

CHAPTER 9

Pater as a "Moralist"

PAUL TUCKER

WHILE PATER'S WORK was the object of severe moral criticism in the author's own lifetime, the tendency of more recent criticism has been to admit its moral seriousness. "Most readers today," wrote David DeLaura twenty years ago, "agree that Pater's aestheticism, for all its confusion of ethics and aesthetics, is essentially a special *morality* not art for art's sake but art for the sake of a special conception of the perfected life."¹ There are indeed early instances of Pater's being accorded the status of "moralist" by critics, for instance by Vernon Lee in 1895.² But there is a marked difference between the way in which the term was applied in the past and the way in which it has been applied since the 1950s. While it used to be claimed that Pater *became* a moralist, he is now said simply to be one, but one evidently uneasy about his chosen morality.³ The difference reflects an important change in critical attitude towards the moral conflict instanced in Pater's writing, especially in his central work, *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), all but avowedly concerned with reviewing the ethical position put forward in his first book, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873).

This element of conflict and of crisis was of course tacitly recognized by critics such as Vernon Lee who posited a transition on Pater's part from an early "aesthetic" to a later moral standpoint. But the notion of a smooth and untroubled "progression" from the one to the other shows an excessive readiness to underwrite Pater's own attempts to reconcile the conflicting elements in his thought. It results in a misleadingly indefinite, unproblematic, and over-spiritualized version of his morality, as, for example, an adherence to "the conception of health and congruity in matters of the spirit."⁴ Critics are now readier to acknowledge Pater's "confusion between ethics and aesthetics," and acknowledge too that the crisis announced in *Marius* remained unre-solved.⁵ Thus, Richard Stein has remarked that Pater's later, fictional writings record "a persistent conflict, stemming from a deep ambivalence over his first book and its doctrine of art for art's sake":

All of Pater's fiction attempts to mediate between aesthetics and morality, to create, while defining a position distinct from Ruskin's, a new "moral aesthetic". . . . Yet his fictional attempt to moralize *The Renaissance* often seems to defeat itself. . . . [N]ew ideas emerge in Pater's late writing and yet remain subordinated within an essentially aesthetic context. . . . The dominant spirit throughout his career is the spirit of art. Pater's new moral aesthetic . . . is an aesthetic before it is a morality.⁶

A similar view has been put forward more recently still by Hilary Fraser. In a study of the relation between aesthetic and religious interests in a number of Victorian writers from Newman to Wilde, she points out how "despite their antagonism towards Ruskinian aesthetics and conventional morality, both Wilde and Pater betray a moral sensitivity in their work and are interested in exploring the possibilities for a re-definition of the moral implications of aesthetic experience."⁷ Like Richard Stein, she sees the critical reception of his first book as having been a stimulus to a deepened moral concern in the later work. The decision to omit the offending "Conclusion" to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in the second edition (1877), and to restore it (1888) only after he had re-stated its position in *Marius* "shows a moral awareness which one would have not perhaps suspected from a reading of the earlier works, but it is a dimension which makes itself increasingly apparent in Pater's mature work."⁸ Pater's is a "special moral aesthetic" derived "from his belief in a natural correlation between the beautiful and the good, and in the fundamental asceticism of human nature." His is a serious attempt "to understand the relationship between aesthetic experience and a moral system."⁹ However,

[f]or Pater, art remains the only way of life, sensibility supersedes morality. Plato's, and indeed Ruskin's, concern is to include aesthetics in an ethical system. Pater's is the assimilation of ethics to aesthetics. Moral virtue is but one beauty among many. . . . Even in his most "moral" works, every ethical principle, every ethical attitude, every religious discovery, is grounded in an aesthetic preference."¹⁰

And yet, "it is still true to say that Pater did perceive an ethical dimension in art. Although he denied that art bore any moral responsibility or didactic function, he nevertheless conceded that it could have a profound moral effect. . . . Even in *The Renaissance* Pater cherishes many of the deeper ethical values which art should hold for humanity."¹¹

I have quoted at length from Hilary Fraser's account of Pater's "special moral aesthetic" because its somewhat tortuous character seems to me illustrative of the limitations that beset even the

most recent discussion of the subject. While the element of moral conflict in Pater's position is acknowledged, too little effort is made to define that conflict. There is generally too uncritical a reliance upon key terms or categories such as "moral," "moralist," "ethics," and "ethical," and hence a tendency to replicate them without sufficiently questioning their use. One result of this situation is that it has not clearly enough been shown that the ethical crisis of the 1880s was not extrinsic but rather fully intrinsic to the positions adopted by Pater in the writings of the 1860s and 1870s.

One aim of this essay will therefore be to distinguish the two ethical directives already contained in Pater's early work. But there is another reason for the inadequacy of the common claim that Pater is a "moralist," however it is made, and this is that his aestheticism is not to be explained solely by reference to specifically ethical motives. These need to be distinguished from the theoretical or metaphysical concerns which also inform Pater's writing. This will be the essay's second aim, leading to an examination of the place of art in Pater's early aestheticism too often taken for granted by critics.

The best way of differentiating, from a specifically ethical point of view, the two ethical directives contained in the early essays is perhaps to consider them as two distinct modes of revulsion from the deductive stringency, or variously "hard and abstract"¹² character of traditional morality. What primarily distinguishes them is that whereas the first, in reacting to the rigour of the tradition, places itself outside the traditional perspective, the second moves from within it. Thus the former objects to the constraints placed by the traditional morality on the self and its free development and opposes itself to the traditional viewpoint; the latter objects to the severity of judgment shown others, on grounds ultimately borrowed from the tradition. Each resultant counter-ethic may be associated with a particular quality or "virtue"; each has its peculiar watchword. Thus, on the one hand we get a "higher morality" of "passion," and on the other a morality of "sympathy."

Let us consider the second of these first, since even if it is the less dominant of the two it is also the more straightforward, being entirely ethical, indeed moral, in its motivations. The term "sympathy" makes its first appearance in Pater's writings in the essay on Botticelli (1870):

So just what Dante scorns as unworthy alike of heaven and hell, Botticelli accepts, that middle world in which men take no side in great conflicts, and decide no great causes, and make great refusals. He thus sets for himself the limits within which art, undisturbed by any moral ambition, does its most sincere and surest work. His interest is neither in the untempered goodness of Angelico's saints, nor the untempered evil of Orcagna's *Inferno*; but with men and women, in their mixed and uncertain condition, always attractive, clothed sometimes by passion with a character of loveliness and energy, but saddened perpetually by the shadow upon them of the great things from which they shrink. His morality is all sympathy; and

it is this sympathy, conveying into his work more than is usual of the true complexion of humanity, which makes him, visionary as he is, so forcible a realist.¹³

However, this morality of sympathy, though not termed such, already forms part of the argument of "Coleridge's Writings," where one element in Pater's defence of the "relative spirit" is precisely that it gives rise to a less unyielding form of moral judgment: "The relative spirit, by dwelling constantly on the more fugitive conditions or circumstances of things, breaking through a thousand rough and brutal classifications, and giving elasticity to inflexible principles, begets an intellectual finesse, of which the ethical result is a delicate and tender justness in the criticism of human life."¹⁴ Pater further instances Coleridge himself as one who would have benefited from a greater indulgence in matters of moral assessment: "all the time his own pathetic history pleads for a more elastic moral philosophy than his, and cries out against every formula less living and flexible than life itself."¹⁵

From the essay on Botticelli onwards, this same plea for a more tolerant application of moral rules is always made in the name of "sympathy." The term is in frequent use in the essays that separate *The Renaissance* from *Marius the Epicurean*, in which it may be said to come into its own. The following is an instance from the essay on *Measure for Measure* (1874):

The idea of justice involves the idea of rights. But at bottom rights are equivalent to that which really is, to facts; and the recognition of his rights therefore, the justice he requires of our hands, or of our thoughts, is the recognition of that which the person, in his inmost nature, really is; and as sympathy alone can discover that which really is in matters of feeling and thought, true justice is in its essence a finer knowledge through love.¹⁶

The term "sympathy" would have had peculiar resonance for readers of the Westminster and Fortnightly Reviews where these essays first appeared, for it represented the central concept of the ethic with which the French Positivist Auguste Comte (1789-1858) had crowned his philosophical system in the early 1850s. These periodicals were among those directly responsible for introducing Comtean Positivism into Britain in the 1850s and 1860s. Comte had developed his ethics in opposition to "metaphysical" and "theological" ethics, which he rejected as not founded on positive science and essentially individualist in character. Positivist ethics, on the other hand, was grounded in the "scientific" study of man as a

biological and social animal and in knowledge of the bond of sympathy that naturally binds men together. It essentially regards the opposition between the "egoistic" and the "altruistic" or "sympathetic" instincts in man. While it recognizes that the former are dominant, it insists on the "modifiability" of this naturally given condition, and that the latter are more susceptible of development. In the exercise and development of the altruistic instincts (that is, in ascending order, Attachment, Veneration and Universal Love), Comte saw "the solution to the problem of Humanity."¹⁷ But Comte was not the first philosopher to have pointed to "sympathy" as the source of moral feeling and action. Indeed he himself acknowledged the importance in this respect, given the predominantly "metaphysical" character of eighteenth-century philosophy, of the "Scottish school" of Hume, Smith and Ferguson.¹⁸ Hume, for instance, in his *Treatise of Human Nature* had argued that the distinction between virtue and vice was not derived from reason but from the operation of a "moral taste" and proceeded from "certain sentiments of pleasure or disgust which arise upon the contemplation and view of particular qualities or characters."¹⁹ Sympathy, he maintained, or a natural "concern for society" and its interests²⁰ was in many instances the principle that motivated that moral taste.

It is to be noted that all instances of the term "sympathy" in Pater's writings prior to *Marius* occur in the discussion of art. It is the works of Botticelli and Shakespeare, of the artists of the Italian Renaissance generally,²¹ or of Charles Lamb,²² which are specifically held up as examples. This is indicative of the fact that the quality is invoked by him there less as a general principle of moral sentiment and action than with specific regard to the problem of the judgment of human character and conduct.²³ While Comtean Positivism itself attributed great importance to art "as a form of `moral exercise . . . calling sympathies and antipathies into healthy play',"²⁴ this identification of the moral quality of sympathy with art is more immediately to be associated with the English Romantic tradition, which like Comtean ethics, but more directly, derived from eighteenth-century theorists of sensibility and sympathy as the central concepts of morality. The Romantics regarded art as a truer and more direct means of moral edification than any simple citing of rules. For them art teaches by instantiating rather than instancing goodness. As M. H. Abrams suggests,

To Shelley, as to Wordsworth and De Quincey, the importance of poetry as a moral instrument lay in its exercising and strengthening the under-structure of moral action, although to his view this is not so much a matter of feeling as of fellow-feeling. It is above all by conveying their power of universal sympathy and understanding that poets, though singing in solitude, become "the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration" and "the unacknowledged legislators of the world."²⁵

This Romantic tradition of a direct service of art to morality through its affective enhancement of the capacity for sympathy survives in Pater's notion of a literally "*poetical justice*," that "finer justice" of which poetry is the prime example by virtue of its genius for observation, its special attention to *circumstance*, above all with regard to human actions: "It is not always that poetry can be the exponent of morality; but it is this aspect of morals which it represents most naturally, for this true justice is dependent on just those finer appreciations which poetry cultivates in us the power of making, those peculiar valuations of action and its effect which poetry actually requires."²⁶

The second of the two ethical directives embodied in Pater's early writings is to be identified with the watchword "passion," and may be conceived as a revolt against the constraints of strictly moral prescription and a bid for release into a broader self-fulfillment. The classical expression of this revolt is the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, especially in its first version: "The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract morality we have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us." Against the curtailment of experience imposed by an ethic of sacrifice, Pater vindicates the right of the individual to cultivate and expand the sense of self in accordance with a "higher morality" of sheer tensivity of mind and feeling, of intensely experienced sensation, of "a quickened, multiplied consciousness," in short, of "passion"²⁷ the perennial antagonist of the ethical tradition, whether as an impediment to the achievement of the inner peace and harmony requisite for individual happiness, or as an obstacle to virtue, but here elevated into an ethical principle.

There is a fundamental ambiguity about this new ethic, manifest in the term "higher morality" itself. More than a right, the term seems to vindicate a duty, and this is evidently an inconsistency in an ethic opposed to the prescriptive exactions of the traditional morality, especially in one that otherwise apparently prefers a classical to a rule-based modern model. As Alasdair MacIntyre suggests: "In general Greek ethics asks, What am I to do if I am to fare well? Modern ethics asks, What ought I to do if I am to do right? and it asks this question in such a way that doing right is made something quite independent of faring well."²⁸ Pater's "higher morality" of "passion" aligns itself intermittently with both positions. It can be seen as a peculiar morality of duty, one where the concept of duty is divorced, not from that of happiness, but from that of moral virtue itself. But at the same time the spirit of this "higher morality" is unmistakably classical, being concerned as it is with personal well-being. It even defines itself, in a characteristically Greek way, as a form of "wisdom."²⁹ Wisdom is not the same as knowledge. It is the sort of knowledge acquired, tested and applied in experience, a kind of practical knowledge or expertise. Greek ethics teaches wise or expert living, expertise in the practical art of living. Its criterion for a life lived well is not extrinsic to the actual living of it, effectiveness or, as Pater has it, "success,"³⁰ rather than merit.

This ambiguity may partly be explained by pointing to what was probably the major source for this new inwardness, the ethical idealism of the German philosopher J. G. Fichte (1762-1814), whom Pater is known to have read in the early 1860s, and from whom he probably took the term "higher morality."³¹ It seems likely that the tendency to posit the passionate exertion of the self as a form of duty is an echo of the high ontological status accorded the inner striving of the subject in Fichte, for spiritual activity and aspiration were the primary truths of Fichte's "turbulent metaphysics of development."³² They expressed the essential dynamism of reality, which had its absolute foundation and driving principle in the will to self-affirmation of the infinite Ego or subject of being. Fichte viewed objective existence as the product or refraction of infinite self-consciousness. Consciousness of this refracted state was the special privilege of the individual, empirical ego, whose vocation consisted in the unremitting struggle to repair the breach in being signified, by the opposition of subject and object. His power, not to achieve, but to strive towards this end was given him in his moral will: "The endeavour to achieve justice is an objective event; it is a striving to overcome that to which we object, namely, injustice; and in its active expression it is the subject's self-revelation and self-affirmation. In every moral action spirit molds nature as it resists nature, and nature is aroused to manifest spirit; the two are radically, that is, at root, one."³³

A second organ for the manifestation of spirit in nature was *genius*, embodied in the figure of the *Gelehrte*, the scholar or learned man. In three successive series of lectures³⁴ Fichte had defined the nature and function of the "scholar" as the "instructor of mankind,"³⁵ prophet and principal agent of its collective advancement towards complete self-knowledge and self-realization. Pater apparently delivered a talk on "Fichte's Ideal Student" to the Old Mortality Society at Oxford in 1863.³⁶ This talk has not survived, but the example of the *Gelehrte*'s unceasing dedication to the task of spiritual transformation³⁷ is clearly discernible in Pater's conception, in "Coleridge's Writings," of "the spiritual element in life" as "the passion for inward perfection,"³⁸ as well as in the injunction issued in the final paragraphs of the "Conclusion" to maintain a constantly high pitch of spiritual concentration and energy. Moreover, the passage cited from the essay on Coleridge first introduces the notion of a "higher morality":

Coleridge thinks that if we reject the supernatural, the spiritual element in life will evaporate also, that we shall have to accept a life with narrow horizons, without disinterestedness, harshly cut off from the springs of life in the past. But what is this spiritual element? It is the passion for inward perfection, with its sorrows, its aspirations, its joy. These mental states are the delicacies of the higher morality of the few, of Augustine, of the author of the "Imitation," of Francis de Sales; in their essence they are only the permanent characteristics of the higher life.³⁹

Fichte had used the expression in his *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben, oder auch die Religionslehre* (The Way towards the Blessed Life, or the Doctrine of Religion, 1806),

where it designates the third in an ascending scale of "points of view" from which the subject may consider the world. The "true and higher morality" is distinguished from the "regulative" (ordnendes), which represents the stage of spiritual development immediately below it, and which Fichte identifies with the concept of moral law as developed by Kant and, in earlier writings (such as his *Sittenlehre* of 1798) by himself. Where the second is "merely negative," in that its task is to maintain a given degree of social equilibrium and tranquillity, the first is "creative," in that its task is not the regulation of an existing order but the creation of one that is absolutely new. It aspires "not just to the form of the Idea, but to the very quality and reality of it." Its aim is the transfiguration of mankind, in accordance with its proper destiny and with a faith in the primal reality of "the holy, the beautiful and the true" into "an exact portrait, an image and revelation of its own divine inner essence."⁴⁰

But if the kind of inwardness Pater is promoting in these early essays is indebted to Fichte, it ultimately dissociates itself from the idealism of Fichte's system. This is immediately apparent in the fact that for Pater spiritual "passion" includes sensation. For Fichte, on the other hand, the sensual are the subject's least important faculties: the condition of being sensible is the primary attribute of existence, but is for this reason not worthy of consideration as a mode of knowledge. For what defines existence is at the same time what distances being. A conception of reality which limits itself to what is available to the senses is the lowest of the worldviews in Fichte's scale; and the subject risen to a love of being as such will regard the sensible world merely as the arena for actions inspired by and expressive of that love. But Pater admits the senses as organs of "inward perfection." Already in "Coleridge's Writings" the apology for a new self-signifying spirituality one neither theologically nor ontologically determined and oriented is accompanied by an insistence on the primacy of the senses over the speculative intellect.⁴¹ Then in the "Conclusion" the senses are firmly equated with the intellect as a means to achieve the desired inner "ecstasy." Indeed they are so far dominant as to condition the exertion of the intellect: "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 opinion and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte or of Hegel or of our own."⁴²

But this is where Pater's position ceases to be explainable solely in ethical terms; by which I mean that, as the above passage suggests, sheer inward resonance of being is not the only end contemplated in these essays, for the reason that perceptual experience is not intended there merely as an occasion or mode of "passion," but also as a means to objective knowledge. There is indeed a sort of double imperative embodied in these writings, ethical and theoretical: "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 be seen in them by the finest senses?"⁴³ They argue not only for "passion," but also for "observation," though in a broader sense than that envisaged by the morality of sympathy.⁴⁴

The truth of these relations experience gives us; not the truth of eternal outlines effected once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change; and bids us by a constant clearing of the organs of observation and perfecting of analysis to make what we can of these.⁴⁵

The service of philosophy, and of religion and culture as well, to the human spirit, is to startle it into a sharp and eager observation.⁴⁶

There is a positive, though qualified, theoretic thrust to Pater's aestheticism that has commonly been overlooked in favour of the subjectivist ethic just examined,⁴⁷ probably because the anti-theoretical stance of pieces like the "Conclusion" has been taken too much at face value. But the actual language of the final paragraphs of the "Conclusion" reveals a persistent impulse to an objective knowledge of reality.

There are, as David DeLaura has suggested, two distinct groups of key words here. But these require to be separated a little more rigorously.⁴⁸ On the one hand there is the language of "passion," consisting principally of substantives expressing reflexive mental states and intense inner sensation: energy, ecstasy, excitement, enthusiasm, pulsations, consciousness. On the other there is the language of "observation" a series of transitive verbs, presupposing, demanding an object: discriminate, see and touch, gather up: "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end." The protest is both ethically and metaphysically motivated. The appeal to "experience" comprehends both of its terms, subject and object not only the "energy" or "excitement," but also the "splendour of experience." "Experience" in Pater is not solely a subjective affect, but includes the experimental,⁴⁹ that "experimental, individual knowledge" held to be the aim of the "true . . . speculative temper" in "Coleridge's Writings."⁵⁰ Under this aspect Pater's aestheticism presents itself (in accordance with the term's original meaning)⁵¹ as a sort of metaphysics of perception, a way of affirming the fundamental reality of experience from within.

This raises the question of the exact relation of the doctrine enunciated in "Coleridge's Writings" and the "Conclusion" to the modern scientific and philosophical statements concerning reality and truth which apparently lend it its premises. For Pater, the fundamental characteristic of "modern thought" is its relativism. Both of the above pieces open by making this point. The "Conclusion" paints a particularly graphic picture of the disintegration of the solid world of experience under the solvent action of modern physiological and epistemological analysis. The eloquence of this desolating survey of the modern scientific and philosophical account of reality has certainly contributed to the commonly held notion that the doctrine which it serves to introduce was merely negatively determined by that account in other words, that the message of

the "Conclusion," with its instigation to *experience*, is negatively inferred from the despair of knowledge apparently authorized by the foregoing theoretical description of the world, and that it constitutes a waiving of the whole question of knowledge or truth. On this view Pater's appeal to experience is the expression of a resigned, philosophically redundant scepticism, a mode of compensating for the dissipation of truth apparently brought about by modern science and philosophy, by abandoning these for a life of immediate consciousness. But Pater's scepticism is not so simple, nor his dependence on "the `relative spirit' " so negative.

He is capable of estimating this positively. In "Coleridge's Writings," for example, there is an unmistakable sense of exhilaration at the spectacle of its subversive force. And there is no disjunction between the attitude of modern science to the world and that which Pater recommends. Indeed, the latter is expressed in language borrowed from the former, the language, as we have already seen, of "observation" and "analysis" and "experimental, individual, knowledge."⁵² Not only do the two attitudes share a terminology, they also share an impulse to, and special apprehension of, truth: "not the truth of eternal outlines effected once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting as we ourselves change."⁵³ Pater's turning to experience at the end of the "Conclusion" is not theoretically inconsequential but affirms this same apprehension of truth. It is the expression of a scepticism that tends towards the conservation of truth.⁵⁴ And this tendency involves not only the deliverance of reality from the constructions of dogma but its defence against the deliverer, the solvent power of scientific and philosophical analysis.

This positive and at the same time critical thrust to the final paragraphs of the "Conclusion" emerges more clearly if we consider the whole piece in its original context, as the final portion of a review-article on the poetry of William Morris. It has been suggested that its closing pages do not form an organic whole with the rest of the article, or that they were composed independently of, and possibly earlier than the review.⁵⁵ Rather, its being an integral part of the essay on Morris explains how the "Conclusion" could come to be extracted and appended to a volume of essays on the Renaissance. The paragraphs in question were originally conceived as a defence of a resurgence of "the pagan spirit" in Morris's more recent Greek poems this spirit being defined in the formula "the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death." Pater imagines the inevitable objection to such an attitude, which reprimands those holding it with wilfully ignoring the simple fact that "the modern world is in possession of truths." He takes up the "challenge" issued by this argument, notwithstanding the "strange transition from the earthly paradise" (the title of one of Morris's poems) to "the sad-coloured world of abstract philosophy"; and the final paragraphs answer the question asking "what modern philosophy, when it is sincere, really does say about human life and the truth we can attain in it, and the relation of this to the desire of beauty."⁵⁶

The "argument" of the "Conclusion" is pre-figured in the discussion of the poems, and in particular of the "transition" between Morris's earlier poetry, with its medieval subject-matter, and his later, with its subjects taken from Greek mythology. The earlier poetry treats of a phase of sentiment in which Christianity finds itself rivalled by the "religion" or "cultus" of

"imaginative love." The competition between the two is strict: each is penetrated with an equal degree of mysticism, and despite the comparative worldliness of the latter the poetry of both is equally marked by a "wild, convulsed sensuousness," an image of the world lighted up by fervid spirituality. In Morris's later poetry, on the other hand, "there is no delirium or illusion, no experiences of mere soul while the body and the bodily senses sleep or wake with convulsed intensity at the prompting of imaginative love; but rather the great primary passions under broad daylight as of the pagan Veronese."⁵⁷ Pater goes on to insist on the emblematic significance of this change:

This simplification interests us not merely for the sake of an individual poet ... but chiefly because it explains through him a transition which, under many forms, is one law of the life of the human spirit, and of which what we call the Renaissance is only a supreme instance. . . . Complex and subtle interests, which the mind spins for itself, may occupy art and poetry or our own spirits for a time; but sooner or later they come back with a sharp rebound to the simple elementary passions anger, desire, regret, pity and fear and what corresponds to them in the sensuous world bare, abstract fire, water, air, tears, sleep, silence and what De Quincey has called "the glory of motion."⁵⁸

Pater is evidently proposing a similar transition to his contemporaries, from the "sad-coloured world of abstract philosophy" back towards the "earthly paradise," a new Renaissance, in the "Conclusion." This is unmistakably a plea for an analogous "simplification" in the apprehension of reality, an analogous "escape to the world without one" from the stifling nightmare world of modern thought, a deliverance not only from the denaturing of experience under the "single sentiment" of metaphysics or of theology,⁵⁹ but from the annulment, under the dissolvent spell of epistemological or physiological analysis, of experience itself along with these tyrannies.

I conclude by pointing to a neglected aspect of the function of art in his early writings in order to illustrate the positive theoretic thrust to Pater's aestheticism. The "Conclusion" itself notoriously closes with the recommendation of "the love of art for art's sake" as the most effective stimulus to "a quickened, multiplied consciousness": "for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."⁶⁰ On this view the value and significance of art is calculated on the basis of its subjective yield as a pre-eminent record and source of heightened sensation. And this estimation of art corresponds to that aspect of Pater's aestheticism which defines it as an ethic of "passion." Art, of course, acquires a different meaning within Pater's doctrine under its aspect as a morality of "sympathy": it becomes, in its patient and compassionate observation of the world, the token of a more humane

phase of justice. Art has a third role in Pater's aestheticism linking it with the latter's cognitive ambition. This role regards the nature of art as a symbolic artefact and its power, in Adrian Stokes's phrase, to "correct abstraction."⁶¹ From this third point of view art betokens an apprehension or representation of reality adequate to its experiential character.

Evidence for such a conception of art is to be found especially in the essay on Winckelmann (1867). This evinces the direct influence of Hegel's *Aesthetic* on Pater's view of art. Hegel had argued for the affinity of art, religion and philosophy as modes of "bringing to our minds and expressing the Divine, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the Spirit."⁶² The special vocation of art was, or rather had been, to display "even the highest [reality] sensuously, bringing it thereby nearer to the senses, to feeling, and to nature's mode of appearance."⁶³ "Had been," because according to Hegel art had been superseded as the supreme mode of knowledge of the Absolute, for the reason that the suprasensuous Idea, which is the content of art, had advanced beyond the stage where it was susceptible of an adequate realization in sensuous form. The mission of art had been, and continued to be, to accompany the Absolute on its way to perfect self-realization, and its destiny was to be transcended as the pure spirituality of the Idea grew steadily more manifest, requiring it to yield its place to abstract thought.

While Pater adopts Hegel's conception of the history of art as the history of the varying relations between sensuous form and spiritual content or thought,⁶⁴ the perspective from which he views this history is a different one. He does not share Hegel's faith in the progress of Spirit. His faith is rather in the ability of art to resist or contain the advance of abstract thought. His history of artistic forms follows Hegel's but is very much viewed from the side of sense. He too recognizes the pre-eminent unity of classical art, but he interprets this in terms of an ideal limitation of its spiritual content: "This ideal art, in which the thought does not outstrip or lie beyond the proper range of its sensible embodiment."⁶⁵ The interest of modern art for Pater lies not in its tendency to self-transcendence, but in its precarious but enduring hold on its essential identity. This explains the peculiar importance for him of Winckelmann, the man fitted to renew the classical tradition for the modern age through intimate affinity with it, and so to convey the truth of the Greek artistic ideal to his successors, above all to Goethe. It also explains why the essay closes in considering the problem posed to himself by Goethe the *poet*: "Can the blitheness and universality of the antique ideal be communicated to artistic productions, which shall contain the fullness of the experience of the modern world?"⁶⁶ Pater concludes that it can. The answer expresses a faith in art as a pledge of a mode of reflection ideally conformed, but at the same time resistant, to modernity.

This faith is amply testified to in the essays on Renaissance art, where an individual work of art is repeatedly presented as an emblem of a certain mode of conceiving the world one poised between the old religious and metaphysical dogmatism and the modern disintegration of experience.⁶⁷ Nothing illustrates this better than Pater's famous interpretation of Leonardo's *Gioconda*. Through the novelty of its expressiveness and its enigmatic resemblance to other images by the artist, through its psychological force and elusive symbolic meaning, and lastly through the

history of its own creation, Leonardo's portrait presents itself as an emblem of a mode of thought that evades both ancient and modern forms of prejudice by combining and mutually adjusting them. "Lady Lisa," as repainted by Pater, represents the "embodiment" of the ancient "fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences" the abstract content of this idea is incarnated and expressed in the person of Leonardo's subject. She is also the "symbol of the modern idea" whereby man is "wrought upon by" and sums up in himself "all modes of thought and life."⁶⁸ The essay on Coleridge suggested the annihilating potential of such an idea. But Leonardo's portrait has literally lent a face to a theory of existence that threatens to deprive the individual of all radical initiative in the sphere of experience, while freeing him from subjection to a "perpetual life" above his own. In the human image, in this icon of personal identity, there coalesce two contrasting conceptions of existence the one subordinating it to a principle that surpasses it in power and scope, and the other to "the intricacy, the universality of natural law."⁶⁹ The work of art illustrates the appeal made in the "Conclusion" for a com-prehensive culture, the need to "be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy."⁷⁰ Art is that focus, where the light of thought is neutralized and magnified in the light of sensation.

Visual art owes the pre-eminence accorded to it in the "Conclusion" and in Pater's early writings generally to its capacity to temper and adjust abstract thought, whether religious or metaphysical, through the neutrality of its peculiar medium, the visible. Its power to do this is repeatedly celebrated in the essays contained in *The Renaissance*, where the various instances presented are also examples of the different ways in which adjustment is achieved. The essay on Pico della Mirandola (1871), for example, turns on the ability of the visual art of the Quattrocento to accomplish the effective reconciliation between Christian and pagan traditions which the (in Pater's view) bizarre scholarly efforts of Pico and others were unable to attain, and which would have to await the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the rise of the "historic sense" for scientific validation. Painting (Pater cites Michelangelo's *Tondo Doni* as an example) anticipated the resolutions of historicism by combining disparate iconographical elements and so realizing a "picturesque union of contrasts."⁷¹ In the case of Botticelli and his "peevish-looking Madonnas,"⁷² the painter's translation of the traditional iconography has humanized its content. His pensive Venus is presented as a historical composite, a Venus born again out of the middle ages, but illustrative of the original complexity of the myth and of the entire "Hellenic spirit."⁷³ Again, the primordial quality of Michelangelo's images achieves a generalizing of their religious or mythological content. Moreover, the "half-emergent" effect typical of his carved figures, accidental or not, defines a precise formal analogue of the aims implicit in the generalizing treatment of the traditional pagan and Christian representations. The formal tension in Michelangelo's carvings realizes the paradox of a manner of thinking the world not removed from the actual current and specific mode of experience.

Visual art does not retain this pre-eminence in the later writings, due to the aggravation of the ethical conflict which as I have attempted to show was present in Pater's work from the start. But the theoretical motives underlying visual art's early importance are still operative in its eclipse in

Marius by the (Christian) moral agent, as the latter provides not only a more moral but also a more adequate because living figure of meaning. But this must be the subject of another essay, in which the "ethical crisis" and "confusion of ethics and aesthetics" pointed to by critics in the later writings will be analysed on the basis of the distinctions established here.