectivity in choice of subject and partly from the absence of primary and secondary material to lend weight and substance to the text. Readers of Hallam's *Middle Ages*, Sismondi's *History of the Italian Republics* or Ranke's *History of the Popes* must have been disappointed by *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*; Pater's response was to change its title.⁸

The problem lay in the relationship between what Barthes calls the syntagm and the system. Stephen Bann in his excellent work on nineteenth-century historiography uses Barthes's terms to distinguish between the narrative text of historical discourse the syntagm and the "series of associated fields" out of which it grows the system. As Bann convincingly demonstrates, different kinds of historical writing can be attributed in part to the articulation of syntagm and system. In the work of a historian like Hallam the discursive mode is primarily epical. The syntagm proceeds logically and chronologically, while the system the "storehouse of parallel and overlapping texts which the historian has drawn upon"⁹ is indicated in the elaborate network of footnotes. Pater, however, does not write like this. The size and complexity of the system in Pater's work is manifestly apparent in the huge supplement to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* provided by both Billie Inman and Donald Hill. But Pater goes out of his way to give priority to the syntagm by weaving the system directly into the texture of the narrative.

Pater further stresses the importance of the narrative as narrative by a refusal to adopt the epical mode. Chronological sequence is replaced by a series of affinities. Periodization is dissolved. The text is reduced to a spare sequence of studies in temperament extending from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century and beyond, each of which is metonymically linked to a set of Renaissance ideas and attitudes. Furthermore, and perhaps most important, the relationship between past and present is problematized. The demarcation between what is now and what was is persistently foreshortened, partly by linguistic devices the use of the verbal imperfect and present rather than the perfect partly by a panoply of intertextual references which generate an exchange between past and present references to the work of Goethe, Heine, Browning, Arnold, Rossetti and so on but mainly by implying an affinity between the perceiving consciousness of each of the Renaissance personae and that of the author. So, for example, Botticelli's painting is

located referentially within the system of the neo-classical appreciation of Raphael and the more recent romantic appreciation of Fra Angelico. Botticelli's Madonnas, Pater writes, "often come back to you when the Sistine Madonna and the Virgins of Fra Angelico are forgotten."¹⁰ But at the level of the syntagm Pater's sympathetic reading of the *Madonna of the Magnificat* acts simultaneously as an emblem of Botticelli's theological disinterestedness "the high cold words have no meaning for [the Madonna]"¹¹ and Pater's personal indifferentism. Furthermore what Barthes calls in another context the "excess of signification" here it is the white light in the picture which Pater describes as being cast up "hard and cheerless from below, as when snow lies upon the ground, and the children look up with surprise and wonder"¹² serves to intensify the presence within the text of the sensitive Paterian "self."

What I wish to suggest is that there is an intimate connection between Pater's highly personal mode of historical discourse and his choice of the Renaissance as the subject of his writing. I want to stress that the evolution of the historical Renaissance as a central topic in Pater's early essays is intimately linked to a personal renaissance, and a process of self-discovery in the context of historiography.

It is characteristic therefore that the very first time that Pater alludes to the Renaissance it appears as a function of temperament. This occurs in "Diaphaneitè" of 1864 where Raphael is described as being "in the midst of the Reformation and the Renaissance, himself lighted up by them," though he yields "himself to neither."¹³ The Renaissance contributes one element to Coleridge's writings in the essay of 1866. What Pater calls "the dawn of the Renaissance"¹⁴ in the thirteenth century is the first indication of his interest in the Renaissance, not so much as a period, but as a process a process which is explored more fully in the difficult and rebarbative essay on Winckelmann in the following year. What took place at the dawn of the Renaissance is re-hearsed in Winckelmann's rediscovery of classical culture, this time in the eighteenth century. What is especially interesting for us in Pater's account of Winckelmann's work is his persistent collapse of historicity. The distant past the Renaissance the early eighteenth century and the immediate present are foreshortened with an urgency and an energy previously absent from Pater's writing:

Filled as *our* culture is with the classical spirit, *we* can hardly imagine how deeply the human mind was moved when at the Renaissance, in the midst of a frozen world, the buried fire of ancient art rose up from under the soil. Winckelmann here reproduces for *us* the earlier Renaissance sentiment. On a sudden the imagination feels free. How facile and direct, it seems to say, is this life of the senses and the understanding when once *we* apprehend it! That is the more liberal life *we* have been seeking so long, so near *us* all the while. How mistaken and roundabout we have been in *our* efforts to reach it by mystic passion and religious reverie; how they have deflowered the

flesh; how little they have emancipated us!¹⁵

The first person plural, "us," and the possessive, "our," both draw the early Renaissance and the work of Winckelmann into the present and establish the centre of the discourse firmly within the shared identity of reader and writer. The essay is charged with similar moments of self-realization, and it is this sense of self-realization which becomes the principal subject of his next essay on the poetry of William Morris. Once again the first person singular dominates at points of crux. Modern identity, or selfhood, is defined by Pater as part of a process of historical evolution:

The composite experience of all the ages is part of each one of *us*; to obliterate any part of it, to come face to face with the people of a past age, as if the middle age, the Renaissance, the eighteenth century had not been, is as impossible as to become a little child, or enter again into the womb and be born. But though it is not possible to repress a single phase of that humanity, which, because *we* live and move and have *our* being the life of humanity, make us what *we* are; it is possible to isolate such a phase, to throw it into relief. . . . *We* cannot conceive the age; *we* can conceive the element it has contributed to *our* culture. . . .¹⁶

The Morris essay is pivotal in Pater's treatment of history. Here Pater principally employs two modern texts "The Defence of Guenevere" and "The Life and Death of Jason" as emblems of contemporary shift in mental awareness a shift which he had already detected within the matrix of history.

The earlier poem represents the "mystic passion and religious reverie" which he had, in the Winckelmann essay, identified with the culture of the Middle Ages. It is the poetry of "reverie, illusion, delirium" in which "the things of nature begin to play a strange delirious part."¹⁷ The later poem represents the reawakening of the mind to "the body of nature for its own sake, not because a soul is divined through it."¹⁸ But it is the shift itself or the process enacted in the term "renaissance" which concerns Pater. In two modern texts, he finds a principle or a "law" as he calls it, which transcends temporality and period. "It explains," he says, "through [Morris] one law of the life of the human spirit, and of which what we call the Renaissance is only a supreme instance."¹⁹ Pater had reached this point by a slow process of indirection over a period of some four years; but within the interstices of two contemporary texts he had at last clinched the personal significance for him of "past ages" as he found them embedded in the texture of the present.

The famous closing paragraphs of the Morris essay are organically linked to this discovery. The first part of the Morris essay identifies the self as the creation of a historical process; the second part identifies fine art as the consummate expression of the self. Structurally these two sections anticipate Pater's remark on historiography in his

essay on style. The historian discovers himself in history, he asserts something that comes of the "vision within" and in articulating that self "he becomes an artist, his work *fine art*." The first element in this structure represents the signified, the meta-subject of Pater's future work, the process called the "renaissance"; the second element represents the mode of signification history as fine art. The essay on Morris appears at the end of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. The material on Morris, however, was removed by Pater and all the essays in the series took its place. The structural relationship, nevertheless, remains intact.

I think that we can safely say that it was at this point Pater established for himself a methodology and a system for the writing of the remainder of his Renaissance essays. After his essay on Morris the whole tenor of his discourse changes and it is at this point he makes a transition from the writing of history as analysis to the writing of history as enactment. The change can be expressed, in part, as a shift from metaphor to metonymy. Previously Pater's historiography had been largely metaphoric. The temperament and work of Winckelmann and the poetry of Morris metaphorically embodied central aspects of the Renaissance spirit as Pater conceived it. "Winckelmann . . . reproduces for us the earlier Renaissance sentiment" and "the simplification" in Morris's poetry is interesting because it "explains . . . one law of the life of the human spirit." In many of the Renaissance studies which follow, Pater adopts a predominantly metonymical approach. Leonardo da Vinci is but a fragment, a supreme instance of one aspect of the Renaissance, and his art represents in turn highly concentrated and refined examples of the more general tendency of his mind. The very title of the volume, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, has a metonymic ring to it. It suggests neither epical history nor metaphorical history but indicates instead an accretion of parts hence the contemporary criticism of its inadequacy as "history."

The shift from metaphor to metonymy is most vividly registered in Pater's treatment of works of visual art. His intertextual use of visual artifacts prior to the Leonardo essay of 1869 are few and when they occur are frankly illustrative and ostensive. In the Winckelmann essay, for example, he uses Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin* as a metaphor for the inability of medieval art to adequately convey immediately apprehended sensuous experience: "Take, for instance, a characteristic work of the Middle Ages, Angelico's 'Coronation of the Virgin,' at San Marco, in Florence. In some strange halo of a moon sit the Virgin and our Lord, clad in mystical white raiment, half-shroud half priestly linen. . . . Certainly it cannot be said of Angelico's fresco that it throws into sensible form our highest knowledge about man and his relation to the world."²⁰

Pater contrasts this with the Venus de Milo, which he says, "is in no sense a symbol, a suggestion of anything beyond its victorious fairness." The *Westminster Review*, in which the essay first appeared, carried no illustrations, but the comparative method "look on this and now on this" gesturing to that which lies outside and beyond the text calls out for the

illustration which feels entirely appropriate in Donald Hill's edition. This method had been brought to a high pitch of refinement by Ruskin who frequently employed visual images as cultural metaphors.

Pater's treatment of Leonardo's works, however, is very different from his account of Fra Angelico's *Coronation*. I have suggested elsewhere that Pater's account of the *Gioconda* is an accretion of symbols which relate directly to his interpretation of romanticism²¹ and taken in isolation it is possible to interpret Pater's account as primarily symbolical or metaphoric. Within the discourse of the essay as a whole, however, the treatment of the *Gioconda*, as of the other works of art by Leonardo, is primarily metonymic. It is, Pater tells us, "the revealing instance of his mode of thought and work."²² Within the single fragment, the painted picture, are gathered up the elements which constitute Leonardo's special temperament, focussed, refined and concentrated in one image. In comparing the Fra Angelico and the Venus de Milo, Pater adopts an ostensive mode. The objective properties of the visual artifacts are stressed, and the signified takes precedence over the signifier. In his account of the *Gioconda*, however, the signified, the physical properties of the work of art itself fade from view and the highly encrusted prose, the signifier, takes precedence. The shift from the method of the Winckelmann essay to the Leonardo essay can be seen in terms of a shift from an allegiance to the methods of Ruskin to those of Swinburne.

Swinburne's account of Leonardo's studies in the Uffizi is well-known: "fair strange faces of women full of dim doubt and faint scorn; touched by the shadow of an obscure fate."²³ So, too, is Pater's acknowledgment of a debt to Swinburne. Swinburne's "Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence" is an essay which deals with nearly three dozen artists and is a veritable taxonomy of responses. Swinburne prefaces his notes, however, by various remarks which locate those responses firmly within the perceiving consciousness of the author. "For guide," Swinburne writes, "I have but my own sense of interest and admiration . . . [and] I have aimed at nothing further than to cast into some legible form my impression of the designs. . . ." ²⁴ Swinburne suppresses the descriptive and stresses the affective and in casting into "legible form" his "impression" he has written himself into his own text. Swinburne's essay was published in July 1868; Pater's essay on Leonardo appeared in November 1869, and in Swinburne's work Pater discovered a means by which the transformation of the visual sign into the verbal sign might act as an expressive vehicle for the temperamental mode of the authorial self.

It is possible to say that in the essays which preceded the piece on Leonardo, Pater employed works of visual art illustratively. In the essays on Leonardo and Botticelli he seizes upon a discourse developed by Swinburne which shifts the locus of representation from illustration to perception and interpretation. In other words, the paintings which are signified within the text are no longer metaphors of historical ideologies; they are instead the focus of a perceiving consciousness. Pater's method, however, is much more ambitious

than Swinburne's. Whereas Swinburne is writing only a series of what he calls "Notes on Designs," Pater locates the art works in a larger historical framework. Within that framework the works function on two levels. At one level they act as the paradigmatic modes of perception of the subjects of each essay. The *Gioconda* is the "most revealing instance of [Leonardo's] mode of thought" and *The Birth of Venus* is the "most complete expression"²⁵ of Botticelli's classical sentiment. At a second level, however, they are also the expression of Pater's own perceiving consciousness, what Swinburne called "the legible form" of his "impression." In Pater's verbal rendition of visual objects these two levels unite and dissolve one within the other. "The consciousness of author and character" as Monsman puts it, "become inextricably interwoven."²⁶ There are no illustrations in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* and rightly so. Priority is given to the chain of signifiers, "the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age"²⁷ while the signified, the portrait of *Gioconda* which hangs in the Louvre, fades into insignificance. So it is with *The Birth of Venus*, and with the other works of art in the *Studies*.

But Pater extends this technique from the art works to the artists, painters, sculptors and writers who form the subjects of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. So as he handles the "legends" of his historical characters, as he picks and chooses among the myths associated with them, he creates a syntagm which is related to, but independent of, the system of historical reference. In writing history, Pater, in his own words, is concerned "not with the world without but with a vision within." The first duty of the aesthetic critic, as he points out in the "Preface," is to identify the nature of his own impression. Like Swinburne he puts into "legible form" the "impression" and in doing so he becomes "something else than a transcriber . . . he becomes an artist and his work *fine art*."

As we know, art and particularly literary art was given high status in Pater's hierarchy of values. In the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* he describes art as the repository of intensified experience, a bastion against the flux of the material world and the flux of the sensational world. Art also is an expression of the self; it serves to disengage the permanent self from the disturbing and dissolving aspects of consciousness. The historian, according to Pater, is an "artist and his work fine art" and as Monsman correctly says, "Pater envisions himself . . . as a figure of multiple selfhood . . . a web of cultural relationships and the individual to be the visible image of an infinite companionship of like-oriented selves that pervade and shape the personality."²⁸

In this way we can see that *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* is in essence a work of modern art, and what modern art has to do "in the service of culture," as Pater says at the end of his essay on Winckelmann, "is so to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit."²⁹ Consequently his attempt throughout the book is to make sense of the present in terms of the past.

The reasons why Pater committed himself to a modern work of historiography based upon Renaissance subjects in or around 1868 is now a little clearer. The system within which Pater was working at this time, as Billie Inman's book on Pater's reading makes clear, was dominantly French. And when we examine the texts of Michelet, Quinet and Gautier, the figure of Leonardo emerges as "tout moderne."³⁰ The creation of the modern myth of Botticelli, on the other hand, was essentially an English phenomenon. Arthur Symons pointed out that *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* "has many affinities with the poetic and pictorial art of Rossetti, Swinburne and Burne-Jones"³¹ and by 1868 it is certain that Pater knew of the high reputation of Botticelli among these artists.

Pater's studies further enhance the "modernity" of these historical figures. Throughout his writing about them he persistently casts off the debris which made them subjects of what he calls "mere antiquarianism." Moreover, they are given a contemporary existence through the vitality of their works of art which transcend the passage of time and within which their personalities are inscribed. As Pater describes them each becomes a kind of cultural burning glass, "present . . . at the focus," in Pater's words, "where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy."³² Each of them, true to the "vision within," wrests from the flux of historical change, images of intensity and vitality which are vested in the permanent forms of art. The essay on Winckelmann is a discursive and analytical account of this process; the essays which follow the Morris article are an enactment of the process in these, Pater himself becoming the final link in the chain of that process; he himself is "focus" where the vital forces of his own culture unite. His ostensible subject is a metonymic study of the Renaissance embodied in the life and works of certain individuals; but these in turn are transformed and become a secondary system in a work whose meta-subject is Pater himself. Just as Leonardo or Botticelli focused the essential components of their culture in their works of art, so Pater re-enacts that process in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. We can see that Pater's realization in 1868 that "the composite experience of all the ages is part of each one of us" led him to create a historical text which was "fine art" developed out of a "vision within" and a sensibility which was exclusively modern.