

THE ANTI-VICTORIAN REACTION

The Aesthetic Movement

At the end of the century, a reaction against the self-satisfying morality and rigid orthodox respectability of the age was brought about by a new generation of writers. It came to be known as the Anti-Victorian reaction and brought to a climax the rebellion which the Pre-Raphaelites, had already attempted.

The whole literature became less didactic and, poetry in particular, more sensuous and less moralizing.

One of the literary currents of the Anti-Victorian reaction was the so-called Aesthetic movement.

The founder and theorist of the English Aesthetic movement was born in London in 1839, Walter Pater (1839 – 1894).

His family was catholic. He attended Queen's College at Oxford where he received attention for his works in the classics and philosophy. His passion for Italian Renaissance took him to Italy. For Pater this was a confirmation, the confirmation an enthusiasm steadily growing in the preceding years. It coincided with the growth of the Aesthetic movement in Paris in the second part of the 80ies. A movement which was moving art away from its traditional role as a teacher and moral guide.

Art had its own reason: art for art's sake.

It was the motto of the Aesthetic movement. This, together with his passion for the 16th century Italian art, was the ideological basis for Pater's *Studies in the Italian Renaissance*. Pater's message in the book was subtly but clearly potentially demoralizing, decadent and subversive. Time flows incessantly like a river towards death. There is no way of seizing its reality since it is continually changing. In the face of the tragic brevity of existence and the uncertainty of time, Pater refuses faith and any other ethical system. Art is the only way of stopping time through the intensity of the ecstatic moment, which is the only certainty or the only illusion.

This moment of ecstasies, the full comprehension of life and destiny, time and art, and all, in one single figure, was the only kind of success worth pursuing in life

Critics and the academic world were hostile to him. He left the university and gave up teaching. He began writing *Marius the Epicurean*: a description of a philosophical growth.

In 1887 he published *Imaginary Portraits* and in 1894, *Plato and Platonism*. Towards the end of his career he tried to correct the tendency begun by *Studies in the Italian Renaissance* clarifying his message and moving towards a Christian vision of the world.

The poet's research of beauty, of the ecstatic moment the "Hard gem – like flame", that Pater in his conclusion in the Renaissance describes the real purpose of life, was the aim of the aesthetic theory of the artist.

The artist should care about form and technique and express himself freely: he should not become the slave of fixed moral and ethical conventions.

This hedonistic conception of art departed from radical rigid Victorian tradition. It alimented a type of literature which cultivated sensations described with frankness and rhythmic beauty.

Dominant on the movement was the influence of the French Symbolists poets (Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé). Aestheticism followers in England were plenty but the most famous were Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837/1909), Walter Pater (1839/1894) and the most famous of all Oscar Wilde (1856/1900).

Rebellion against Victorian values

Because of her economic power Britain became the most powerful country in the world and by the end of the century it controlled an empire which covered a fifth of the Earth's surface.

People became very patriotic and, when queen Victoria created Empress of India in 1871 had her Diamond Jubilee in 1896, it was a cause for national celebration.

Empire however brought duty (Rudyard Kipling, The White Man Burden) and English men felt they had a special mission to civilize the more primitive peoples of the world. It was this sense of duty, the white man's burden, which the writer Rudyard Kipling (1865/1936) spoke of in the 1880ies and 1890ies. For him and many of his generation the empire was not so much an

advantage as a responsibility. It was also, perhaps, an escape: serving India and Africa gave men something positive to do : helping the local people to solve their everyday problems were concrete actions which saved them from the need to think too deeply.

However not all writers shared Kipling's seriousness or the seriousness of the earlier realists. The Aesthetes, the most famous of whom Oscar Wilde, did not accept Middle class morality and the sense of earnestness which dominated Victorian public values.

Nor did they agree with Matthew Arnold or John Ruskin, that art should have a moral purpose and be useful. Instead they shared with their predecessors, the Pre Raphaelite poets, such as Dante Gabriele Rossetti, a belief in art for art's sake: art only needed to be beautiful, to justify itself. They rejected a simple type of realism: art, in their opinion, should not just reproduce the world but offer an alternative to it.

Like the Romantics they have not faith in reason, believing that true reality could only be found through senses and that beauty was the only thing that add any meaning.

The most important statement of Walter Pater in his famous book introduction affirms that life was only a series of experiences and that the way to give it meaning was to live this experiences as intensely as possible. The most important thing for Pater was Beauty; life was usually ugly and sordid, only art could be really beautiful, so life should copy art.

This belief in the superiority of art to life was the opposite of how most people saw the matter and the Aesthetes cultivated it in order to shock a society they considered too self-satisfied.

Swinburne had been one of the first of the Antivictorian writers. His Poems and Ballads, published in 1866, greatly shocked his contemporaries and was an inspiration for those who like Oscar Wilde rebelled against Victorian values and taste.

The Aesthetes' escape from ugly industrial reality into a world of senses was only partly the result of looking for a new sort of culture; it was also, like Kipling's idea of Empire, an attempt to escape from the Victorian crisis of the mind. By the end of the century many of the reasons for Britain confidence was disappearing: Germany and the United States were becoming more powerful and putting Britain supremacy in doubt, economic depression in the 1870's showed that free trade did not provide all the answers and that some sort of State control of the economy would probably be necessary; the Franco-Prussian war of 1871 left many in France demanding revenge and put at risk the peace which had lasted since the Treaty of Vienna in 1815 and which had allowed Britain to trade and become rich and powerful. The familiar world, which the Victorians had felt able to dominate, was changing and moving out of control.