WALTER PATER: CRITICAL THEORIES

Andy Wilkinson: 66715187

“Explain and discuss the critical theories through which Walter Pater examines works of art.”
Walter Horatio Pater was a 19th century philosopher and writer based at Oxford University. He is most well known for the oft-misunderstood conclusion to his work, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, in which Pater was misread as promoting hedonism and surface aestheticism. This essay aims to offer a rebuttal to this grossly oversimplified reading of Pater, offering an introduction to his theories of criticism and how he applied them to works of art. I propose that the general misunderstandings of Pater result from a simple “surface-reading” of Pater’s theory, and peeling away the layers — so to speak — reveals Pater’s unique insights, particularly with regard to Renaissance art.

As Pater’s theories of art criticism are an extension of his general philosophy on life, I will first touch upon his perception of reality. By understanding how Pater viewed the human condition and his unique belief in the role of the art critic, the logic of the stories he wrote about artists becomes apparent, as does his use of language. Only after comprehending these fundamental tenets of Pater’s theory does the true meaning of his writing manifest — a call for art to enrich life, not merely a hedonistic statement of sensual pleasure.

Pater’s *Renaissance* was written with the goal of enhancing the human spirit through art, without relying on the Ruskinian model of art as a model for moral improvement. His critical theories are borne out of his personal philosophical methods, which he briefly described in the conclusion to *The Renaissance*. In the short but dense conclusion, Pater raises the issue of subjectivity and individual experience. Pater divides life into ever smaller pieces and waxes lyrical about each; as if he is a scientist slicing atoms into their component particles in a search for understanding. At the deepest possible level, Pater refers to life as a series of fleeting impressions, that last for a moment — and are then gone. Furthermore, he goes on to refer to every human as essentially an isolated mind, experiencing their own “dream” of the world. Finally, he touches on mortality and the brevity of life:

> 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 focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?

---

The conclusion caused somewhat of an uproar, being seen as amoral and promoting hedonism—enjoying images for the pleasure that we derive from them. However, in his philosophical novel, *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater clarifies his position; it is not simply pleasure he wishes to gain through art, but insight and fullness of life; a life which has an array of experiences and emotions, including "noble pain and sorrow."²

Pater strongly disagreed with the direction that art criticism was taking, and made no secret of this fact in the preface to *The Renaissance*. He believed that the search for a "universal formula" of beauty was inherently flawed due to the nature of our subjective existence; and failed to help the reader appreciate or judge the work of art. Pater, in his belief that man lives in his own mind — isolated, his experience of the world being filtered through his own unique temperament and set of experiences — felt that there could be no such thing as a universal formula for beauty. Therefore, Pater believed that the role of the critic was not to search for an objective formula or truth that could be applied to all art, but that the critic should be searching for the formula which best expresses “this or that manifestation of [beauty].”³ The most important quality to be possessed by the art critic was not an intellectual definition of “beauty,” but a certain temperament — “the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects.”⁴

But how does one define beauty? How does Pater apply his philosophical approach when judging an artwork? In *The School of Giorgione*, Pater wrote that every art form—poetry, music, painting—has its own “sensuous charm” and that no artwork could ever succeed without first, in its primary aspect, delighting the senses.⁵ If one attempted to read Pater without properly understanding his philosophy, the antecedent statement would appear to be calling for the viewer of an artwork to focus simply on the pleasure derived from it. Pater continues, however, stating that “true pictorial charm is... neither a mere poetical thought or sentiment... nor a mere result of communicable technical skill in colour or design.” Put quite simply, Pater believed “good art” showed a technical mastery of the medium, appealing to the senses; but that great art appeals not just to the

---

⁴ ibid.
senses, nor to only the intellect, but masterfully weaves the two together, blurring the lines between form and matter, and addressing what he called the “imaginative reason.” Elaborating on this viewpoint, Pater wrote that all art “constantly aspires to the condition of music,” due to the fact that it is impossible to disentangle the form from the matter, one cannot judge one without judging the other; this is further evidence that Pater disagrees with the notion of judging an art simply on its formalistic attributes — or purely on its subject matter. Furthermore, in Pater’s view, the greatest works of art show not only a mastery of their own medium, but approach the condition of other art forms. To paraphrase Pater, a great work of architecture may fulfill the required conditions of a picture (the Arena chapel) or sculpture (Giotto’s tower at Florence.)

To fully enjoy a great artwork, Pater believed that one had to understand the context in which it was created. You had to get inside the mind of the artist, understand the social conditions of the time; essentially one had to try and view the artwork from the artist’s perspective. Pater’s art writings are an elaborate story, based on an equal mix of evidence and speculation. About da Vinci, Pater writes:

Curiosity and the desire of beauty—these are the two elementary forces in Leonardo’s genius; curiosity often in conflict with the desire of beauty, but generating, in union with it, a type of subtle and curious grace.

The essays in *The Renaissance* were Pater’s attempt to find common themes in the continual flux of the artists’ lives, with the hope that viewing their work through this lens would offer the reader a greater appreciation of the work in question. Returning to an example of Pater’s writing on Leonardo da Vinci:

This struggle between the reason and its ideas, and the senses, the desire of beauty, is the key to Leonardo’s life at Milan—his restlessness, his endless retouchings, his odd experiments with colour.

He uses this story to explain and offer a unique viewpoint on Leonardo’s work that he produced in Milan — his “restlessness, his endless retouchings, his odd experiments with colour” are said to be results of da

---


7 ibid.

8 ibid.

Vinci’s endless internal conflict between curiosity and the desire for beauty. It is Pater’s hope that this psychological insight allows the viewer to better appreciate Leonardo’s work, through understanding the dissonance present in the artist’s mind. Pater viewed an artist’s personal style as an expression of the artist’s temperament, and through understanding that temperament, one could better appreciate the sensations evoked by the artist’s work.

Pater’s critical writing is not without its flaws. In his attempt to understand the mind of the artist, and convey that to the reader, Pater would treat the artist as one would a fictional character—his essay on Sandro Botticelli, while interesting from a literary standpoint, is of questionable value as a piece of art writing. A lack of information about Botticelli was no obstacle for Pater—who felt free to speculate about the artist’s motives and internal condition. R.V Johnson observes that some of the paintings that Pater used as evidence for Botticelli’s melancholic personality have since been re-labelled as the school of Botticelli — Pater’s emphasis on Botticelli’s “melancholic strain” may offer a greater insight into the mind of Pater than it does the artist. 10

Language is quintessentially human; it is how we organize abstract concepts, emotions and thought into a form understandable by all — essentially a method of baring one’s internal mind to the outside world. Pater’s use of language was carefully considered; he believed that the author should use a varied prose based on the needs of the text: the precise thought or emotion that the author wishes to convey — “reserved or opulent, terse, abundant, musical, stimulant, academic.” 11 This was arguably driven by Pater’s personal conviction that “in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly.” 12 This is often misinterpreted as a self-centred and highly subjective viewpoint, but Pater was not claiming that art criticism should be reduced entirely to subjective impressions; rather, he believed that such insight was an essential ingredient of sincerity on the part of the art writer. Pater’s writing, was the result of a process; of looking inwards to first understand his impression of an artwork that he believed to be exceptional, and then

10 Symons, A Study of Walter Pater, p.29
picking the right combination of words to best relate his experience to others, so as to direct the reader’s attention to the source of his pleasure, enriching the reader’s own experience of the artwork. The role of Pater’s critic, then, was to act as an intermediary, capturing and documenting their response to a work of art as sincerely as possible.

Pater once described life as a series of fleeting impressions in “perpetual flight;” as soon as we try to apprehend a moment, it is gone, a “tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream.” This quote aptly sums up Pater’s view of the human condition, essential to understanding his writings about art and culture. Far from being a hedonist, Pater believed that through art, we could sharpen the senses—and develop the ability to savour and appreciate each impression as it comes to us. While the sensual aspects of art were certainly important to Pater, they were far from his primary concern, in opposition to what his detractors may believe. A great artwork, to Pater, weaved together form and matter until the two were indistinguishable — and one could only fully appreciate this by understanding the work as the expression of a temperament, the projection of an artist’s mind into the outside world. His stories of the Renaissance artists, while of questionable fact, are certainly successful in their attempt to enrich the artwork for the viewer.

Walter Pater walked the line of critique and creation; and by doing so, he created a body of criticism which is arguably a form of art in its own right.

---

Bibliography


Walter Pater, classicist and Oxford don, radical aesthetic philosopher, and consummate prose stylist, was immensely influential in his own day. His work fell into critical neglect during the first half of the 20th century, but starting in the 1970s the significance of his contributions began to be understood and from 1980 onward his life and work have been the subject of ever-increasing critical attention. His favorite literary form is the essay, and he shot to notorious prominence in 1873 when he published his first collection of essays, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (subsequently WALTER PATER: CRITICAL THEORIES Andy Wilkinson: 66715187)

"Explain and discuss the critical theories through which Walter Pater examines works of art." 1983 words. Walter Horatio Pater was a 19th century philosopher and writer based at Oxford University. 1 His critical theories are borne out of his personal philosophical methods, which he briefly described in the conclusion to The Renaissance. In the short but dense conclusion, Pater raises the issue of subjectivity and individual experience. Pater divides life into ever smaller pieces and waxes lyrical about each; as if he is a scientist slicing atoms into their component particles in a search for understanding. 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