

APOCALYPTIC PORTRAITS

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Mario Praz long ago traced the genealogy of Walter Pater's famous description of *La Gioconda* from Baudelaire and Gautier through Flaubert and Swinburne. I don't intend to challenge that genealogy here, but rather to supplement it. Since Praz's primary purpose was to trace "the family likeness between this portrait and the Fatal Women of Gautier, Flaubert, and Swinburne" (Praz, 244), his comments on Pater are fairly cursory, and his genealogy for *La Gioconda* is limited both by being too linear rather than more broadly contextual, and by not examining the full significance of the Swinburnian and ultimately Pre-Raphaelite influence.

Also, since Praz was interested in following the evolution of an ideal type, he does not consider the fact, of importance to Pater, that *La Gioconda* was, as Pater was careful to remind his readers, "a portrait":

From childhood we see this image defining itself on the fabric of his dreams; and but for express historical testimony, we might fancy that this was his ideal lady, embodied and beheld at last. What was the relationship of a living Florentine to this lady of his thought? By means of what strange affinities had the person and the dream grown up thus apart, and yet so closely together? Present from the first incorporeally in Leonardo's thought, dimly traced in the designs of Verrocchio, she is found present at last in Il Giocondo's house. ("Notes," 506)

Pater's apparent surprise that an imaginative ideal could be caught in what he called "mere portraiture" points to a serious difficulty presented by portraiture for Romantic aesthetics – and particularly, as we shall see, for Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics. Strikingly, Chiaro dell'Erma, the painter represented in Rossetti's "Hand and Soul" was only able to paint his ideal, his own soul, when a woman, not unlike *La Gioconda*, perhaps, came to pose for him, saying "I am an image, Chiaro, of thine own soul within thee" (*Works*, 553).

Indeed, for any artist wanting to insist on his transcendent autonomy, his ability to represent the ideality of his own inner genius, the undeniable historicity of the portrait presents a problem. Sir Joshua Reynolds, for example, made a distinction between "what he termed 'the cold painter of portraits' and the artist in whose portrait an element of 'fancy' or imagination was evident" (*The British Portrait*, 213). Like other portraitists, Reynolds did not like his imagination to be tied down