

# Walter Pater and Aestheticism

BY NASRULLAH MAMBROL ON NOVEMBER 14, 2017 • ( 0 )

Walter Pater (1839–1894) is best known for his phrase “**art for art’s sake.**”

In his insistence on artistic autonomy, **on aesthetic experience as opposed to aesthetic object**, and on **experience in general as an ever vanishing flux**, he is a precursor of modern views of both life and art.

His subjectivist and “impressionistic” criticism, once attacked by the likes of Eliot and Pound, who called for a return to a depersonalized classical objectivity, **is now regarded with renewed interest**; not only did it influence figures such as Oscar Wilde but **it is now also seen as anticipating several strains of modern theory**, including those which derive from Nietzsche and Derrida, as well as certain elements of reader-response theory.

Educated at Oxford, Pater visited Italy in 1865 and was **deeply affected by the Renaissance paintings** he saw in Florence and elsewhere. His experience eventually inspired his *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873). His other works included *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), *Imaginary Portraits* (1887), and *Plato and Platonism* (1893). Pater’s work belongs to an era of what is called “decadence,” marked by a resigned withdrawal from social and political concerns, disillusionment with the consolations available in religion, and **a rejection of the philistine and mechanical world which was the legacy of mainstream bourgeois thought and practice**, in favor of **an exaltation of art and of experience.**

Needless to say, the views of Pater, Wilde, and other aesthetes and impressionists brought them into **conflict not only with the builders of systems and the defenders of religion or morality, but also with those Victorian writers who saw art and literature as having a high moral purpose and civilizing function.**

In the preface to his *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Pater rejects as useless any attempt to define “beauty in the abstract.” While on the surface Pater claims to accept Matthew Arnold’s imperative that the function of true criticism is to “**see the object as in itself it really is,**” he redefines this formula in a subjective way: to see the object as it really is, he says, “**is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly**” (viii).

The kinds of questions we should ask are: “**What is this song or picture . . . to me? What effect does it really produce on me?**” The answers to these questions are the “**original facts**” which must be confronted by the critic (viii).

Pater’s views of aesthetic experience are rooted in his account of experience in general. In the conclusion to *Studies* he observes that **modern thought tends to view all things as in constant flux. Our physical life is a “perpetual motion” of ever changing combinations of elements and forces. This is even more true of our mental life, of the world of thought and feeling.**

At first sight, he says, “*experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects . . . But when reflexion begins to play on those objects they are dissipated under its influence . . . the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind*” (234–235). Hence **the world** which seemed overwhelming, which seemed solid and external and of boundless scope, **is**

actually encompassed within the circle of our impressions, our experience (235). Not only does the whole world reduce itself to our impressions, but these impressions themselves are ever vanishing and in “perpetual flight” (236). Given the brevity of our life, we must “be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy, of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own.” For Pater, experience must be undertaken for its own sake: “Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end . . . To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (236–237). Such intense experience is furnished foremost by “the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake” (239).

We have here reached a point in Western culture where **experience is dirempted and abstracted from any kind of constraint whatsoever**, even from its consensual overlap with that of other individuals. Hegel would have regarded such experience as an abstract category, not even possible; but **Pater expresses a desperate attempt to redeem experience from the weight of centuries of oppression and coercion and molding into various socially acceptable forms**. He effectively aestheticizes experience, equating **the fullness of experience with beauty**, in an attempt to extricate the category of experience from the burdens invested in it by bourgeois thought. Experience is no longer a reliable source of knowledge or a basis of scientific inquiry; it is not a realm which constrains the operations of reason; nor is it a realm under the strict surveillance of morality or of religious institutions. It is raised from the mere means to the exaltation of end, a celebration of purposelessness, a celebration of indirection, of relativism and randomness.

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