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WALTER PATER AND OSCAR WILDE

INDIVIDUATION AND NARCISSISM

IN

SOME MAJOR WORKS OF

WALTER PATER AND OSCAR WILDE

By

WILLIAM JAMES LOUGHLIN, B.A.

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AUTHOR: William James Loughlin, B.A.  
(McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor J. Sigman

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### Abstract

Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater have ordinarily been labelled Decadents. However, there are real differences between their systems of thought. An examination of Pater's The Renaissance and Wilde's Intentions shows that although Wilde was profoundly influenced by Pater he deviated widely from Pater's ideas. Pater's thought focused on the concept of individuation within an idealistic context. Wilde, on the other hand, was concerned less with the growth and development of the personality and more with the undermining of the personality for the sake of the glorification of the self. The same principles can be seen to exist in Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray and Pater's Marius the Epicurean. The conclusions reached is that Wilde's ideas developed in a perverse direction while Pater's remained within the realm of the ideal.

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## INTRODUCTION

In many respects, the critical writings of Oscar Wilde display characteristics which can easily be seen to have their origins in the ideas of Wilde's artistic progenitor, the nineteenth century critic and aesthete, Walter Pater. The similarities of style and subject matter suggest, upon superficial reading, little or no distinction between the two writers in terms of basic preoccupations and emphases. While it is true that there is a direct continuity from Pater to Wilde, the inference that Wilde's ideas were entirely derived from those of Pater results in a dangerous confusion. Upon close examination of some of their major works, it can be seen that there are clear distinctions between the two sensibilities on the very basic level of philosophical commitment.

The aim of this thesis will be to clarify and define the precise nature of that commitment within the context of the metaphysical quest for individuation or identity. Both Pater and Wilde attempt, in their writings, to achieve what might be called a hyperaesthetic vision in which a total affirmation of the self and the human spirit is found within the world of art. The different means by which each writer arrives at this end and reaches

a form of aesthetic individuation will be the subject of this thesis. The terms "individuation", "identity", "orientation" and "selfhood" will be used throughout in reference to both Pater and Wilde. It will be useful, therefore, to provide the background for this kind of critical approach as developed by Morse Peckham in his book, Beyond the Tragic Vision<sup>1</sup>. The scope of Peckham's work is extremely broad since it covers the entire movement of European culture from the Enlightenment to Nietzsche. Its primary focus, however, is not on the aesthetic issues of the century, but rather, on the metaphysical quest for meaning, order, and value, as manifested in the works of a number of nineteenth century artists. Peckham uses the term "orientation" to describe the experience of value and meaning that the individual finds in his relation with his environment. The loss of meaning, or disorientation, includes a loss of the sense of identity. In his survey of cultural movement in the nineteenth century, Peckham traces several orientations and reorientations which derived value and meaning from

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<sup>1</sup>See Morse Peckham, Beyond the Tragic Vision (New York: George Braziller, 1962). The following outline is not intended as a summary of Peckham's book, but rather is meant to establish the basis for the specific kind of critical approach used in this thesis. None of Peckham's comments on Pater or Wilde have been used, and the conclusions reached in later chapters of this thesis do not necessarily coincide with those of Peckham.



a variety of sources. In the Middle Ages, of course, the fundamental source of value was found in religion where ultimate meaning was derived from the divine or beatific vision of eternal salvation. With the coming of the Enlightenment, however, and the growth of rationalist and empiricist thought, value was also seen in nature, where it was perceived that an order and structure existed which was analogous to the divine order of paradise. It soon became evident, however, that nature was essentially indifferent to man, and that along with sublimity, it encompassed a malignance and destructiveness which appeared to deny the possibility of meaning. Society, as an organic outgrowth of nature, was similarly riddled with contradiction and disharmonies. It was the achievement of the great Romantic poets, Wordsworth, Keats, and Coleridge, to reconcile these opposites and recover meaning, order, and value in spite of them. The problem of finding a satisfying orientation, however, remained. Since the loss of orientation meant the loss of identity, a new source of identity was found in the discovery of the noumenal or "unconscious" self, as distinct from the "conscious" or phenomenal self.<sup>2</sup> While the

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<sup>2</sup>Peckham traces the source of the "noumenal" self to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. It was Kant who established that the "noumenal" self is the entity that structures and organizes the data received from the "phenomenal" self in a way that is analogous at least, to the structuring power of the divine.

noumenal self was now seen as a source of value, the phenomenal self was equated with the social personality, which, as a product of society, was an aspect of it and was therefore worthless. With the growing loss of faith in revealed religion, a new frame of reference had to be discovered which the self could engage with in order to derive meaning, order, and value. As the realm of art became more and more to be seen as having the qualities formerly attributed to religion--order, structure, harmony and meaning, it came to be a source of orientation:

This was what distinguished art from all other orientative activities; its power to symbolize individuality and selfhood as opposed to personality and lack of identity meant that it was the opposite of hell--personality and the objective world. Art, therefore, was not symbolic of paradise; it was paradise. In itself it was order, meaning and value ... The religion of beauty, 'aestheticism' was thus born. The word 'aesthetic' was traditionally applied both to, 'that which is characteristic of works of art,' and, 'that which is beautiful'. The relation between religion and art was conceived as symbolic; but the symbolism went in the opposite direction. Art was not symbolic of the divine; rather the fiction or illusion of the divine was man's way of symbolizing the essence of Art. <sup>3</sup>

Since art was now the new religion wherein beauty was the object of worship, the relationship of the individual with the external world--nature, society, and the social personality, had value only to a limited extent. Since nature and society could not be "redeemed",

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 311.

then art could have no social or moral purpose. It existed, therefore, for its own sake. The task of the individual was to achieve individuation in an aesthetic sense. By structuring and formalizing his experience through the aesthetic manipulation of an artistic medium, he made manifest the identity of the self.→ The importance of style, in this sense, is paramount since style is the one element which gives a work of art its aesthetic quality:

The new style was at once impersonal and individual, and the art of the past was neither a tradition to be triumphantly exploited by the personality nor the source of styles and forms to be arbitrarily imposed from without. Rather, it became a model; and the artist's task was not to imitate it but to grasp its essence. A tradition gave the artist impersonality; to make a unique use of the tradition gave him individuality or selfhood.<sup>4</sup>

Style, then, was to be the means by which the artist symbolized his orientative power and achieved aesthetic individuation. The importance of "content", therefore, was relative to the demands of style. Since beauty was perceived to reside within the structuring power of the self rather than in the objective world, it was no longer valid for the artist to "express" anything other than his own individuality. The union of form and matter was to be a total one; hence, Pater's famous assertion that, "all art aspires toward the condition of

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 310.

music".

The aesthetic idealism which we find in Pater's The Renaissance, might best be understood as the quest for individuation itself. For Pater, one could arrive at this aesthetic "state of grace" through a process of self-culture and refinement of sensibility. By immersing oneself in the world of art, and cultivating a sensitivity to beauty, one could reach the stage of refinement where the relationship to beauty was an intuitive and spontaneous one, becoming a total orientation in itself. In this way, life, experience, the natural world, and the human personality could be aesthetically re-structured and idealized, and in a sense, "redeemed" through the appeal to a higher realm of value, namely, beauty.

Although Peckham makes only a passing reference to Pater in his book,<sup>5</sup> it can be seen that Pater's The Renaissance is the embodiment of the new orientation in that it presents an idealized aesthetic vision of Renaissance culture in which the entire era is seen as an analogue for Pater's own sense of individuation. Although The Renaissance is a work of criticism rather than a work of art, this distinction becomes a nebulous one when Pater

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 146. Although he describes Pater's assertion that "all art aspires to the condition of music" as "one of the central statements of the latter part of the century", Peckham does not explore Pater's ideas any further.

rejects objectivity in favour of the idea of "impressionistic" criticism, which has the effect of re-locating the focus of the work from the subject matter to the form—that is, the style of the work.

Pater *emerged from* a tradition that includes Morris, Ruskin, and Arnold, all of whom emphasized the social and moral responsibility of the artist. In his departure from this, Pater was establishing a new ideal in which the world of art became totally independent of didactic predispositions. This does not mean, however, that Pater's ideal was an amoral one. Insofar as The Renaissance was a manifestation or symbolization of a new orientation—a new realm of value—it was intended to serve as an example which might be followed. As he suggests in his conclusion, it is the realm of art, for art's sake, which holds the highest potential for human self-realization.

If Pater's The Renaissance represented a genuine, if somewhat naive attempt to resolve the problem of identity, value, and meaning, the same could not be said of Wilde's Intentions or The Picture of Dorian Gray. Here idealism becomes transformed into cynicism and what results is not individuation but a form of "aesthetic narcissism". There is a sense in which Wilde's ideas are simply progressive extensions of those of Pater, carried to their logical extremes. This, however, seems inadequate to

account for the radical shift of emphasis which Wilde's ideas display. Aside from the influence of Pater, the single most important factor in the development of Wilde's philosophy was that aspect of French Romantic literature that Mario Praz, in The Romantic Agony, has described as sado-masochistic. Praz characterizes the work of a number of writers, (De Sade, Stendhal, Byron, Maturin, Lewis, Baudelaire, Lautremont, Verlaine, Swinburne, Huysmans, and Wilde) as informed by this sense of perverse eroticism. The principal characteristic of this tradition seems to be a reversal of eros and thanatos. As Peckham has pointed out, society and nature were perceived by the Romantics as lacking in order and harmony. In this sense, along with the new distinction between the self and the social personality, society was seen as analogous to "hell" or chaos, while the self was seen as representative of paradise. The spirit that formed the sensibility of a writer like De Sade, for example, was one of violent self assertion by means of the erotic violation of another personality, or on a symbolic scale, of society itself.<sup>6</sup> Praz has pointed out the emergence of a number of archetypal patterns or themes which have in common the morbid

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<sup>6</sup>See Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 104. De Sade apparently came to the conclusion that since everything is evil, it was necessary to practice vice since it conforms to the law of nature.

obsession with evil or sadistic violation. Among these are the figure of Satan as "noble bandit" or "heroic transgressor", and the figure of Medusa or "the fatal woman", the best example being Wilde's Salomé, and, in general, the sense of eros as being the realm of the demonic.<sup>7</sup> Although this tradition was largely confined to France, elements of it can be seen in the Byronic hero, in gothic novels such as Lewis' Monk and Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer, and in the poetry of Swinburne.

As eroticism came to be seen as the ultimate transgression within the context of society, it became a source of fascination for Wilde. Since the world of art and the external world were now separate, the subject matter of the decadents had to come, by necessity, from the realm of experience, or hell, which could then be transformed into an aesthetic vision which would reaffirm the sense of identity through the power of style. The glorification of the sense of "sin" which we find both in Dorian Gray and in Wilde's critical writings

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<sup>7</sup>For a fuller treatment of the "Fatal Woman" theme, see Praz, pp. 199-281, 301-313.

Although outside the scope of this thesis, it can be stated here that Wilde's Salomé represents the culmination of the "Fatal Woman" theme, combining the eroticism and sensuality of Moreau's Salomé (as described by Des Essentis in Huysman's Au Rebours) with the figure of the Medusa or the female vampire, depicted in the gothic tradition as well as in the poetry of Keats and Shelley.

would seem, therefore, to be the result of his interest in the aesthetic possibility that these morbid themes could offer. The "forbidden fruit" of eroticism which was the source of Dorian Gray's degeneration and eventual destruction, was thus frequently combined with the figure of the tempter or seducer; a combination of a Mephistopheles with the deliberately or self consciously amoral figure of the manipulator, perhaps most evident in Lord Henry. The manipulator, in fact, is usually a Wilde persona in most of his works. This is evident even in the critical dialogues, "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist," where consistency of argumentation is subordinated to the seductive appeal of wit and paradox.

Wilde's departure from Pater, then, can be seen as a difference in kind, as well as degree. While Pater attempted to reach an ideal aesthetic vision through the power of style, with individuation as the end result, Wilde attempted to use style in order to destroy objective reality, by establishing a strict polarity or antipathy between art and life on the levels of the edenic and demonic. In this way, Wilde could arrive at a form of individuation simply by rejecting any element of the external world which did not provide the self with a satisfying reflection. In this sense, Wilde's version of individuation was, in essence, narcissistic. The



result of the self-conscious cultivation of sin and guilt was the transcendence of the realms of good and evil and the acquisition of a manipulative power which would have no moral or social limits. In this way, the realm of thanatos—society, nature, and the social personality, was not "redeemed" or idealized but was self-consciously and systematically destroyed.

The terms "individuation" and "narcissism" then, will form the basis for this discussion of Pater and Wilde respectively. In the first chapter, therefore, I have attempted to trace the development of Walter Pater's aesthetic philosophy, which will form the starting point for a discussion of Wilde's Intentions, in chapter two, and finally of The Picture of Dorian Gray in chapter three.<sup>8</sup> The evolution of an orientation based on the sense of identity and selfhood shows, in some ways, a linear progression from Pater to Wilde. In another sense, however, Wilde's deviation from Pater moves in a perverse direction which ultimately results, in Dorian Gray, in a problem that Wilde was unable, or perhaps unwilling, to resolve.

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<sup>8</sup>In order to balance Wilde's novel with one by Pater, and in the interest of greater depth, I have added an appendix on Pater's Marius the Epicurean.

## CHAPTER I

### PATER'S RENAISSANCE

It may be said with considerable justification that the most thoroughly aesthetic vision of any nineteenth century writer is found in The Renaissance by Walter Pater. The purpose of this chapter will be to discuss the book with a view to determining the precise nature of that "aesthetic" sensibility insofar as it is understandable on the basis of the quest for value and meaning through the achievement of selfhood or individuation.

The first difficulty in dealing with Pater's work objectively is the total and deliberate absence of objectivity in his approach. It is, first and foremost, Pater's own, highly personalized interpretation of Renaissance culture. We feel we must accept his views not so much for their intrinsic accuracy or merit, but because of his initial critical assumptions which the reader feels obliged to accept since it is only in this way that the book can be dealt with on its own terms. The final impression one is left with is that the book is not so much an expository interpretation of the work of a number of Renaissance figures as an illustration of the level of self-culture and aesthetic individuation that

Pater himself has achieved. This implies that criticism is an art form or the critic is an artist, although this idea is never explicitly stated by Pater but is picked up later by Oscar Wilde and carried, as we shall see, to its ultimate extremes.

The function of the "aesthetic" critic, according to Pater, is to cultivate the kind of temperament that is highly susceptible to the impressions of beauty. The resultant "impressionistic" criticism is therefore of a highly subjective and personalized kind. This implies, on the one hand, a totally intuitive and spontaneous critical response, and on the other, a complete disregard for external criteria of critical judgement. Paradoxically, this both liberates and constricts the critic, since while he is now able to articulate a critical response to all works of art which is uniquely his own, his critical pronouncements cannot have, by definition, any relevance to anyone else, in terms of the communication of knowledge. There is no common ground in the form of an understood conception of the nature, value, and function of art that he can relate to with his reader.

He who experiences these impressions strongly, and drives directly at the discrimination and analysis of them, has no need to trouble himself with the abstract question what beauty is in itself, or what its exact relation to truth or experience—metaphysical questions, as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere. We may pass them all

by as being, answerable or not, of no interest to him.<sup>1</sup>

Nor does the aesthetic critic confine or narrow his perception of beauty to works of art. Indeed, anything that satisfies the instinctive receptivity to pleasure is a worthy subject of critical delineation:

To him, the picture, the landscape, the engaging personality in life or in a book, La Gioconda, the hills of Carrara, Pico of Mirandola, are valuable for their virtues, as we say, in speaking of a herb, a wine, a gem, for the property each has of affecting one with a special, a unique impression of pleasure. Our education becomes complete in proportion as our susceptibility to these impressions increases in depth and variety.<sup>2</sup>

The aesthetic critic does not attempt to determine, through the use of a scholarly methodology, the cultural, historical, or metaphysical significance of any individual work of art. His only concern is to isolate and identify what is to him, the particular virtue inherent in a work of art and to characterize it as an operating principle in the work itself—"To see the object as in itself it really is."<sup>\*</sup>—but totally independent of any preconceived

<sup>1</sup>Walter Pater, The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry, Volume I of the Works of Walter Pater (London: Macmillan, 1900), p. VIII.

For the sake of convenience, the short form of the title (i.e. The Renaissance) has been used throughout the text.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. IX.

\*Matthew Arnold, "On Translating Homer." (1861)

notions or abstract definitions. Aesthetic criticism then, is not so much a method of intellectual inquiry as a process wherein the critic achieves a high level of individuation and manifests a self-definition on the most satisfying possible basis—that of beauty. The realm of beauty, unlike that of "truth" is, for Pater, the one in which the most affirmative and positive value lies, and as he indicates in his conclusion, the only one that is not reducible, by science or any philosophical orthodoxy, to the valueless level of quantifiable and prosaic reality.

Pater's conception of Renaissance culture, on this basis, can be regarded as deriving from an inward impetus to externalize one's sense of identity in aesthetic terms and project it onto an entire culture. His treatment of the Renaissance is not only highly selective, in terms of subject matter, but is representative only of the aesthetic sense rather than the historical, social, or philosophical sense. He limits his subject matter to those artistic works and personalities by which he himself is charmed, and his constant movement is toward the apprehension of the ideal virtues which he relates to fully on the common aesthetic level.

Before entering upon a discussion of the various Renaissance figures he deals with, it will be necessary

to gain a clear understanding of Pater's views of the historical Renaissance. Since the work is highly subjective and personalized, Pater's views on the growth of personal freedom, on religion, art and humanism can be best understood as analogues for his own quest for identity and individuation. It becomes, for him, a phenomenon wholly explicable and approachable when understood as a large scale awakening to the self-conscious necessity to seek out formal (i.e. aesthetic) conditions under which identity and individuation might be realized:

For us the Renaissance was the name of a many sided yet united movement in which the love of things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake, the desire for a more liberal and comely way of conceiving life, make themselves felt, urging those who experience this desire to search out first one and then another means of intellectual or imaginative enjoyment, and directing them not merely to the discovery of old and forgotten sources of this enjoyment, but to the divination of fresh sources thereof--new experiences, new subjects of poetry, new forms of art.<sup>3</sup>

The Renaissance, then, was an "outbreak of human spirit", a desire for a certain "sweetness" which led, initially, to the classical revival, and then to the awakening of those vital passions so long held in suppression by the austerity of the Middle Ages. Pater, in fact, sees the distinction between the Middle Ages

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. IX.

and the Renaissance solely in terms of the aesthetic sense. The chief artistic monuments of the Middle Ages are characterized by Pater in terms of "Gothic heaviness" or "rude strength". This gives way, with the coming of the Renaissance, and the "outbreak of Human spirit", to the "sweetness" of Renaissance culture. If the Renaissance can be seen as analagous to Pater's own sense of individuation, embodied in broad cultural terms, then, in the Peckhamian sense, it could be described as the birth of a new orientation; the re-location of value from revealed religion and the established church to the realm of beauty and the senses. For Pater, the fundamental difference between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was that identity was no longer to be found in the beatific vision but in the aesthetic vision.

In their search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination, in their care for beauty, in their worship of the body, people were impelled beyond the bounds of the Christian ideal, and their love became sometimes a strange idolatry, a strange rival religion ... More and more as we come to mark changes and distinctions of temper in what is often in one all-embracing confusion called the Middle Age, this rebellious element—this sinister claim for liberty of heart and thought comes to the surface.<sup>4</sup>

This idea of beauty as an object of worship, of art as a form of religion, was one with which Pater had strong affinities. The aesthetic orientation, to

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 24.