CHAPTER II

PATERIAN CRITICISM

Pater was not a systematic thinker and therefore, it is perhaps not possible to discern in his critical writings a set theory, comprising assured standards or abstract principles, which he employed while evaluating works of art and literature. His distrust of theory and abstract principles and lack of belief in any individual formula for aesthetic criticism is evident in his essay on Coleridge when he says that ancient philosophy sought to arrest every object in an eternal outline, to fix thought in a necessary formula, and the varieties of life in a classification by "Kinds" or genera. "To the modern spirit nothing is or can be known except relatively and under 1 conditions." But whether he has a systematized theory of criticism or not, it is certain that Pater had a clear and well defined notion of the functions of a critic, and held to it from the beginning to the end of his career as a writer.

The preface to The Renaissance defines succinctly the aims and functions of a critic. Repudiating all efforts to

define beauty in the abstract, since such efforts seldom aid the reader in either enjoying the work of art or poetry, or in achieving proper discrimination between what is excellent or otherwise, Pater says that the true aim of the aesthetic critic is to define beauty in "the most concrete terms possible, to find not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it." Beauty is relative and for Pater it may be said to be identical with "the power or force producing pleasurable sensations, each of a peculiar or unique kind." The critic therefore cannot apply any previously conceived rule or standard to assess a work of art, for the beauty or pleasure varies according to conditions. He, therefore, focuses his attention upon the object as such to investigate and analyse the special manifestation of beauty. Here he gets confirmation of his views from Matthew Arnold whom he quotes in *The Renaissance*, "To see the object as in itself it really is, has justly been said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever..." In order to find the formula which expresses the particular manifestation of beauty in the particular object of art the

3. Ibid., p.ix.
4. Ibid., p.viii.
critic must distinguish, analyse, and "separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure." The work of the critic comes to an end "when he has disengaged that virtue and noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element for himself and others."  

Thus the aim and function of the critic as outlined by Pater is indeed objective and the most important requirement is the power to disengage the virtue from the common elements which may be found mixed in varying degrees. The critic is almost like a scientist a "chemist" searching, analysing, sifting, separating to get at the essence, the virtue of the object of art which, like "a herb, a wine, a gem," has different qualities that make it valuable. Pater is trying to bring into criticism the method of science, and he uses scientific vocabulary. Pater's essays are a fine illustration of what he says. His chief endeavour in almost all his important critical essays is to bring out the "Virtue", the peculiar quality of the artist's work, and to find its "formula". 

The essay on Coleridge is one of Pater's earliest attempts at serious criticism. Coleridge "is ever restlessly scheming to apprehend the absolute, to affirm it effectively

5. Ibid., p.ix.
6. Ibid., p.x.
to get it acknowledged"? That is the active principle behind his work. What is the 'virtue', the active principle in Wordsworth's poetry which the critic is to follow up and disengage? "... the action of his unique, incommunicable faculty, that strange, mystical sense of a life in natural things and of man's life as a part of nature."8 This point is elaborated in the essay on Wordsworth. Pater tells us that the writings of Wordsworth are the central and elementary expression of his sense of "an intimate consciousness of the expression of natural things."9 And about Prosper Mérimée Pater says: "There is the formula for Mérimée the enthusiastic amateur of rude, crude, naked force in men and women - whereever it could be found."10 The motive of all Michelangelo's work is "this creation of life-life coming always as relief or recovery and always in strong contrast with the rough hewn mass in which it is kindled..."11 And these are the questions Pater seeks to answer in the essay on Botticelli: "What is the peculiar quality of pleasure, which his work has the property of exciting in us, and which we cannot get else where?"12 That

7. Appreciations, p.68.
8. The Renaissance, p.xi.
9. Appreciations, p.43.
11. The Renaissance, p.76.
12. Ibid., pp.50-51.
Pater kept the aim of sifting out the essence and finding the formula of a work of art to the end is borne out by the fact that in Plato and Platonism, the last of his works, he finds Plato's "sensual love of the unseen" to be the essence of his genius.

Pater also mentions in the Preface as to how the object of art is to be seen as it really is. The absolute impersonality of view which is implied in Arnold's words "to see the object as it really is" is not what Pater seems to mean. For, immediately after quoting Arnold he says that the first step towards knowing the object is to know one's own impression as it really is. And further on, "What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book to me? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? And if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?"

This stress upon the individual sensibility of the critic might well raise doubts whether Pater was at all interested in an objective evaluation of the work of art. It could give rise to the kind of criticism T.S. Eliot.

15. Ibid., p.viii.
and Paul Elmer More\textsuperscript{17} objected to and denounced Pater for the criticism in which the critic sets forth his personal reactions to a work of art, whimsical at times and fanciful, showing complete indifference to impersonal or external standards, or sound reasoned judgements. In this form of criticism called impressionistic criticism, the critic turns creator forgetting in the process the object before him, and expressing his own impressions of it, thereby distorting or falsifying it. The impression that Pater belongs to such a dangerous type of critics, who relates the adventures of his own soul among masterpieces is strengthened by such a purple passage as the famous one on Mona Lisa in his essay on Leonardo Da Vinci\textsuperscript{18} and the words in the 'Conclusion' expressing Pater's belief that "experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by the thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without."\textsuperscript{19}

Torn out of its context the passage could well suggest that the critic can never apprehend the object as it is, but can only know the impression it has made upon him, which impression could be far removed from the object.

\textsuperscript{17} Paul Elmer More: \textit{Shellburn Essays}, (New York, 1913) "Walter Pater."

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Renaissance}, p.124-136.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, p.235.
Itself. But Pater in the passage is only trying to emphasize the fleeting nature of things, moments, sensations, images, even impressions, in order that we might make the best of these passing moments of our brief existence, reap the fruit of "a quickened multiplied consciousness", ennoble our lives through experience of life and art.

In the Mona Lisa passage, Pater in an effort to communicate to the reader his impression of Leonardo's masterpiece, through subtle suggestion and work pictures is supposed to have created something different from the object before him. But as Rene Wellek has rightly suggested, the passage is "not really representative either of his method or his philosophy." Moreover the passage in question belongs to the category of art criticism. Pater himself is aware of the problem of communicating the peculiar sensation through a medium other than the one employed by the artist. In his essay on 'The School of Giorgione' he says that criticism of painting fails to achieve its proper aim which is to fix upon "the peculiar and untranslatable sensuous charm which painting alone can convey." Since in his art criticism Pater wanted to communicate to the reader the total effect


of painting, the artist's imaginative vision of the subject, he could not but resort to the creative method. He makes use, therefore, of all his literary artistry to evoke and convey an effect which is comprehensible only to those who are fully conscious of the purely graphic qualities as well as their possible imaginative and emotional overtones. It is true that here he lays himself open to the charge that he is a creative writer who only uses the art object as a stimulus to or a springboard for his own feeble creative impulse, or that he is no critic at all. But keeping in view his aim, it is difficult to understand how else he could have achieved what he had set out to achieve.

The stress laid on the individual sensibility of the critic by Pater, has been misinterpreted by his detractors perhaps because they fail to recognise the clue Pater provides in the Preface itself when he says: "... and as in the study of light, of morals, of number, one must realise such primary data for one's self or not at all." Pater's plea obviously is for sincerity. He only wants men to respond to a work, to feel for themselves and refuse to form and accept opinions at second hand. By mentioning art and morals along with such scientific studies as light and number, he wishes

22. Ibid., p.viii.
to bring them into the field of objective analysis. He does not favour whimsical personal reactions.

In the preface to *The Renaissance* Pater does not touch upon other steps that the critic must take to see the object as it really is. He mentions about a certain kind of temperament that the critic must possess, "The power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects" and the ability to "disengage the virtue."  

But in his essay on Coleridge and in *Plato and Platonism* the counsel of objectivity and detachment is given in no uncertain terms. "Nothing is or can be rightly known except relatively and under conditions."  

He criticizes Coleridge for trying to "fix truth in absolute formulas" whereas "truth is a thing fugitive, relative, full of fine gradations."  

In order to get at the true meaning of a work of art you must place it in relation to the conditions in which it was produced; in the world everything changes, develops and grows. In *Plato and Platonism* Pater states that "in every age there is a peculiar ensemble of conditions which determines a common character in every product of that age, in business and art, in fashion and speculation, in religion.

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13. Ibid., p.x.
15. Ibid., p.72.
and manners, in men's very faces; that nothing man has projected from himself is really intelligible except at its own date, and from its proper point of view in the never resting secular process; the solidarity of philosophy, of the intellectual life, with common or general history; that what it behoves the student of philosophic systems to cultivate is the 'historic sense'.'

What is important to note in this statement is the suggestion that the critic should adopt a standpoint which would enable him to truly understand the object before him. In fact Pater advocates the 'historic method' in criticism. In his study of Poetry, Matthew Arnold has pointed out certain dangers inherent in the historic estimate of literary works, which he distinguishes from the real estimate. A poem may count to us historically and because of its importance at a particular stage of development of literature. The investigator of 'historic origins in poetry ought to enjoy the true classic all the better for his investigations; he often is distracted from the enjoyment of the best and with the less good he overbusies himself, and is prone to over-rate it in proportion to the trouble which it has cost him.'

Although Arnold is suspicious of the historical investigation he does not deny its utility. Pater's insistence on the background studies is not for its own sake, but for the sake of a better understanding of the object by the critic. His interest obviously is less in the historical setting as such than in the individual genius placed in that setting. Pater says: "All true criticism of philosophic doctrine as of every other product of human mind, must begin with an historic estimate of the conditions, antecedent and contemporary, which helped to make it precisely what it was. But a complete criticism does not end there." 23

For besides the fatal, irresistible circumstances of a particular age to be analysed and explained, there is also the comparatively inexplicable force of a personality, resistant to, while it is moulded by, them. And then he gives us his own view of criticism:

It might even be said that the trial task of criticism, in regard to literature and art no less than to philosophy, begins exactly where the estimate of general conditions of the conditions common to all the products of this or that particular age - of the environment leaves off, and we touch what is unique in the individual genius which contrived after all, by force of will to have its own masterful way with that environment.

29. Ibid., pp.124-125.
In short the critic’s primary object in criticism, according to Pater, is to analyse the characteristics, the virtue, the active principle of the artist’s work, and the study of background is only a step, an instrument of assistance, towards a true apprehension of the work of art. It is indeed a counsel of detachment and in Pater’s view a critic is not just a pedlar of whimsical opinions. The historical estimate should not become a substitute for a personal estimate; it is there to safeguard the critic from misunderstanding a work of the past or the anarchy of feeling.

It is often believed that for Pater the sole criterion of good art is expression. His sometimes exaggerated stress upon form relates him to the followers of Art for Art’s sake, but his strong belief in the fusion of form and matter saves him from being a frivolous aesthete; and when he makes a distinction between "great" art and "good" art on the quality of the matter it informs or controls, he steers clear of the cult of Art for Art’s sake. Votaries of Aestheticism consider form to be more important than the subject matter in a work of art and for them the real value of a work of art lies in its form rather than the matter. Such sentiments as "in a beautiful work of art the substance ought to be inoperative and form should be
everything", or "form is the one element which distinguishes a work of art from all other products of man's mind", or that "form alone ennobles the content" are frequently found in Aesthetician's theory. In some places Pater seems to give expression to identical thoughts. He is actually making some necessary discriminations. For example the following statement can be easily misconstrued as laying stress on form. In Gaston while speaking about Montaigne he says he is "always on the look out for the sincerities of human nature (sincerity counting for life giving form, whatever the matter might be)". And in the Giorgione essay he writes: "That the mere matter of a poem, for instance, its subject namely, its given incidents or situation - should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter ...". Again in Plato and Platonism: "But then, in the creation of philosophical literature as in all other products of art, form in the full signification of that word, is everything, and the mere matter nothing."

The more than usual importance attached to form in these statements is perhaps to counter the general tendency to consider matter to be more valuable than form. What he seems to suggest is that without form, matter remains mere matter, for it is after all through form that matter will have an identity. In works of art form and substance are in fact inseparable. One cannot think of matter without form or form without matter. It is no doubt possible, in some kinds of writing, to distinguish between matter and form, but Pater believes that the "ideal types of poetry are those in which this distinction is reduced to the minimum." He emphasizes in all his writings the identity or the fusion of form and substance. Music, according to him is the ideal of all arts whatever, because it is this art which "most completely realizes the artistic ideal, this perfect identification of matter and form." And that again is the reason behind his well-known statement: "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music," for he says that it is the constant effort of Art to obliterate the distinction between matter and form. And

33. The Renaissance, p.137.
34. Ibid, p.139.
when he speaks of lyrical poetry as "the highest and most complete form of poetry," it is precisely because in it we are least able to detach the matter from the form.

His conception of style is another instance of Pater's refusal to separate form and matter. "Literature by finding its specific excellence in the absolute correspondence of the term to its import, will be fulfilling the condition of all artistic quality in things everywhere, of all good art." He speaks of the one indispensable duty in literature as being truth - the fusion of word and insight. "All beauty is in the long run only fineness of truth, or what we call expression, the fine accommodation of speech to the vision within." All the conditions of good writing that he lists in the essay 'On Style', the labour and the craft, the scholarship of the artist, the knowledge of the laws of language and its usage, discrimination and careful choice of words, the removal of surplusage, the importance of mind in a work of art, its architectonic technique, and even the quality of soul in style, aim at pointing out the identity of the word with its object. He praises Flaubert's obsession

36. Ibid., p.137.
38. Ibid., p.10.
with the thought that there exists the precise word or phrase for everything to be expressed: "The one word for the one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words, terms that might just do; the problem of style was there: - the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay, or song, absolutely proper to the single mental presentation or vision within."\(^{39}\)

Similarly while writing about Wordsworth Pater says: "In him, when the really poetical motive worked at, it united, with absolute justice, the word and the idea; each, in the imaginative flame, becoming inseparably one with the other, by that fusion of matter and soul, which is the characteristic of the highest poetical expression."\(^{40}\) He praises Coleridge for his imaginative philosophical expression "In which, in effect, the language itself is inseparable from or essentially a part of, the thought"\(^{41}\) and commends Rossetti for being "one who had a matter to present to his reader" and whose "primary aim as regards form or expression in his verse, would be but its exact equivalence to those data within."\(^{42}\)

\(^{39}\) Ibid., p.29.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., p.58.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., p.93.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., p.206.
Perfect confluence of form and matter then, according to Pater, is the condition of all "good art" but not necessarily "great art", which requires greater "dignity of interests, such as devotion to the increase of men's happiness, the redemption of the oppressed, the enlargement of sympathies with each other, the presentation of truth, new or old, as may ennoble and fortify us in our sojourn here, or immediately, as with Dante, to the glory of God." Now this distinction between good and great art is no revocation of Pater's earlier aestheticism, for he never advocates form as the only valuable item in a work of art, nor is it in any way abandoning the insight into the unity of matter and form, for even in "great art" the conditions constituting good art is the basic quality. Pater does not suggest that the mere quality of matter will make a work of art great. It has in any case to be fused with form.

It should be clear by now that Pater was not the kind of writer who would accept the standpoint of Art for Art's sake. He in no unambiguous terms repudiates the point of view of those for whom human values have nothing to do with the judgement of art. Art cannot be absolutely divorced from life, and as a critic Pater always looks for highly distinctive, noble and generous

43. Ibid., p.38.
emotions and worthy characters in works of art, things that could give the highest quality to the passing moments of man's life. His enquiry is directed to beautiful objects of art to ascertain: "How is my nature modified by its presence and under its influence?" He selects Wordsworth for his "strange mystical sense of a life in natural things and of man's life as a part of nature." The choice of the study of Italian Renaissance throws ample light on his bent of mind. It is not "merely for its positive results in things of the intellect and the imagination, its concrete works of art, its special prominent personalities, with their profound aesthetic charm, but for its spirit and character, for the ethical qualities of which it is a consummate type." It is towards the best in a period that the critic's searching gaze is directed. "In whom did the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period find itself? Where was the receptacle of its refinement, its elevation, its taste?" Throughout the essays contained in *Appreciations* the moral outlook is discernible.

The office of the poet is not that of the moralist, Pater says in the essay on Wordsworth, but "through his poetry and through this pleasure in it, he does actually convey to the reader an extraordinary wisdom in the things of practice, and one lesson he conveys more clearly than all, the supreme importance of contemplation in the conduct of life." He praises Lamb for his humour, pity, critical appreciation and having "reached an enduring moral effect also, in a sort of boundless sympathy." In his criticism of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, he comments admirably on the moral bearings of the play and of poetry in general. "It is not always that poetry can be the exponent of morality, but it is this aspect of morals which it represents most naturally, for this true justice is dependent on just those finer appreciation which poetry cultivates in us the power of making, those peculiar evaluations of action and its effects which poetry actually requires." Rossetti, Pater thinks, did something excellent through his poetry to reveal, "unveil to every eye, the ideal aspects of common things that are ideal from their very

49. Ibid., pp.109-110.
50. Ibid., p.184.
His comment on Feuillet is characteristic: "Often his most attentive reader will have forgotten the actual details of his plot, while the soul, tired, enlarged, shaped by it, remains as a well fixed type in the memory." 52

We find then, that Pater is a critic who cannot be placed or strictly categorized. His aim is to be objective, almost like a scientist, to sift, to analyse, to visualize the exact conditions and circumstances in which the work of art was created, so as to comprehend precisely what the artist had sought to convey and then to communicate in exact terms the impression created on his own mind. If the work of art is the "objective correlative" or symbol of the idea or the vision in the mind of the artist, then criticism must be the objective correlative or symbol of the work of art, whereby the critic evokes the vision and its accompanying pleasure and simultaneously makes the reader see and understand the virtue, the truth, the cause of the pleasure. To put it in Pater's own words: "To be forcibly impressed in the first place, and in the next, to find the means of making visible to others that which was vividly apparent, delightful, of

51. Ibid., p. 218.
52. Ibid., pp. 219-220.
lively interest to himself to the exclusion of all that was but middling, true, or only half-true.53

The role of a critic is one of analysis and explanation. He feels the influence of beauty and its consequent pleasure and "wishes to explain by analysing and reducing it to its elements."54 Now an accusing finger is sometimes raised against him for not giving an assessment of the author or artist discussed. He shirks the critic's responsibility to judge. But that is like condemning a person for not doing what he never intended to do. Pater's aim is to commend to the reader what he finds interesting in the works he discusses which in itself is a judgement. His approach to criticism is what is called appreciative. Appreciation of a work of art is as legitimate an activity of a critic as any other and particularly so when the appreciation helps and guides the reader in the comprehension of the qualities and the correct enjoyment of the "unique" pleasure that the work of art affords. Does Pater succeed in communicating that "unique" pleasure which he has experienced? It is in the success or failure of his appointed task that Pater should be blamed or praised. To show that a particular

54. The Renaissance, p.ix.
work of art is superior or inferior to another or to place it high or low in a hierarchical order is, to be sure, not the true, or at least not the only function of criticism. Appreciative criticism is not worthy of appreciation when the personal sympathy of the critic blinds him to the real quality of the work of art and makes him shower praise where praise is not due or when he deliberately refuses to take notice of the weaknesses or shortcomings, or explains them away as of no consequence. That would mean a lack of responsibility on the part of a critic almost amounting to dishonesty. And lack of sincerity and responsibility is the last thing that Pater can be accused of.

Pater realizes that objectivity in criticism cannot be the objectivity of a computer or a machine. The subjective element must come in, for the impression of the work of art is after all the critic's impression and some colouring of his personality is bound to creep in. So an absolutely impersonal criticism like an absolutely impersonal art, is what Pater does not believe in. He gives expression to a deep critical truth when he says that the critic must find within himself the real source of criticism and not in considerations outside him. He is indeed in the tradition of the romantic critics who were moving in the
direction of subjective criticism as opposed to the criticism of the Neo-classical age which considered the knowledge of cut and dried precepts as the first and perhaps the only, element in criticism. Pater's achievement lies in giving a reasoned expression to the attitude found in his predecessors but only dimly understood by them.

The temperament of the critic is all important in Pater's theory of criticism, but it is not a temperament allowed to remain undisciplined, whimsical, biased, or in a word, uncultured. The critic must cultivate his sensibilities, train them, be a scholar, have depth and width of knowledge, enrich his mind with the conditions of the age and ennoble his mind with the experience of life and art. His criticism then will not be just a rendering of spontaneous, personal impressions or mere sensations, but an objectively analysed, impartial, considered, balanced, mature, almost perfect impression of the object of art.

Pater is an impressionist in the sense that he endeavours to analyse and comprehend the central response of the object of art.

Pater is often linked with the Art-for-Art's-sake group, because of his concern for Beauty in all its forms. He regards all objects of beauty as powers or forces which produce pleasurable sensations, but the pleasure is not limited to a sensual perception of
outward qualities only. Beauty for him is not a matter of outward form. It symbolises goodness, truth, the ideal perfection. It does not just titillate the senses. Beauty as Pater conceives it, deeply influences the mind, elevates and ennobles human beings. He does not attach the same kind of importance to form in art as the Aesthetes usually do, and his way of thinking is alien to the cult of form which implies that ethical, religious and such like values have no relevance to the judgement of art and are of least import in literature. He is an aesthetic critic but not in the popularly understood sense of the word. He is not the aesthetic critic who is interested only in the formal aspects of art and has a more than ordinary sensibility to objects of beauty with little or no intellectual basis for his appreciation.