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Walter Pater's representation of "the central love-poetry of Provence"

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Walter Pater's construction of Provençal poetry is part of his larger project to uncover the Greek and pagan elements in the Middle Ages which to him announced the Renaissance. But Pater's discussion of the literature of the troubadours also helps him legitimize contemporary Pre-Raphaelite and "Aesthetic" artists in a context of criticism levelled against their works. Defending those recent trends in literature and painting is one of Pater's main concerns, and he considers Provence as a literary and aesthetic tradition that originates in Greece and comprises contemporary artists and poets such as William Morris and D.G. Rossetti.

Pater first mentions Provencal poetry in his anonymous review of "Poems by William Morris" (1868), the beginning of which he re-published in 1889 as "Aesthetic Poetry" in the first edition of the volume *Appreciations.* Comments on Provençal poetry alternate with appreciations of Morris's poetry, which he calls "aesthetic Poetry" (1889: 213). Pater stresses the combination of Greek and medieval elements at work in the culture of the Middle Ages—an eclecticism which is also a main feature of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic art. Discussions of the poetry of Provence are also central in "Aucassin and Nicolette," an essay he specifically wrote for the first edition of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and expanded as "Two Early French Stories" for the other editions of 1877, 1888 and 1893. Pater defines the "central love-poetry of Provence" as "poetry for the few, for the elect and peculiar people of the kingdom of sentiment" (1873: 11) and in the second version of the article, he claims that the story of Aucassin and Nicolette "comes, characteristically, from the South and connects itself with the literature of Provence." (1893: 12)

In his review of Morris's poetry, Pater establishes a typology of the different poetical genres of Provence. He for example mentions the "*nocturn*, sung by the lover at night at the door or under the window of his mistress," the "*serena*, or *serenade*"—"songs inviting to sleep"— or "the *aube* or *aubade*"—"waking songs." Yet, the general mood is disquieting:

> Those, in whom what Rousseau calls *les frayeurs nocturnes* are constitutional, know what splendour they give to the things of the morning; and how there comes something of relief from physical pain with the first white film in the sky. The Middle Age knew those terrors in all their forms; and these songs of the morning win hence a strange tenderness and effect. (1889: 219-20)

Pater seems particularly attracted to Pre-Raphaelite constructions of the Middle Ages as a period marked by fear and grief. He associates Morris's poems to that medieval tradition and sees a similar mood in both: "[t]he crown of the English poet's book is one of these appreciations of the dawn." (1889: 220) Both Provençal poetry and Morris's poems tell of apprehension, expectation and desperate love, and these feelings affect the whole natural world around:

> It is the very soul of the bridegroom which goes forth to the bride: inanimate things are longing with him: all the sweetness of the imaginative loves of the Middle Ages, with a superadded spirituality of touch all its own, is in that! (1889: 220-21)

But this "spirituality" is highly paradoxical since "touch" evokes a physical dimension—a paradox which is at the core of Pater's aesthetics of the Middle Ages.

Another element of Pater's conception of the love-poetry of the Troubadours is its links with religious antinomianism, expressed here as a competing pagan religion: "in those imaginative loves, in their highest expression, the Provencal poetry, it is a rival religion with a new rival cultus that we see." (1889: 215-16) He comes back to the subject in "Aucassin and Nicolette" and notes the revival of Greek culture in the Middle Ages:

> Here and there, under rare and happy conditions, in Pointed architecture, in the doctrines of romantic love, in the poetry of Provence, the rude strength of the Middle Ages turns to sweetness; and the taste for sweetness generated there becomes the seed of the classical revival in it, prompting it constantly to seek after the springs of perfect sweetness in the Hellenic world. (1873: 9-10)

Pater's definition of "sweetness" and "strength" is complex and varies during his career but here sweetness refers to the classical tradition that influences medieval Provence and heralds the irruption of the Renaissance. The Middle Ages, therefore, are characterized by a synthesis of Christianity and paganism. Pater relates Provençal culture with such figures as Abélard and Dante as well as with religious dissenters, and Provençal poetry records a reaction against religion that takes the form not only of religious "antinomianism" but also of a sensuous or physical liberation. "In that poetry, earthly passion, in its intimacy, its freedom, its variety—the liberty of the heart—makes itself felt." (1873: 10) Drawing on Italian and French sources, he discovers the seeds of a "renaissance" in the medieval period: it is that "profane poetry of the Middle Ages, the poetry of Provence, and the magnificent after-growth of that poetry in Italy and France, which those French writers have in view when they speak of this Renaissance within the Middle Ages." (1873: 10) The religious art of the Middle Ages too is crossed by rebellious counter-currents, and Pater draws a contrast between Christian art and profane poetry, which is concerned with love and the body. Provençal poetry is characterized by a "spirit" of rebellion that includes a sensuous dimension, and it influences Abélard or other heretical figures and later reaches Dante in Italy:

> [W]e see that spirit going abroad, with its qualities already well defined, its intimacy, its languid sweetness, its rebellion, its subtle skill in dividing the elements of human passion, its care for physical beauty, its worship of the body; which penetrated the early literature of Italy, and finds an echo in Dante. (1873: 11)

This is what really interests Pater—antinomianism and the predilection for the body. The irruption of the Renaissance in the Middle Ages is seen in terms of an awakening that is both a physical liberation as well as a revolt against Christianity:

> One of the strongest characteristics of that outbreak of the reason and the imagination, of that assertion of the liberty of the heart in the Middle Ages, which I have termed a medieval Renaissance, was its antinomianism, its spirit of rebellion and revolt against the moral and religious ideas of the age. […] The Albigensian movement, connected so strangely with the history of Provençal poetry, is deeply tinged with [this rebellious element, this sinister claim for liberty of heart and thought]. (1873: 16)

The conflict between the Christian and the pagan is propitious to the return of the exiled pagan gods in a Christian world and Pater provides his own variation on the legend of Venus and Tannhaüser, which was a favourite theme in Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting in the wake of Swinburne's *Laus Veneris* (1866).[ii] "It was the return of that ancient Venus, not dead, but only hidden for a time in the caves of the Venusberg, of those old pagan gods still going to and fro on the earth, under all sorts of disguises." (1873: 16) Abélard and "the legend of Tannhaüser" (1873: 16) are related to the new "spirit." The cult of the beloved and the worship of the body seem to supplant Christianity itself: "[i]n their search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination, in their care for beauty, in their worship of the body, people were impelled beyond the bounds of the primitive Christian ideal; and their love became sometimes a strange idolatry, a strange rival religion." (1873: 16) The story of "Aucassin and Nicolette" is an example of such "spirit" since their passionate love defies religion: it is "the answer Aucassin makes when he is threatened with the pains of hell, if he makes Nicolette his mistress." (1873: 17) The lovers choose the body and the senses at the expense of their spiritual salvation, which brings Pater closer to the Rossetti circle, whose Religion of Beauty and cult of love superseded Christian religion. Pater adheres to these artists' refusal to pass a moral judgment on physical passion or on adulterous love. His reluctance to highlight the spiritual dimension of the Middle Ages demarcates him from Ruskin, who lauded the early phase of Pre-Raphaelitism precisely because it reflected that dimension. Pater's personal appreciation of the love-poetry of the Troubadours echoes the second-generation Pre-Raphaelite or "Aesthetic" artists' appropriation of medieval courtly lore, which gave a central role to woman and to illegitimate love.[iii]

However, the sensuous and physical liberation—a constitutive element of Provençal poetry—is associated with despair and unrest. Intense love is conducive to excess, despair or adultery. Aucassin's passionate love for Nicolette plunges him into some kind of subjection, while Nicolette is described as a strange and seductive enchantress—a "beautiful, weird,

foreign girl, whom the shepherds take for a fay, who has the knowledge of simples." (1873: 14) There is an atmosphere of disease and disorder—a "faint air of overwrought delicacy, almost of wantonness, which was so strong a characteristic of the poetry of the Troubadours" (1873: 14) and this is because they "came to value a type of personal beauty which has in it but little of the influence of the open air and sunshine." (1873: 14) Aucassin is a paradoxical figure: although he is "the very image of the Provençal love-god" (1873: 16), under her influence, he forsakes his masculine vigour, "faints with love" and "weeps at evening." (1873: 15) He "has the malady of his love so that he neglects all knightly duties" (1873: 15). Love, in fact, enfeebles him.

In the Morris essay, the medieval world is characterized by frustration, mental anguish and confusion. Medieval religion and Provençal poetry are both marked by the irruption of "the reign of reverie," which induces disquieting visions of "earthly" love. "Into this kingdom of reverie, and with it into a paradise of ambitious refinements, the earthly love enters, and becomes a prolonged somnambulism." (1889: 216) This, in turn, influences Morris: "[r]everie, illusion, delirium: they are the three stages of a fatal descent both in the religion and the loves of the Middle Ages. […] The English poet too has learned the secret." (1889: 217-18) The same themes of absence, unrequited love, alienation, and sadness characterize Morris's works and Provençal love poetry:

> Hence a love defined by the absence of the beloved, choosing to be without hope, protesting against all lower uses of love, barren, extravagant, antinomian. It is the love which is incompatible with marriage, for the chevalier who never comes, of the serf for the chatelaine, of the rose for the nightingale, of Rudel for the Lady of Tripoli. (1889: 216-27)

The theme of love is marked by a similar sense of fatalism as found in works by Swinburne, Rossetti, Morris, Burne-Jones or Solomon. Pater states that "Provencal love is full of the very forms of vassalage" (1889: 217), which reminds one of the Pre-Raphaelite theme of the lover enthralled by an unreachable *femme fatale* staged in a medieval context. While many contemporaries baulked at such chivalric yet disempowering attitude to women, Pater endorses such poetical visions and that aesthetics of feminine remoteness. The type of beauty he notes in Provence evokes Rossetti's and Burne-Jones's androgynous or dream-like figures: "under this strange complex of conditions, as in some medicated air, exotic flowers of sentiment expand, among people of a remote and unaccustomed beauty, somnambulistic, frail, androgynous, the light almost shining through them" (1889: 217). Even Morris's visions of love and beauty are exclusive and outlandish. "It is in the *Blue Closet* that delirium reaches its height with a singular beauty, reserved perhaps for the enjoyment of the few." (1889: 218) Once more, Pater asserts the empathy between man and nature, since even the sun and the moon reflect the general sense of oppressiveness:

> [Morris] has diffused through King Arthur's Tomb the maddening white glare of the sun, and tyranny of the moon, not tender and far-off, but close down—the sorcerer's moon, large and feverish. The colouring is intricate and delirious, as of 'scarlet lilies.' The influence of summer is like a poison in one's blood, with a sudden bewildered sickening of life and all things. (1889: 218)

Nature itself seems to convey some form of intoxication and to mirror man's experience of alienation.

Pater comes back to Provençal poetry in his essay of 1876, "Romanticism", re-published as Postscript to *Appreciations*. To him, there are romantic elements not only in Greek culture but in all artistic traditions, so "romanticism" is at work in Provençal poetry: "[t]he essential elements […] of the romantic spirit are curiosity and the love of beauty. […] in the overcharged atmosphere of the Middle Ages, there are unworked sources of romantic effect, of a strange beauty, to be won, by strong imagination, out of things unlikely or remote." (1910: 248) Once again, he focuses on themes such as strangeness and madness:

> Here, in the literature of Provence, the very name of romanticism is stamped with its true signification: here we have indeed a romantic world, grotesque even, in the strength of its passions, almost insane in its curious expression of them, drawing all things into its sphere, making the birds, nay! lifeless things, its voices and messengers, yet so penetrated with the desire for beauty and sweetness, that it begets a wholly new species of poetry, in which the Renaissance may be said to begin. (1910: 250-51)

"Strength" here is associated with what Pater sees as the strangeness of Romanticism, which in Provençal poetry blends with "beauty". Furthermore, he describes a world in which nature reflects human feelings of insanity and uneasiness. Animals and elements convey the emotions experienced by man; they in fact "bend" to the human mind—an idea that particularly interested Pater in the 1860s and 1870s. It is prominent in his conception of Provence in the Morris essay:

> A passion of which the outlets are sealed, begets a tension of nerve, in which the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliancy and relief—all redness is turned into blood, all water into tears. Hence a wild, convulsed sensuousness in the poetry of the Middle Ages, in which the things of nature begin to play a strange delirious part. Of the things of nature the medieval mind had a deep sense; but its sense of them was not objective, no real escape to the world without us. The aspects and motions of nature only reinforced its prevailing mood, and were in conspiracy with one's own brain against one. A single sentiment invaded the world: everything was infused with a motive drawn from the soul. The amorous poetry of Provence, making the starling and the swallow its messengers, illustrates the whole attitude of nature in this electric atmosphere, bent as by miracle or magic to the service of human passion. (1889: 218-19)

The natural phenomena, in fact, reflect exacerbated feelings of madness, terror and distortion.

Such discourse is also present in the essays on Greek religion. Because of man's universal poetical faculty, man has special affinities with nature and Pater insists on the imaginative and poetical faculties of the primitive mind. The making of the myth of Demeter, for example, originated in a poetical process. Fuelled by their poetical, religious but also sensuous temperaments, the ancient Greeks thought that the same life-spirit animated both the natural world and men:

> […] that sort of poetry, which also has its fancies of a spirit of the earth, or of the sky,—a personal intelligence abiding in them, the existence of which is assumed in every suggestion such poetry makes to us of a sympathy between the ways and aspects of outward nature and the moods of men. (1876: 96-7)

Nature mirrors man's emotions—a process to be found in Greek religion, Provençal poetry, and also contemporary poetry. What Pater insists on here is the trans-historical presence of that poetic imagination in cultural history: such animistic conception of the Greek mind is related to his idea that both the medieval mind and Morris conceived of nature as "bent" to "human passion" (1889: 219) and to an oppressed mind.

This discourse diverges from Ruskin's indictment of "pathetic fallacy" in volume 3 of *Modern Painters* (1856). According to Ruskin, the natural elements could not reflect human feelings:

> The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl. The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief. All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the "pathetic fallacy." (2000: 369)

To Ruskin, attributing human emotions to nature entails a kind of folly. Pater, on the contrary, praises the "delirium" which to him characterizes the medieval atmosphere: in the poetry of Provence, nature reflects human feelings of gloom and insanity, and "the things of nature begin to play a strange delirious part." (1889: 218) But unlike Ruskin, he relishes in this excess of temperament that attributes intensified feelings to nature. In so doing, he endorses the new course undertaken by some Pre-Raphaelite or "Aesthetic" artists, which Ruskin precisely regretted. Such "delirium" is indeed also at work in Morris's or Rossetti's poems, and so Provence helps him defend contemporary works that would be criticized by Ruskin for their "pathetic fallacy."

When Pater re-published his essay on William Morris for the 1889 edition of *Appreciations*, he re-wrote the end so as to make a transition with an essay on "Dante Gabriel Rossetti" which he had published in 1883. That he dedicated another essay to a Pre-Raphaelite artist and arranged the two pieces as sequels attests to their importance to him:

> One characteristic of the pagan spirit the aesthetic poetry has, which is on its surface—the

> continual suggestion, pensive or passionate, of the shortness of life. This is contrasted with the bloom of the world, and gives new seduction to it—the sense of death and the desire of beauty: the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death. But that complexion of sentiment is at its height in another "aesthetic" poet of whom I have to speak next, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. (1889: 227)

Pater in fact admires the typically Rossettian association of love, beauty and death in his essay on Rossetti, and he probably had in mind Ruskin's *Art of England* lecture of 1883 and his regret that Rossetti lately "refused […] the natural aid of pure landscape and lacerated his powers of conception with Chinese puzzles and Japanese monsters". (1884: 9) Pater implicitly posits himself against Ruskin's rejection of the eclectic and "aesthetic" direction of the artist's late career and he associates Rossetti and Morris as two "romantic" and "aesthetic" poets influenced by the Provençal tradition, characterized by "artifice" and sad love:

> Love—sick and doubtful Love—would fain inquire of what lies below the surface of sleep, and below the water; stream or dream being forced to speak by Love's powerful "control"; and the poet would have it foretell the fortune, issue, and event of his wasting passion. Such artifices, indeed, were not unknown in the old Provencal poetry of which Dante had learned something. Only, in Rossetti at least, they are redeemed by a serious purpose, by that sincerity of his, which allies itself readily to a serious beauty, a sort of grandeur of literary workmanship, to a great style. (1910: 210)

There is something paradoxical in Pater's claim that Rossetti has redeemed the legacy of Provençal "artifices" by his "sincerity." But this is because Rossetti's "sincerity" was an important issue for Ruskin, who found it questionable, and so Pater probably contradicts him on that point. Furthermore, Pater links Rossetti to a deeper imaginative structure that is akin to the animistic spirit of the Greeks:

> With him indeed, as in some revival of the old mythopoeic age, common things—dawn, noon, night—are full of human or personal expression, full of sentiment. (1910: 210-1)

The poet, stirred by his formidable imaginative powers, attributes human emotions to nature Pater praises this new poetical version of the "pathetic fallacy."

Pater defends the poet's conception of love: "throughout, it is the ideal intensity of love—of love based upon a perfect yet peculiar type of physical or material beauty—which is enthroned" (1910: 212). Unlike critics such as Robert Buchanan or Harry Quilter who had vituperated against his poetry in the 1870s and 1880s, Pater paradoxically describes Rosseti's vision of love as both "ideal" yet founded on a "physical" and "material" type of beauty. Throughout, he defends the poet-painter's "peculiar" type of beauty, which he coherently inscribes within the same conception of love, beauty and the body he found in Provençal poetry.

Pater selects Provence on account of its peculiar representation of love and the body. But he also appropriates it and turns it into a poetical tradition that reflects contemporary aesthetic concerns and mirrors his own centres of interest—such as those anachronistic and personal "romantic" themes on which he concentrates. Provence appears as a historical validation of that "aesthetic poetry" and art he appreciated so much. Both Provence and contemporary poetry are concerned with physicality and passions, but these are ambivalently presented since the general mood is stifling. Not only does he define "aesthetic poetry" as a poetry that mediates the past through other past cultures, but he also participates in that movement with these exercises in subjective "aesthetic" criticism. Pater re-reads William Morris' re-readings of the Middle Ages through Provence and he recasts "Aucassin and Nicolette" as a text indebted to a vision of Provence that fits his project. When he states that the Middle Ages record the irruption of the Renaissance and of paganism, he diverges from "those writers […] who have said so much of the "Ages of Faith" (1973: 16), among whom Ruskin and Alexis-François Rio. Pater's love-poetry of Provence, therefore, is a defence of and a contribution to, the eclectic and fleshly visions of the past as found in the works of his Pre-Raphaelite and "Aesthetic" contemporaries. Provence is the encounter of the medieval and the Greek, or of the Christian and the pagan, and this is why it is linked to his discourse on the irruption of the "renaissance" in the Middle Ages, a renaissance which is seen as a liberation from religious constraints, a physical revitalization and an emotional regeneration. The medieval mind who experiences that "renaissance," is very much akin to Pater's idea of a modern, tormented mind.

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Abstract :

This paper focuses on Walter Pater's approach of Provençal poetry. Pater associated the poetry of the troubadours with "antinomianism" – a religious rebellion which to him was a "Renaissance" already at work in the Middle Ages. Pater envisions this reaction against religion as a sensuous and physical liberation that originated in religion itself and brought about "a rival religion with a new rival cultus" ("Poems by William Morris", 1868). He considers the story of Aucassin and Nicolette as a late representative of Provençal poetry, in which religion is replaced by "earthly passion, with its intimacy, its freedom, its variety – the liberty of the heart" ("Two Early French Stories", 1872). Pater also discerns a whole aesthetic and poetical tradition that comprises the poets of Provence as well as Abelard and Dante in order to inscribe the contemporary school of "aesthetic poetry" within that very tradition, with Morris and Rossetti as prominent figures of that school. Studying their love poetry, Pater states that Morris and Rossetti were inspired by the themes and the peculiar aesthetic of that Provençal tradition – which are characterized by themes of sadness, madness and unrequited love. Pater's construction of the poetry of Provence in fact contributes to his critical project – defining "Aestheticism" and legitimizing contemporary controversial poets such as Morris and Rossetti. And his discourse on medieval poetry is characterized by very personal aesthetic motifs.

Keywords:

Walter Pater; Provençal poetry; Aestheticism

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Description

Anne-Florence GILLARD-ESTRADA is a lecturer at Rouen University where she teaches late-Victorian literature and visual arts. She specializes on Hellenism and Greece in the Victorian era and particularly in Walter Pater's works, as well as on the inter-textualities with Oscar Wilde. She also works on the painting of the "Aesthetic Movement" and of the Classical revival, as well as on the reception of such painting in critical essays and periodicals.

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[i] See for example Inman (1990: 348-50).

[ii] For example, Edward Burne-Jones's oil painting *Laus Veneris* (1873-5) and William Morris's poem "The Hill of Venus" (1870).

[iii] See, among others, Rossetti's watercolour *Arthur's Tomb: The Last Meeting of Lancelot and Guinevere* (1854), Morris's oil painting *La Belle Iseult* (1858), Burne-Jones's *The Madness of Sir Tristram* (1862) or the different versions of the story of *Paolo and Francesca* or of *The Blessed Damozel* by Rossetti and Burne-Jones.