

WALTER PATER THE RENAISSANCE: STUDIES IN ART AND POETRY (1873)

"Preface and Conclusion to Studies in the History of the Renaissance." Critical Theory Since Plato. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971. 640-643.

Preface

Here, Pater argues that many attempts have been made "to define beauty in the abstract, to express it in the most general terms, to find some universal formula for it" (xxix). Alluding to Arnold's influential "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Pater stresses that the ideal in aesthetics has been to "see the object as in itself it really is" (xxix). However, he argues, beauty

like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative, and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness. To define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find, not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the student of aesthetics. (xxix)

This is why the "first step toward seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly" (xxix).

Arguing that the "objects with which aesthetic criticism deals – music, poetry, artistic and accomplished forms of human life" (xxix) are "receptacles of so many powers or forces: they possess, like the products of nature, so many virtues or qualities" (xxix), the question consequently arises:

What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, *to me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? And if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? The answers to these questions are the original facts with which the aesthetic critic has to do; and . . . one must realise such primary data for one's self, or not at all. (xxix)

He who "experiences these impressions strongly, and drives directly at the discrimination and analysis of them" (xxx) has no truck with the "abstract question what beauty is in itself, or what its exact relation to truth or experience – metaphysical questions" (xxx).

Pater continues by arguing that the critic regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind. This influence he feels, and wishes to explain, by analysing and reducing it to its elements. To him, the picture, the landscape, the engaging personality in life or in a book . . . are valuable for their virtues, . . . for the property each has of affecting one with a special, a unique, impression of pleasure. (xxx)

Our education consists in experiencing as many of the best examples of beauty as possible. The function of the critic is accordingly to

distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of this impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced. His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue, and noted it, as a chemist notes some chemical element, for himself and for others. (xxx)

This is why it is less important for the critic to "possess a correct abstract definition of

beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects" (xxx).

The critic must remember that "beauty exists in several forms" (xxx) for which reason "all periods, types, schools of taste, are in themselves equal. In all ages there have been some excellent workmen, and some excellent work done" (xxx-xxxi). In each case, such excellence is the product of particular artists through whom the "stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period" (xxxi) finds itself expressed and who thus becomes the "receptacle of its refinement, its elevation, its taste" (xxxi). It is often difficult to "disengage this virtue from the commoner elements with which it may be found in combination" (xxxi), even in the work of great artists such as Wordsworth where the "*virtue*, the active principle" (xxxi), in other words, "what the heat of [his] imagination has wholly fused and transformed" (xxxi), coexists with mere "*débris*" (xxxi).

Conclusion

Pater attempts here to ground the theory of criticism offered in the Preface as a largely subjective process in a theory of consciousness. The source of consciousness is in our "physical life" (150), he argues, which is nothing less than a "perpetual motion" (150): the "passage of the blood, the waste and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain under every ray of light and sound – process which science reduces to simpler and more elementary forces" (150). These forces of change are not limited to the "elements of which we are composed" (150) but extends "beyond us: it rusts iron and ripens corn" (150), leading to "birth and gesture and death and the springing of violets from the grave" (150), for example. This is the "flame-like" (150) nature of all life which is the temporary "concurrence . . . of forces parting sooner or later on their ways" (150).

The result is that it is humans who, in an effort to make sense of things, try to arrest the flux of life, as it were, to join the dots and fill in the blanks: that "clear, perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours, under which we group them – a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it" (150). As he puts it later, "it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike" (152). This is because the "inward world of thought and feeling" (151) is in a flux similar to that of the outer physical world: consciousness is nothing less than a

drift of momentary acts of sight and passion and thought. At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But when reflexion begins to play upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force seems suspended like some trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions – colour, odour, texture – in the mind of the observer. And if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Everyone of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (151)

The "impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight" (151), "limited by time, and . . . as time is

infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also" (151). All that is "actual" (151) in each of these impressions lasts for but a "single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is" (151). Pater concludes:

To such a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down. It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off – that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves. (151-152)

Consciousness, Pater asserts, is a fragile thing, tantamount to nothing more than the ephemeral impressions which one has of the external world.

The "service of philosophy" (152), Pater stresses, "towards the human spirit, is to rouse, to startle it to a life of constant and eager observation" (152). The goal is not the "fruit of experience, but experience itself" (152): 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? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the locus 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. (152)

While all "melts under our feet" (152), we grasp at anything, "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 senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artistic hands, or the face of one's friend" (152). This is why, Pater argues, not to "discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and into the very brilliancy of their gifts, some tragic dividing of forces on their ways is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening" (152).

Given the ephemeral nature of life, there is little to reduce the concrete impressions afforded by pure experience to abstractions: with this

sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are in one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. (152)

We need to be

for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing to a facile orthodoxy, of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own. Philosophical theories or ideas, as points of view, instruments of criticism, may help us to gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us. 'Philosophy is the microscope of thought.' 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 theory we have not identified with ourselves, or of what is only conventional, has no real claim on us. (153)

Referring to Hugo's view that "we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve" (153), Pater argues that our one

chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life. . . . (153)

This "passion" (153) is the "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" (153).