The Eighteen Nineties were a period of variety and vivacity, and so the descriptions of the decade vary a good deal. "The Yellow", "The Naughty", and "The Romantic", are the terms used to describe this period. It was a period of decadence that had "all the qualities that marked the end of great periods... an intense self consciousness... a spiritual and moral perversity...a beautiful and interesting disease."\(^1\) While the 1890's denoted the death of the century, it also marked the beginnings of the new age—"a wonderful harbinger of futurity."\(^2\) The decade was astir with movements in art and literature: aestheticism, impressionism, symbolism and modernism. It was the

period of the "Tragic Generation", of Aubrey Beardsley, Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson who attracted disaster to themselves and ended up as failures. W.B. Yeats was the one great writer who, though shaped by it, lived on into the twentieth century, always striving to overcome his limitations and develop his genius. And there were some writers who lived in the period but were not of it; Henry James, H.G. Wells and Conrad, whose beginnings are in that period. The Yellow Book and The Savoy appeared in this period and are said to have reflected the literary taste of the time and given to the period its peculiar flavour. Above all, it was a decade in which worked various influences - the influences from across the English Channel, mainly from France, which brought about a change in the ideas and opinions prevalent in the period and the influence of Walter Pater, whose theory and method of criticism moulded the Nineties and left some marks on the criticism of the twentieth century. The French and native influences tended to coalesce.

It is no wonder that the vast variety and vivacity have induced some scholars to call the Nineties "an intricate tapestry", for it is "this inter-weaving of threads that characterises this
period and distinguishes it from other periods." To disentangle the intricacies of this tapestry, to follow the different movements to their sources and explain the development, to interpret the various theories and ideas in the different areas of literature propounded by different writers is indeed a stupendous task. This chapter is concerned with identifying just one thread woven into the texture of the Nineties, investigating how Paterian criticism was reflected in the critical works of some writers of the decade.

That Pater's Studies in Art and Poetry, *The Renaissance* (1873), inspired the English Aesthetes and Decadents, chiefly associated with the Nineties, is common knowledge. In "The Conclusion" Pater counsels that we must make the most of life while it exists, experience as intensely as we can the ever slipping impressions of the world around us which is in a constant state of flux, for "to burn always with this hard gemlike flame to maintain ecstasy, is success in life." Art, according to him, helps most to intensify experience, as "Art comes to you

---

professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass and simply for those moments sake." The value of art, as Pater conceives it here, is for the immediate impression it affords and not for any hypothetical aftereffects, for he says, "not the fruit of experience but experience itself is the end." The novelty and off-beat nature of such ideas, presented in Pater's "subtle, evocative prose, with its sinuous ambiguities and attention to strangeness," obviously satisfied the quest for new experience and for new forms of expression. And so we have people talking of The Renaissance as the "golden book", "the most beautiful book of prose in our literature." Walter Pater became the master and idol of the Rhymers' Club founded in 1891, whose members looked consciously to Pater for their philosophy and "wished to express life at its intense moments and at those moments alone." Pater found fame as the apostle of Art for Art's sake although he keenly desired a moral development through art and was alive to moral considerations in art.

5. Ibid., p.239.
6. Ibid., p.236.
The Yellow Book (published from 1894 to 1897) which has been called by Stanley Weintraub* the epitome of the fin-de-siecle years", was typical of its time and symbolised the spirit of the age. It acquired a popular reputation for decadent perversity despite the fact that "it sought respectability." Holbrook Jackson says that it came to be associated "with all that was bizarre and queer in art and life, with all that was outrageously modern." The Savoy (1896), edited by Arthur Symons, sought to rival the Yellow Book and it was not much different in spirit and only appeared to give a new lease of life to the decadent movement, for many of the writers who contributed to the Savoy were those who wrote for the Yellow Book too. The aim of the publication as stated by Symons in the first issue was to appeal to the tastes of the intelligent: "We have no formulas and we desire no false unity of form or matter. We have not invented a new point of view. We are not Realists or Romanticists or Decadents.

10. Ibid., p.viii.
For us all art is good which is good art.  

But for the press and public The Savoy was closely connected with the Yellow Book and was indeed its near imitator. Since quite a few of the writers associated with the Yellow Book were those influenced by Pater and exemplified the so-called aesthetic and decadent ideals, it was assumed that he was a force behind it, even though we know that the mature Pater had little inclination for aesthetic form and expression divorced from moral judgement. However in regard to the critical essays published in the Yellow Book Katherine Lyon Mix rightly sums up the position: "Pater had set up a high concept of the duty and function of the critic, holding that criticism must be subjective as well as objective and the critic a creative writer. Yellow Book criticism for the most part accorded with this theory."

Literary criticism in the last decade of the Nineteenth century was not of a very high order, perhaps because much of it was written for popular magazines and journals and in such writings quality is generally the first to be sacrificed. The taste of the majority of a reading public cannot be expected to be of


a very high level, nor is it possible for a professional journalistic critic to keep pace with the express demands of the editors and publishers. So his work is done in haste. Some idea of the prolific output of the critics can be got from George Saintsbury's own estimate that he produced about a hundred volumes of magazine material in twenty years as a critical journalist. And Andrew Lang, as W.R. Matthews tells us, wrote no less than a thousand articles during his writing career. In such circumstances criticism cannot but be superficial and intellectually thin for most of the critics will rush to conclusions without taking time to form just estimates. As a consequence there is bound to be some inaccuracy, irrelevancy or presumption. However, out of a long list of amateur and professional critics and the formidable bulk of criticism, it is not impossible to select a few well-known critics who possessed a higher level of insight, and who were not great critics but were influential enough to help define the role of literature in a fast changing social milieu. The selection of such critics is facilitated if we bear in mind the distinction between the practice of reviewing and the art of criticism, for reviewing is a practice that in general has not much to do with literary criticism.

There were two major tendencies in criticism during the period under study, an ethically oriented aesthetic which stressed the ethical content in art and an Art-for-Art's-sake theory which emphasised the criterion of form, of the supremacy of expression over matter. The techniques adopted were conflicting too - judgement by rule and judgement by personal impression.

There is little doubt that Matthew Arnold was one of the major seminal influences in the field of criticism in the late nineteenth century. He was considered one of the greats in English criticism in his own lifetime, which is indeed a rare achievement. He did anticipate new trends in criticism, but in his touchstone method and insistence upon the morality of the artist, he was regarded as a dogmatic critic of mid-century with fixed moral and artistic standards. Ruth Z. Temple suggests that he is "not necessarily the most noteworthy critic." The most noteworthy was Walter Pater. He became, inadvertently though, the founder of the aesthetic school of criticism in England.

His method of criticism, that is, analysing a work of art to find its formula or essential quality, the emphasis he laid on the personal experience and power of

perception of the critic, and his refusal to bring
to bear preconceived standards of judgement upon a work
of art, found ready acceptance with critics in the
Nineties. Pater's concept of style, his belief that
beauty is born of perfect form and his view that in
great art form and matter are fused as in music are
constant reflected in the criticism of his disciples
of whom he had not a few. Some of his statements
became oracular. There were, however, some critics
who, although they considered themselves the
followers of Pater, were only mistakenly so. For
through either a misunderstanding of Pater's ideas or
focussing their attention mainly on a part of his early
work, The Renaissance, they tended to distort his views
or put them out of focus. Oscar Wilde, for instance,
was one of those who gave a perverse twist to the
austere philosophy of sensations, for he obviously
sought a licence for his own decadence. Some other
critics gave fresh interpretation to some of the
ideas contained in Pater's criticism, elaborated or
formulated into theories what was merely suggested or
implied, developed into a fully shaped body what was
in embryonic form. Arthur Symons and W.B. Yeats were
among such disciples of Pater. The study of Pater's
influence in the Nineties then shows what transformations
his ideas underwent through the differing personalities
and temperaments of the critics who came under his spell.
In an article "The New Criticism" published in The Cornhill (1900) it is stated that criticism which perhaps began as an appraisal of works of art meant to help the reader began to be valued in its own right in the latter half of the Nineteenth century. The criticism of books was conducted on the same eloquent principles as were to be found in Pater's eloquent passage about Leonardo's picture of Mona Lisa. It did not seem to matter what the critic had to say. What was of consequence was how he said it. Further more, criticism to be an art could not be "restricted to the lower gifts of style and denied the higher gifts of creative imagination." The writer picks out Edward Dowden and Edmund Gosse as the most remarkable representatives of "imaginative criticism" as he calls it. His object obviously is to run down the two critics, whose kind of criticism offered no help to the reader. Moreover this contemporary view provides clear evidence of the fact that during the period popular critics were following in their own ways the critical opinions of Pater.

An examination of the New Review symposium on

17. Ibid., p.117.
"The Science of Criticism" (1891) reveals that critics like Henry James held certain views which are very much like those held by Pater. In his contribution to the symposium, Henry James, after referring to the prodigious quantity of literary criticism produced in the periodicals at that time speaks of criticism as the most complicated and the most particular of arts. He sees the critic as "the real helper of mankind ... the interpreter par excellence." The critic, according to him, is a valuable instrument, for in literature "criticism is the critic." There are various kinds of criticism, according to him, but "the only kind worth speaking of is the kind that the most living spirit gives us." The critic knows that "the more impressions he has the more he is able to record." His business is to understand others and to interpret. It is not difficult to find a similarity between these views and the opinions of Walter Pater.

Similarly, Andrew Lang, while recording his

19. Ibid., p.402.
20. Ibid., p.402.
views in the same symposium, endeavours to find a
common factor in criticism and suggests that all
critics contemplate works of literary art through the
medium of their own temperaments and that "the only kind
of criticism worth reading or writing is that which
narrates the adventures of an ingenious and educated
mind in contact with masterpieces." The critic must
possess originality, individuality wide knowledge and
an interesting temperament to write what shall be
valuable. Good criticism, he believes, "does for art
and works of art what art does for nature and the
works of nature. It clears our eyes, it lightens and
intensifies and makes more select our pleasures." Andrew Lang's statements obviously owe a good deal to
Pater but Lang's description of criticism as a
narration of the adventures of an ingenious and
educated mind in contact with masterpieces is Wildean in nature.

Edward Dowden's acquaintance with Pater and his
works was long and deep. This is evident from his
essay on Walter Pater, wherein he speaks of the boy
Pater's cleverness as "rather a shy brooding faculty,
slow to break its sheath, and expand into a blossom, a

22. Ibid., p.404.
23. Ibid., p.405.
faculty of gradual and exact receptiveness." He tells us that the central fact to remember about Pater is that he was a seeker for truth, with "the eye and with the imagination penetrating its way through things visible." All his life he was occupied with a study "not of ideas apart from their concrete embodiment, not of things concrete apart from their inward significance, but with a study of expression." A kind of spiritual sensuousness is how he describes Pater's creed. For Pater "could not disdain the things of sense, for there is a spirit in sense, and mind communes with mind through colour and through form." Dowden was one of the few critics contemporaneous with Pater to correctly comprehend that the view of life expressed in the Conclusion to The Renaissance is not "mere hedonism, a mere abandonment to the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life." He realised that Pater's object was not pleasure but a fulness and vividness of

25. Ibid., p.2.
26. Ibid., p.3.
27. Ibid., p.7.
28. Ibid., pp.8-9.
life, a perfection which could not be attained without discipline. He realised too, that much attention had been focused on the Conclusion as if it were Pater's "ultimate confession of faith"; whereas the truth is that "the conclusion was a prologue." Dowden goes on to study and interpret Marius the Epicurean and Plato and Platonism in the essay and points out, in the process, the wrongheadedness of the criticism, which represents Pater as subordinating truth to any form of pleasure. He does not fail to notice the insistence on "the close connection between the aesthetic qualities of things and the formation of moral character" or the ethical influence of art.

Dowden's approach to art and the artist is akin to Pater's as is evident in his "Interpretation of Literature" (1888). He lays down in this essay what the critic ought to do when confronted with a work of literature. "His aim is to obtain a faithful impression of the object. His second movement of mind will be one of recall and resilience, whereby having received a pure impression of his object, he tries to surprise and lay hold of the power which has produced that

impression."31 After making a thorough study of the artist's work the critic attempts to find its central motive by scientifically setting up a hypothesis, testing, rejecting, trying a new hypothesis. When he finds the central motive, "then, of a sudden, order begins to form itself from the crowd and chaos of his impressions and ideas."32 Dowden's essays give evidence of a thorough-going academic scholar at work as also of a subjective critic. He believed that the function of the critic was to interpret a work of art to the reader. Dowden, it seems, was not quite sure whether to regard criticism as a kind of self-expression, as Wilde did, or as an exact science. Criticism for him was more than a statement of facts about a work of art collected after research; it was also the personal response of the critic, but the personal response is no imaginative indulgence; it must cover all the facts concerning a work and also its elements. And since the aim of the critic is to see an object as in itself it really is, to use Matthew Arnold's words, subjectivism also is out of place. In other words he was not in

32. Ibid., p. 264.
favour of elevating criticism to a science, for the personality of the critic could not be excluded. This owes something to Pater who considered it the critic's job to study a work of art objectively and in a scientific spirit, but who also asserted that it was the critic's personal impression of a work of art that was of primary concern in the complete assessment of a work.

In his Introduction to *New Studies in Literature* (1902) Dowden discusses the loss and gain the influence of science has brought to the literature of criticism. He says that living at a time when the scientific spirit is dominant, it is quite right to appropriate some of the methods of science and cultivate scientific habits of mind, realising at the same time that there is undoubtedly, "a danger that in accumulation, arrangement, observation, analysis, induction, we may lose some of the higher spirit of literature." 33 He seems to believe that criticism can remain a delicate art and yet take advantage of the inductions of science if "we don't forget the end of study in the means." 34

---

34. Ibid., p.31.
Dowden as a critic tried to find a middle way between academic and impressionistic criticism, to assert the truth in contradistinction to some critics' fancy for abstractions. And in this, as in his approach to the technique of criticism, he appears to have taken a hint or two from Pater.

Edmund Gosse was a well-known critic in the Nineties. He started writing for literary magazines in the seventies but it was in the last decade of the century that his reputation grew. He published four volumes of critical essays during the Nineties, the volumes being collections of his contributions to the various magazines and journals.

"A Portrait" of Walter Pater in *Critical Kit-Kats* by Edmund Gosse indicates how concerned for and vexed he was by the "strange inexactitude in matters of detail which marked almost all the notices of his career which appeared at the time" of Pater's death. Gosse was keen to set the image right by presenting the facts regarding him which he could set down from personal knowledge of the man who was "an object of respect" to him. He was so sure of the worth of Pater as man and writer that he wrote: "The fame of Walter Pater will not be wrecked on the holiday of an editor or

the indolence of a reporter. It is grounded on the respect which has not yet failed to follow pure and distinguished excellence in the art of writing. 36 He speaks of Pater's influence upon his age and the merits of his style, "of charm and lucid order, and labour of the file." 37

While so many critics spoke of the worth and excellence of Pater's criticism, there were also dissenting voices. Walter Pater was caricatured under the title of Mr. Nose in The New Republic and it was said that he was much distressed by the parody of his style and manner and consequently relinquished society and even gave up writing for some years. Gosse states that "nothing could be further from truth." 39 Pater considered the portrait a bit unscrupulous and did not like the freedom of some of its details. "What he liked less, what did really ruffle him, was the persistence with which the newspapers at his time began to attribute to him all sorts of aesthetic follies and extravagances." 40

36. Ibid., p.241.  
37. Ibid., p.255.  
40. Ibid., p.258.
He told Gosse in 1876: "I wish they would not call me a hedonist; it produces such a bad effect on the minds of people who do not know Greek." Gosse takes pains to clear the misconceptions about Pater being cold, queer and inaccessible. He was cautious, reserved and shy but extremely affectionate, patient and courteous and had "great sweetness and uniformity of temper." What made the character of Pater difficult for others to elucidate, according to Gosse, was "the perennial conflict between his exquisite instinct for corporeal beauty on the one hand and his tendency to ecclesiastical symbol and theological dogma on the other."  

Although criticism was his chief interest during his career as a writer Gosse does not seem to have been interested in developing a coherent theory of criticism. His objective in writing criticism was to communicate the pleasure that he himself experienced in books. In "The Science of Criticism" (1891) we have a clear statement of Gosse's critical theory, if we may call it

41. Ibid., p.258.
42. Ibid., p.266.
43. Ibid., p.268.
44. Ibid., p.270.
that. A true critic, he believes, is much more than a mere reviewer, for he possesses intelligence, sympathy and a profound love for literature. His criticism is almost as valuable as the original work of art, for his mind is sensitive to delicate impressions and with his deep insight and powerful imagination he peers into the very mind of the author and reconstructs the "why" and "what" of the work of art. The personal reaction of the critic to the work is what makes criticism distinctive, according to Gosse. It is nothing if it is not the utterance of a highly individual mind. The rare being that Gosse conceives a critic to be and the function that he performs, interpreting the work of literature to the reader and communicating the pleasure of the book, clearly indicate that he was following the critical line initiated by Pater.

Although in theory Gosse realized that the critic was like a high-priest of literature and it was his duty to keep the standard of taste of the readers high, particularly in a world which was hostile to art and poetry, in practice he more often than not, failed to execute the role that he assigned to critics and to himself in particular. That he was sensitive to form and style is obvious from his essays on poetry and poets where he talks at length on style, but he
rarely communicates the depth of the poet's thought. He believed that a poem was in essence a manipulation of words and it was the form, the versification and the diction that lent greatness to it. Thus the matter in the poem is important but it is surely not decisive.

In *Questions at Issue* (1893) Gosse says that a poet is "a maker, a man or woman who expresses some mood of vital passion in a new manner and with adequate art." It is apparently the new manner, the style, that is of interest to Gosse and how very important it is to him is nowhere better exemplified than in his book *From Shakespeare to Pope*, which interprets a whole century of poetry as a history of the increasing use of distich. Again he is not prepared to consider Walt Whitman and Whittier as first-rate poets just because they lacked style even though he admits their sincerity and devotion to ideals. The sharp differentiation which Gosse makes between form and content is not found in Pater although he seems sometimes to suggest that form is distinct from matter and more important too. Gosse in his strong feelings for the beauty of language and interest in the refinement of

46. *Questions at Issue*, p.72.
47. *Late Victorian Journalistic Criticism*, p.79.
48. See *Critical Kit-Kats*.
a poem's exterior mechanism is obviously more inclined towards the extreme aesthetic position than Pater was. Similarly in the critical part of his essays though following Pater's way, he gives his own impressions of a work of literature, he does not, as Pater does, explain the cause of those impressions. Despite these slight differences, it is obvious that Gosse's Criticism shows the impress of Pater upon it.

George Saintsbury was perhaps the most influential critic and literary historian of the early twentieth century. He started writing criticism in the 1870's and continued to do so for more than half a century, his last work being published in 1931. No other critic can possibly match Saintsbury in sheer bulk and range of writing. In his History of Criticism he mentions about the debt he owed to Walter Pater in his critical work. That Pater's criticism formed the foundation for his own critical faith is evident from his essay on Walter Pater in The Bookman (1906). Saintsbury frequently expressed his views about what a critic ought to be and what the technique of good criticism is. It is not difficult to discern his own critical method in such statements as the one in an essay on Diderot's Salons (1884):

While some critics (more in his days than ours) proceed on a cut and dried method of formulas, applying the footrule and listening to the stop watches; ... Diderot follows a third course. He asks "what is the impression of the work on me?" first. But he is by no means content with that impression. He goes on to ask "why does it produce that impression? What connection has that impression with such and such another?" Sometimes, not very often because the very habit of such questioning insensibly refines the taste itself, he has to come back upon his impression and ask whether it was a genuine and not a mistaken one. This, I say is the method of all good critics.

There cannot be a more striking resemblance between this statement and what Pater says in the Preface to "The Renaissance." Add to this Saintsbury's suggestions that the critic should consider a work of art as having its own existence, endeavour to explain the cause of the impression upon him and also look for its beauty; that to achieve these objectives the critic must analyse and take the help of the historical background and we have Pater's critical method without much change. There is perhaps some truth in Dorothy Richardson's opinion that because of his emphasis on form and style, separation of ethics and aesthetics, considering personal reaction to be a dominant part of

50. Quoted in Late Victorian Journalistic Criticism, p. 55.


true criticism and making life a series of pleasurable moments through art, Saintsbury seemed to align himself with the art-for-art's-sake movement. This is what was said about Pater too. But the fact that Saintsbury recognised that there can be no style without a concomitant matter, and being temperamentally a rather conservative person never went completely against traditional values, and even when advocating criticism by impression realised the need for some order and coherence in the impressions, and never encouraged arbitrary enjoyment and liking or mere caprice, clearly shows that he, like Pater before him, never opted fully for art-for-art's-sake theory.

Saintsbury's treatment of poets and writers in his essays also indicate how he adopted Pater's critical method. He almost always tries to search for the "unique gift" in each writer's work and to point out the formula of the writer as Pater did. For instance, he says that Tennyson's "secret lay in his slow and dreamy music," and Moore's virtue he felt was in "his ability to marry music to both verse and poetry." It is sometimes considered a weakness in

53. Quoted in Late Victorian Journalistic Criticism, p.89.
54. Ibid., p.90.
Saintsbury's criticism that he tried to find something good to say about even the minor writers. This practice of his is in consonance with his creed as a critic contained in the conclusion of his History of Criticism. His critical goal is "an art of appreciation - a reasoned valuing and analysing of the source of literary charm." And it is not different from Pater's aim as a critic as laid down in the Preface to The Renaissance. Saintsbury's impatience with rules and traditional judgements, his criticism based on personal impression and the importance given to form and style, his appreciative interpretation of works of literature, all bear an unmistakable stamp of Pater's critical opinions.

The critics we have considered point clearly to the fact that in the welter of movements and counter-movements in the complex 1890's it is not difficult to see a line of thought clearly influenced by Pater's critical opinions. What is common in the criticism of these critics is their lack of faith in criticism by rule and preconceived notions of what a work of art ought to be; their belief in the critics possessing a high sensibility so as to be able to give a proper account of his high calling especially because criticism in the final analysis is the expression of a

personal reaction; their conviction that form and style are more important than matter and that morality as such is not the concern of literature, even though literature in not immoral; and finally their belief that the critic's job is to find, point out, elucidate and analyse the joy that a work of art gives to a reader. All these ideas they have drawn evidently from Pater, although more often than not it is the early Pater that influenced them, which accounts for their being dubbed as impressionist or aesthetic critics. George Saintsbury did realise the "double edged" nature of Paterism and the desirability to interpret and explain the ambiguities inherent in some of his works. Pater had in fact cleared whatever ambiguities lay in his work in Marius and later writings, yet a band of youthful artists misinterpreted Pater and were responsible for the kind of criticism which treated art as a stimulus for those whose lives were governed by mere sensation, and who asserted that the only job of the critic was to give expression to the movement of his own soul in the presence of art. We cannot but notice the fact that Pater, inadvertently

though, gave impetus to the idea that it was not necessary for art to serve any moral convention and that perfection of form is indeed a virtue and it is from such ideas that the theories of impressionistic criticism and autonomy of art evolved.