

PATER'S NOBLE VISION

"and I recall that Love and War
came from the eggs of Leda."

"all things dying each other's
life, living each other's death."

W. B. Yeats, A Vision

In the judgment of Walter Pater, Goethe's art is universal, "the completeness and serenity of an exigent intellectualism," his works "high examples of modern art dealing with modern life." The inception of what is called modern art -- an art of dissolution, crisis, estrangement, self-consciousness, and formal complexity -- has been dated to various historical moments. It has been divided into particular phases from Romanticism and Symbolism to the more aggressive Modernism of our own century, and we are now living, it is even said, in a post-modernist world. Yet it is helpful, as some still suggest, to take a long view of modern art, dating it from the advent of what is called Romanticism -- identifying Goethe as a central transitional figure between the older, Hellenic tradition and the new, more fragmentary culture of the modern world.

Goethe's notion of a unified culture is the foundation of Pater's own concept of harmony in The Renaissance -- a book ever new, though now almost eleven decades old. Pico della Mirandola's attempts to reconcile Christian and pagan truths, his ambition to make a "union of contrasts," are seen as typical of such universality, and Leonardo's "boundless curiosity" is understood as an essentially Faustian quest for wholeness. It is from the marriage of Faust and Helena that "the art of the nineteenth century" was born, but in the "perplexed light of modern life," the ideal of unity is a problem -- a goal harder to achieve than in the past. Pater seeks to maintain the sense of cultural unity while expressing the "perpetual change" of modernity. In The Renaissance he diaphanously rewrites history in a modern idiom, implicitly charting western thought from Greece to the moderns, not merely in the form of a linear progression but as if a unified flux. In a verbal kaleidoscope, Pater presents a vision of history that is both ordered and perpetually changing, and these transformations are understood only as one rereads his little book, recognizing different historical configurations born of "multiplied consciousness," and, in the root sense, of constant revision.

Pater searches for the ideal of harmony in the period of the Ren-