

THE RENAISSANCE AND MARIUS THE EPICUREAN:  
A STUDY IN COUNTERPOINT

The purpose of this essay is to suggest that Walter Pater, far from displaying a reasonable stability of thought over his extended writing career, was in fact a deeply perplexed thinker at war with himself. The ideas he advanced in The Renaissance<sup>1</sup> disturbed him considerably, prompting him to re-examine and reverse them all in his novel, Marius the Epicurean.

In The Renaissance, Walter Pater observed of Michelangelo that "the spirit of [his] sonnets is lost if we once take them out of that dreamy atmosphere in which men have things as they will, because the hold of all outward things upon them is faint and thin."<sup>2</sup> This observation may or may not be true of Michelangelo's sonnets, but it is certainly applicable to the set of critical essays and the philosophic "Conclusion" which make up Pater's Renaissance. For these essays are a prolonged reverie about art and poetry, breaking the bonds of mere criticism and achieving the status of literature. Many arguments can be advanced to prove the unity of The Renaissance, but the best is that the critical essays and "Conclusion" constitute a single reverie -- a self-exploratory dream which Pater chose to objectify in this particular form.

In "The School of Giorgione" -- included in The Renaissance for the first time in 1888 -- Pater wrote: "That the mere matter of a poem, for instance, its subject, namely, its given incidents or situation -- that the mere matter of a picture, the actual circumstances of an event, the actual topography of a landscape -- should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling; that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter: this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees" (R, p. 135). It is the spirit, then, the mode of handling, that is the most important aspect of artistic creation, without which the "mere" subject-matter is reduced to nothingness. In the case of The Renaissance, the subject-matter is the art and poetry of a period in European history stretching from ancient Greece to the eighteenth century. The mode of handling, however, is impressionistic, and this directs the gaze inward and renders the book primarily a study of the world within. In the "Preface," Pater, while apparently acquiescing, subtly reversed Arnold's dictum that the critic's function is "to see the object as in itself it really is." Rather, Pater argued, the aesthetic critic should strive to know and record his own impressions of that object. Why does this particular work of art leave me with an impression of beauty or pleasure? This is the question the