

PATER IN THE 1880'S: EXPERIMENTS IN GENRE

The concept of genre enables us to examine the form of a literary work both as an embrace of and as a swerve away from historically precedent and conventionalized forms. Perhaps its use is most apparent when we regard any work in its aspect as a "mixed form," in which several levels of generic implication come together in a unique formula. Against its specific literary-historical background, a work so regarded will be seen to identify itself by appropriating some elements in a set of conventions and to differentiate itself by rejecting others. These gestures of inclusion and exclusion may be marked or announced more or less self-consciously in any given work. In this argument, the term "genre" will be used in a particular, microcosmic historical context: the career of Walter Pater, whose work more than any other characterizes the literary transitions of the 1880's and 90's. This "intrinsic" focus is perhaps a rather odd focus, for an argument about developments in genre, at least, but corollary "extrinsic" arguments, comparing Pater synchronically to other essayists of his own period, or diachronically, to major essayists before and after him, would yield many of the same conclusions regarding his self-conscious manipulation of genres. I will allude to some of those other possibilities of generic argument within the course of my own; but this particular argument is formulated chiefly to understand the massive achievement of Marius the Epicurean as an encyclopedia of genres. When Pater's novel was published in 1885, he had already spent nearly two decades experimenting with generic combinations and transformations, and of these Marius was the culmination. The novel's richness and variety -- as well as its contradictions -- must be approached with a method that speaks of its total form, including among other features its realistic, historicized setting, its union of "real" (that is, historical) and fictional characters, its unmistakably confessional element, and, with its interpolated fragments of other works, its overt, self-conscious intertextuality. After a brief discussion of the concept of genre, and its use in criticizing Pater, I will outline the development of Pater's experiments with genre before Marius, then explore the manifold nature of Marius the Epicurean as a compendium of generic forms.

I.

Pater's fundamental form was the essay, inherited from his immediate forbears Arnold and Ruskin, Newman and Swinburne. This "received" form was the basis of Pater's experiments in generic