

Literary Analysis: Pater, Sassoon, Walcott

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Walter Pater, in his "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, posits a theory of human perception that was quite unsettling, even threatening to the cultural elites of his day. Why? Because in this brief treatise, Pater attempts to redefine the meaning of what is objectively "real" and "unreal," and in so doing, offers an ethical blueprint for the modern age devoid of moral principles, in which the experience of sensation for sensation's sake is the paramount goal and virtue.

Introducing his view of human perception and thus reality itself as something fundamentally subjective, Pater says, "at first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But when reflection begins to play upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence... each object is loosed into a group of impressions -- color, odor, texture -- in the mind of the observer." The world Pater describes is one of abstract impressions, "unstable, flickering, inconsistent." He sees the events experienced by an individual as the product not of an objective, absolute reality, but rather of that individual's particular internal feelings and imagination. In such a world, meaning cannot be externally quantified; who is to say what is ethical or unethical, real or unreal, if outward experience is simply a construct of the human mind?

What *does* have meaning in Pater's philosophy of existence is the rapture of unadulterated experience and pure sensation within the moment. "Not the fruit of experience," he writes, "but the experience itself, is the end." To live in the brilliantly focused present and seek out experiences that proffer the most intense sensations of ecstasy -- whatever the nature of those experiences -- is, to Pater, the definition of success. If one follows this line of rhetoric to its logical conclusion, it's not hard to see why the political, social, and economic powers of the Victorian era perceived Pater's writing's as such a threat to the status quo. If maintaining the "ecstasy of pure sensation" became the only criteria by which to live one's life, with no societal injunctions or constraints to inhibit impulses and determine "good" behavior from "bad," then chaos might well reign. What would compel people to work, or go to church, or pay taxes? Indeed, what would prevent a man from strangling (or bludgeoning, or dismembering) his wife or neighbor because he wanted to "see what it felt like"? An extreme example, perhaps, but not beyond the realm of possibility.

My own opinion of the argument Walter Pater advances in his "Conclusion" is distinctly, irreconcilably ambiguous, I'm afraid. From a purely philosophical point of view, I would agree that the reality we each perceive is essentially a subjective construct; whatever compromise we may come to about the objective properties of, say, a couch (never mind a human being), the official, main-line consensus about what is "real" is, at best, only an approximation of its true nature. And too, I think Pater's on to something when he advocates "getting as many pulsations as possible into a given time" and reveling in "the ecstasy of sensation" as a modern or post-modern credo by which to live. My central problem with what he proposes is that, however chaotic the world we live in today may be, and however dissatisfied with the institutions of power and status quo *I* may be, I'm not certain that sensation for its own sake as a way of life is the way to go. I believe that the experience of human existence is deeper, richer and more encompassing than the sensations we feel at any particular moment, no matter how intoxicating...

Siegfried Sassoon, in his World War I era poem *Glory of Women*, reinscribes and revalues the traditional romantic view of soldiers in war as seen by the women who love them, their girlfriends, wives, and mothers. "You love us when we're heroes, home on leave, or wounded in a mentionable place," he begins, and it's clear from the outset that Sassoon's words carry a sarcastic sting; you will love us as long as we are "heroes," he says, and as long as we're injured in an "acceptable" place, an arm or a leg, maybe. The implication is that were a soldier disfigured, or wounded in an "unmentionable place" (like the groin, with its suggestion of impotency), a heroes' welcome might not be forthcoming. The next lines are an indictment of traditional romantic notions of war, and the naive idolatry of war heroes by the women who wait for them at home:

You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.

Then Sassoon's language shifts from a relatively genteel approach to a more visceral, harsher narrative, designed to invoke the naked terror and violence of real modern-day war, rather than rose-tinted imaginings of battles' past. His tone is accusatory as he states, "You can't believe that British troops 'retire' when hell's last horror breaks them, and they run, trampling the terrible corpses -- blind with blood." You cannot accept, Sassoon writes, that your son's, your boyfriend's,

your husband's, could retreat in battle, frightened out of their wits and "trampling the terrible corpses," hardly heroic and perhaps even cowards. The last three lines of *Glory Of Women* pack the most punch, as Sassoon brings home the ugliness of his point with devastating bluntness:

O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

This poem, to use the parlance of literary criticism, "deconstructs" the traditional, benign, and ignorant view of war held by the civilian populace in general (that is, those who don't do the fighting) and skewers the romantic war fantasies of women in particular. Essentially, it holds up all such illusions to the cold light of day and finds them wanting. Sassoon's *Glory of Women* presents a new take on the nature and experience of war that, along with the rest of the "World War I poets," would redefine how people looked at war, and as such contributed to a demystification process that is ongoing, even today.

As an individual paralyzed by divided loyalties to two disparate cultures -- a black man who was educated in the English-speaking universities of the West Indies -- Derek Walcott imbues his poem *A Far Cry from Africa* with a quintessentially modern sensibility. In it, he addresses both his revulsion over English colonialism (which resulted in bloody and protracted warfare between an indigenous Kenyan tribe, the Kikuyu, and British settlers) and the crisis of personal identity it has precipitated within him. In the first stanza, Walcott mourns the carnage wreaked upon a beautiful land -- "corpses are scattered through a paradise" -- and reserves the lion's share of the blame for the British: "Statistics justify and scholars seize the salients of colonial policy. What is that to the white child hacked in bed? To savages, expendable as Jews?" He sees the English as racist interlopers excusing their imperialistic policies and genocide with statistics and specious logic, but reproaches the Kikuyu as equally murderous. Like Sassoon before him, Walcott revises traditional English assumptions about the patriotic nature of war, stripping it of all pretense of honor or moral righteousness. "Again brutish necessity wipes its hands upon the napkin of a dirty cause," he writes, "again a waste of our compassion, as with Spain, the gorilla wrestles with the superman."

At the heart of this poem, however, is Walcott's private war, the one fraying the edges of his soul. In a very real sense, he is a man in exile, torn by his allegiance to the cultures of both Africans and English, yet realizing he is neither wholly one nor the other:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose.
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?

In these, the last lines of the poem, Walcott simultaneously expresses anguish for the profound ambivalence he feels, and also demands that his readers (a good many of them British, no doubt) reassess their own definitions of what it means to be English. If one has black skin but speaks expert English and loves many of the same things white Englishmen do, then what, ultimately, is he? Though Walcott raises this crucial contemporary issue with eloquence and power, in the end we, like him, are left with more questions than answers. The use of the literary form of irony in the title succinctly illustrates his dilemma. "A Far Cry from Africa" can be interpreted as a distant plea for help from the African continent; it can also be read in the colloquial sense, as in "*wherever* my cultural identity lies, it's a far cry from Africa." Walcott's problem is that, as far as his inner life is concerned, both interpretations apply. Consequently, he remains unable to reconcile the antagonism he feels toward contemporary England that's articulated so forcefully throughout the poem; one hopes that since its inception (1962) Walcott has achieved some measure of peace.