JOSEPH A. KESTNER

Constructing the Renaissance: Leighton and Pater[1]

The publication in 1873 of Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* is the most famous but by no means sole manifestation of the Victorian preoccupation with the Renaissance in Italy, or rather with constructing an idea of that Renaissance. Literary manifestations of this impulse were numerous, most conspicuously in Browning's "My Last Duchess" (1842) and "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" (1845), examples, as DeLaura notes, of Browning's "reveling in the strong personalities produced by the Renaissance" (371). "Pictor Ignotus" (1845), "Fra Lippo Lippi" (1855), and "Andrea del Sarto" (1855) are particularly intriguing for constructing an image of the artist confronting cultural prescriptions. *The Ring and the Book* (1868-1869) constitutes an incisive exploration of the Renaissance in all its violence, politics, and religiosity, its examination paralleled by Eliot's *Romola* (1862-1863). The influence of Alexis Rio's *De la poesie chretienne* (1836) was especially extensive among writers who theorized about the significance of the Renaissance, for Rio's emphasis on the primacy of the early "Christian" Renaissance artists, those of the duecento and trecento, formed the basis of an intense debate among Victorian historians of art. Anna Jameson in *Early Italian Painters* (1845) praised Fra Angelico as an idealist, Christian artist, contrasting with the naturalism of an artist like Lippo, as DeLaura observes (378), a position advanced in her *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1848). Ruskin read Rio in 1843 and referred to "the foul torrent of the Renaissance" (8.48) in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). Ruskin's denunciation of the "pagan" Renaissance was to reach its most intransigent form in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* in 1853 with his discussion of "Roman Renaissance." Kingsley expressed his strong disapproval of the trecento in *Yeast* in 1848.

It is in the context of this debate about the Renaissance and about which Renaissance—the early (duecento/trecento) or the later (quattrocento/cinquecento)—was to be preferred, that the art and aesthetic theory of Frederic Leighton merits a unique place. Leighton, as Ormond has noted, exhibited the influence of Renaissance artists throughout his career: "Raphael is only one of many Renaissance influences observable in Leighton's work" (30). Leighton studied at the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Florence during 1845-46; under Edward von Steinle at Frankfurt from 1850-52 Leighton absorbed the allegiance of the German school and the Nazarenes for Raphael, an impression reinforced when he met Cornelius and Overbeck when he went to Rome in November 1852. Much of Leighton's painting in the 1850s and 1860s was a "conscious tribute" (*VHR* 102) to Renaissance art and its masters, as with *La Nanna* (1859) or *Golden Hours* (1864), discussed below.

Leighton's construction of the Renaissance assumed two forms, one in pictures evoking Renaissance subjects and artists, the other a theorizing about the nature of the Renaissance itself in his address to students of the Royal Academy on 10 December 1887, "Art in Modern Italy; Tuscany. The Renaissance." Leighton had two specific objectives in his pictures and in his address: to construct an image of the artist and to configure an idea of the cultural metier in which the artist practiced. In this respect, Leighton's agendas were not unlike those of Pater in *The Renaissance*, a text which fashions discourses about both artists and their confrontation with cultural imperatives. Both Leighton and Pater implicitly repudiate Ruskin's rejection of the "pagan" High Renaissance (c. 1495-1520), especially Ruskin's denunciation of Michelangelo. In this they follow the emphasis and preference expressed by Vasari in *Lives of the Artists*, a common source for both Leighton and Pater.

Leighton's oeuvre is particularly unusual vis-a-vis