CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The fact of Walter Pater's pervasive influence cannot surely be denied. It is indeed a commonplace of literary history. George Saintsbury asserted that Pater was the most important critic of the last generation of the nineteenth century. ¹ Edward Dowden admired Pater and his approach to art and artists is akin to Pater's. He speaks of Pater's occupation during his whole life with a study of expression and perceives that "the richness of colour and delicacy of carving in some of Pater's work have concealed from many readers its intellectual severity, its strictness of design, its essential veracity." ² Edmund Gosse said that Pater's polished

and concentrated work had "become part of the classic literature of England", and that he was a writer who would be remembered among the writers of the age when all but a few would be forgotten. Pater had a special appeal for the younger generation of the time. A rather unusual testimony of his popularity is mentioned by C. M. Bowra. Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig came back in 1919 to his old College at Brasenose, and asked the Principal if his old tutor was alive. On being told that he was dead he said, "I am sorry. I modelled my prose style on his." Gerald Manley Hopkins, one of his first students admired him and Lionel Johnson, one of his last students, almost worshipped him. Oscar Wilde considered *The Renaissance* a "golden book" without which he never went anywhere and it appeared on the first list of request books Wilde prepared while in Reading Gaol. Arthur Symons had a long and close friendship with Pater who, in his opinion, was the best critic of the time. He even dedicated his first


book of poems to Pater. W.B. Yeats acknowledged that Pater's ideas had a profound influence on the age, especially on him and his associates in the Rhymer's club, and considered him their philosopher. As a prose stylist in English Pater was rated very high by Yeats who described Marius the Epicurean as the only great prose in modern English.

Pater's prose, it must be admitted, has a very real and enduring charm. On account of its symmetrical phrasing, and its smooth inconspicuous structure, its exquisite exactness of diction and its atmosphere suggestive of quiet, "it has all the beauty of refined and harmonious expression." It is no wonder that many of those influenced by Pater were struck by his prose. The liquid charm of his style evoked a haunting, delightful excitement in his readers, an excitement and desire to emulate and create out of similar impulses.

In what precise manner Pater's style influenced his followers and how it can help in the understanding of Pater is a field in which valuable

work has been done by some critics. For instance, J. Gordon Baker sets forth an approach to Pater through the study of his style. With a logical analysis of his workmanship and by observation of what effects his method enabled him to gain with various materials, it may be possible, Gordon Baker believes, "to evaluate more accurately the quality of the matter that went into Pater's art as well as his critical theory that led him to write as he did."  
Ernst Bendz's study of Oscar Wilde deals with Pater's influence on him. It comprises of a catalogue of parallels and phrases borrowed or echoed in the prose writings of Wilde. In every instance of a likeness or difference of literary manner, he has tried "to establish the obvious or hidden connection with the underlying affinity or dissimilarity of mind and temperament."

In the present times, however, when the sentences grow shorter and shorter and units of thought break up, the artistic prose of Pater is supposed to be artificial, over-elaborate and distasteful. The fame

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he had won as a great stylist has declined. Similarly as a critic Pater no longer enjoys the popularity which he enjoyed for a few years after his death in 1894. In 1906, for example, A.C. Benson wrote an excellent biography of Walter Pater wherein he did justice to both the man and the writer. Pater is described as a conscientious teacher who engaged the attention of all by his shyness, keen interest in his students, and his fondness for simplicity and beauty. Benson categorically states that Pater did not have the slightest sympathy with the extravagances and excesses of the aesthetic movement at Oxford in those days which resulted even in loosening the principles of morality for he was "a man of scrupulous conscience and a high standard of moral delicacy."10 But in 1907, the attitude began to change. Thomas Wright wrote The Life of Walter Pater in two volumes and " damned a good friend with his praise."11

For many years after that the generally prevailing view about Pater was that of an aesthete

and decadent, an amoral hedonist and loose pleasure seeking impressionist and a preacher of "anarchy of feeling" in the practice of criticism. Because of his affinities with Romantic criticism and the so-called undisciplined impressionistic criticism later critics, who looked for discipline and rigorous standards of judgement, developed a hostility towards his work and he was written off as a literary critic.

Paul Elmer More, for instance, passed a harsh judgement on Pater: "Indeed of the critical mind, exactly speaking he had little." He refused to reckon him as a critic for being at once something more and something less than this. His accusation is that Pater makes truth the servant of beauty and goodness the servant of pleasure and "in this exaltation of beauty above truth and aesthetic grace above duty, and refined perception above action, this insinuating hedonism which would so bravely embrace the joy of the moment," he empties life of its true values. T.S. Eliot's essay (1930)

12. The phrase is T.S. Eliot's.
on Peter contains a similar note of disapproval. Oliver Elton's praise of Peter whom be considered "the greatest critic since Coleridge" is exceptional and not in line with the prevailing view.

Then came signs of a resurgence of interest in Peter's work. A.J. Farmer wrote a study of Peter as a literary critic. The writer seeks to "appreciate" the *Appreciations* of Walter Pater. The investigation is however confined to the essays in *Appreciations* with little reference to Peter's other works, the *Guardian Essays* being dismissed as fragmentary and unrevised. Helen H. Young analyses the works of Walter Pater to detect in them reflections of British philosophical opinions from 1860 to 1890. The study indicates that Pater was not merely an aesthete and a stylist but a thinker too. Anthony Ward's Walter Pater: The Idea in *Nature* attempts to place Pater's work within the context of Hegelianism and British empirical philosophy. Ruth C. Child's is another distinguished

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and useful book which analyses Peter's aesthetic theory. The author stresses growth in Peter and tries to clear away some misunderstandings about the impressionistic and aesthetic nature of his writings. R.V. Johnson\textsuperscript{20} also draws attention to aspects of Peter's criticism and aesthetic theory that are often overlooked or misapprehended due to certain unfavourable preconceptions about his works.

Whether this interest in Peter's work will rehabilitate his position as critic and bring about a change in the estimate of his work cannot be predicted. But what can be said for certain is that scholars and critics have started considering him worthy of serious critical examination. It has been recognised, for instance, that Peter's work exercised a considerable influence on his contemporaries and on later writers too. But what the precise nature of this influence is, particularly on critics of literature who liked to call themselves his followers has not been studied in detail. This is because the disciples of Peter such as Lionel Johnson, Oscar Wilde and W.B. Yeats were known better as poets and writers than as

literary critics. Hence it has not been thought worthwhile to examine what they have said about Peter or how they made use of his critical writings.

The purpose of this study is to show how the critical opinions of Walter Pater were reflected in the critical writings of his "divergent disciples" in the Eighteen Nineties, particularly in the critical works of Oscar Wilde, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons and W.B. Yeats. This necessitates examining the opinions of Walter Pater as a literary critic, who is quite often looked upon as a leading exponent of aestheticism, even decadence and of counselling people to concentrate on passing moments. This is a gross misrepresentation of him by the people who should have known better.

A retrospective glance at the period immediately preceding the nineties will make it possible to understand Pater's appeal to his generation. It is evident to any casual observer what the tenets and mores which found approval in the Victorian age were. Respectability and decorum were expected everywhere and literature and art propagandised virtue. By the Eighteen Seventies, however the structure of


22. Many statements in the following paragraphs are drawn from C.M. Bowra's Inspiration and Poetry, pp.201-203.
Victorian religious belief had been seriously damaged. First by Darwinism which gave an account of the universe that horrified the devout and secondly by the spirit of historical criticism which was in fact born of rationalism in the eighteenth century. It found a new driving force in its display of scientific method and impersonal detachment. This gave rise to an atmosphere of doubt and despair, for the old values and assumptions were no longer accepted while compromise with the new brought no comfort. The decay of religion created a vacuum which required to be filled. There were some who believed that natural science could be a substitute for religion as it promised the unravelling of the mysteries of life and death, as well as an insight into the innermost workings of the universe. But there were many who were not satisfied and desired something warmer and more intimate, something that could arouse a sense of awe and mystery and demand devotion and sacrifice and give hope and a sense of purpose to their life.

This need for some kind of a faith corresponded with another not easily distinguishable from it, which was the consequence of the Industrial revolution in England. A new pattern was imposed upon life by
unrestricted enterprise and a stupendous increase in the production of material goods. Under the impact of the growth of cities and slums, standardised production and the struggle for wealth, people became cold, callous and calculating. The old ease and grace of life seemed to disappear. The new class which rose to power was devoid of traditional culture and sweetness. This created a sense of dismay and horror in many serious and sensitive men who looked at the dark prospect with anger and fear. Carlyle attacked the worship of Mammon and Matthew Arnold preached sweetness and reason against the Philistines. Even Ruskin let loose an onslaught against the commercial outlook, blindness to beauty and the smug reliance on material prosperity.

The need was to restore values and counter the gross taste of the new age. As a result of these compulsions some men sought salvation in the religion of beauty, to which they could give their devotion and faith as also counter the barbarisation of society. It is obvious that Peter's first and most fervent admirers turned to him with the express hope that he would meet their needs, provide a gospel to oppose the attacks of the scientific spirit and check the menace of a materialistic society. But Peter was not what his admirers considered him to be. Nor did he
desire to found a movement. In fact when he found that others regarded him as a guide to life and his personal tastes as the articles of an aesthetic creed, Pater was distressed and embarrassed.

It has become increasingly obvious on closer examination of the literature of the later nineteenth century that there is an over simplification and historical inaccuracy involved in referring to Pater as an aesthete and dating the start of the English decadent movement from the publication of Pater's *The Renaissance*. The two well-known doctrines most often cited from the Conclusion as the essence of the aesthetic and decadent spirit were already part of the intellectual and psychological currency of literate and cultured England. The doctrine of Art for Art's sake had been asserted, defended, interpreted in France since Théophile Gautier who publicised the idea in the 1830's. All Englishmen interested in contemporary literature were surely acquainted with it. 

And secondly the brevity of life and the consequent necessity of making the most of the joys of this world had been a recurrent theme in English literature, especially poetry, for many years before *The Renaissance* appeared. Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* (1859) and Swinburne's "Hymn to Prosperine" are obvious examples.
Also, most people conveniently overlook the fact that what appeared as the Conclusion to *The Renaissance* was the closing portion of a review written by Pater and published in the *Westminster Review* in 1868. The thoughts developed there arising out of "the continual suggestion, pensive or passionate, of the shortness of life" in Morris's work.

The votaries of aestheticism lay emphasis upon form and technique, thereby effecting a separation of form and matter and evaluating works of art on the basis of form alone, as if matter could thus be excluded from a work of art. Their sole aim was pursuit of beauty as an end in itself, of whatever is aesthetically pleasing or satisfying. In such a consideration, the stress is on sensuous and exotic elements in art; and criticism being no more than a series of personal impressions becomes something like the adventures of the soul among masterpieces. The aesthetes also treated art as an exclusive territory, cut off from life, and the artist as an isolated being

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little concerned with the world that he lived in. This led to an attitude of moral defiance, a flouting of all traditions, and art was considered as transcending mundane morality. In other words ethics was divorced from aesthetics and in the judgement of art only artistic values were looked for.

The intention of this study is to show that the critical principles held by Pater were at variance with all such views and as such he cannot be categorized as a decadent, and also that a large part of the blame apportioned to him, in fact, belongs to some of his disciples who misread and misapprehended his works.

An investigation of Pater's works shows that he distrusted theory and abstract principles, and put little belief in universal formulas for aesthetic criticism. The function of criticism, he believes, is to communicate to the reader the peculiar pleasure found in a work of art and point out the distinctive quality that is the chief source of this unique pleasure. In performing this function the critic has to know and analyse his own impression of the work of art, but that does not make his criticism purely subjective or whimsical, because the process of analysis is almost scientific in spirit and the personality of
the critic that Peter visualizes is that of a mature, disciplined, widely read and cultured being. In regard to the question of expression, Peter unequivocally advocates the fusion of form and matter. His belief that "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" is well known because it is only in music that form and matter coalesce completely. His emphasis on the identity of word with thought and the need for more than ordinary labour and search for the right word misled his followers to think that form or expression is the only end of art and literature according to Pater. But he clears the confusion when he stresses the distinction between good art and great art. He does not however abandon the fundamental insight that form and matter are inseparable. Similarly, Pater seems to isolate beauty as the end of all art, very much in the art-for-art's-sake fashion. But his works reveal that his fascination for and conception of beauty are different from what the decadents believed. Nor did Pater advocate an art which rejects the burden of the

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human spirit. In "The Decay of Lying" Wilde denies that "Art expresses the spirit of its time, the moral and social conditions that surround it and under whose influence it is produced." But Pater is explicit in suggesting that art and literature reflect the complex, many-sided movements of life. He may not be in favour of art that is directly didactic but the moral bearing of all art and its uplifting effect on the character of man he does not deny. In Pater's aesthetic art has a moral function to perform.

Distinction is sometimes made between the early Pater who was given to a life of sensations, and who was a votary of aesthetic decadence, and the later Pater who transformed himself through fear of social disapproval. This is not a correct picture of Pater. Lionel Johnson's view that critical ideas adumbrated in his later works were implicit in the earlier work and the only transformation is the transformation that comes with experience and maturity of mind is nearer the mark.

So delicate is the balance between what may be called the aesthetic and the humanist strains in

Pater's writings that one element is likely to be stressed to the detriment of the other. This perhaps is one reason why there is such a divergence of views among the disciples of Pater. But the more important reason, as this study will bring out, is the differing temperaments and inclinations of the different critics, which made them fasten on to such statements as suited their sensibilities, or even deliberately distort the meanings with the desire to express their personal propensities. And such a one was Wilde, who proclaimed himself a devoted follower of Pater and of the doctrines contained in the Conclusion to The Renaissance, but pursued them in his life and in his writings in a manner Pater never intended. Wilde's critical opinions though they derive from Pater, present either a distortion of Pater's ideas or an obliteration of them, for the meanings are stretched to ridiculous extremes. Wilde thus turns out to be not only the chief promulgator but also the chief vulgariser of Pater's ideas in the Nineties.

Lionel Johnson presents a marked contrast in his interpretation of Pater. His interest in Pater did not end with The Renaissance as Wilde's did. He paid equal attention to Pater's later writings, and
found nothing in them to contradict his early work. His understanding of Pater and his work came close to what Pater intended. He repudiated the art-for-art's-sake theories; and like Pater, stressed the need for harmonizing form with matter, ethics with aesthetics, and personality with impersonality. The writer of the thesis has tried to show that Johnson sought and succeeded in correcting the focus and projecting the right image of the man which Wilde had distorted.

Arthur Symons did for Pater something more than what Johnson did. His interests were wider than Johnson's. Symons was European in the range of his interests. Being a propagandist for French symbolism, he found or tried to find grounds for its adoption in English in Pater's aesthetic. Hence he emphasized such aspects in Pater's writings as supported the symbolist movement and theory. These aspects are a plea for the freedom of the artist to search for new forms and new experiences, and to liberate the arts from bondage to moral criteria. In this he suggests the connection between Pater and some aspects of twentieth-century criticism.

W.B. Yeats's close association with the three disciples referred to, brought him under Pater's influence whose ideas on style, sincerity in literature
and impersonality in art found an echo in his heart, for he was passing through an important, formative phase in the Nineties. Yeats's increasing interest in symbolism during this period made him see seeds of symbolism and symbolic method in the description of Leonardo's Mona Lisa.

The decade, Eighteen Nineties, has been the focus of attention for various reasons. One is that it formed Yeats,27 it is also a decade isolated by its curiosity and vitality; it is a decade of transition, or revolt, or the seed time of the new century. The purpose of this study is, however, limited to establishing the fact that Pater's critical opinions found ready acceptance in the Nineties and were reflected in the works of many critics with deviations here and there. In so doing the character of the age is also suggested.