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Julie L'Enfant

book review of

The Rescue of Romanticism, Walter Pater and John Ruskin by
Kenneth Daley

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Kenneth Daley

The Rescue of Romanticism: Walter Pater and John Ruskin

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Index; bibliography

It is a critical commonplace that Walter Pater was influenced by John Ruskin's idea of the critic as a creative sensibility, even though he habitually reversed the older writer's judgments. Harold Bloom, Kenneth Daley's advisor on the 1993 dissertation that is the basis for *The Rescue of Romanticism*, referred to Ruskin as Pater's "only begetter. . . whose effect can be read, frequently through negation, throughout Pater's work."^[1] But, as Daley informs us, no scholar has made a detailed examination of this influence, and that is what this study sets out to do. The enterprise is necessarily speculative, for there is little in the way of personal connection, despite the simultaneous presence of both at Oxford for a time, and neither was given to careful acknowledgement of his intellectual debts. Then there is the matter of the broader topic, romanticism, a term vigorously debated since its introduction in the eighteenth century. Daley focuses his discussion of the two critics on this problematic theme, analyzing selected texts to show Ruskin's rejection of romanticism on the grounds that it denies transcendental truth and Pater's "rescue" of romanticism using Ruskin's own topics and terms.

The crux of the matter is found in the two critics' writings on William Wordsworth, examined in Chapter One. The early Wordsworth corresponded with Ruskin's romantic ideal, found in the French Gothic, which he variously described, Daley tells us, as "heroic, passionate, imaginative, virtuous, beautiful, modest, sincere, and sublime," also "unerring," indicating his requirement that the romantic artist capture an external and absolute truth (18). Ruskin admired the Wordsworth of *The Excursion* (1814), where the "excursive sight" of the Wanderer produced historical and social observations that offered a Christian cure for the sorrow and cynicism of the modern age. But Ruskin grew increasingly negative about Wordsworth on the score of "Self-Love," condemning the subjective response to nature seen in later poems as the Pathetic Fallacy. Whereas Homer and the ancients based their sense of animation in nature on the presence of the gods, most modern poets merely projected their own imaginations onto nature, representing for Ruskin a fall from faith into a mere sensuousness that threatened civilization.

Pater, in contrast, saw Wordsworth's ability to project his feelings into nature as a "survival" of Greek myth. Rather than seeing a Ruskinian fall, Pater saw a "myth of return and refinement" (39). (He was influenced here by the Oxford anthropologist Edward Tylor.) Where Ruskin condemned Wordsworth for a lack of social conscience, Pater admired him for his empathy with the "pathetic" aspects of country life. Pater's version of Wordsworth as endlessly speculative and alert to the "strangeness" of life is quite different from the nineteenth-century stereotype of the bard as lofty and inspiring. In short, for Pater the "pathetic fallacy" becomes Wordsworth's chief glory.

Pater's tendency to reverse Ruskin's critical conclusions has been most often noticed in writings on the Renaissance, the topic of Chapter Two. The two critics saw virtually the same characteristics in that period, as Wendell Harris has observed: they "equally recognized the classical influences, the surging individualism, the explicit pursuit of pleasure, the rise of science, the growth of a class of men of refined, if selfish and worldly aesthetic sensibilities."^[2] For Ruskin, this was a fall from Gothic grace. In the Renaissance, the putative reconciliation of Christian and classical ideas was shallow and false, and science stifled Gothic emotion and imagination. Ruskin propounded such views as Slade Professor at Oxford between 1869 and 1873, the years in which Pater wrote most of the essays for *The Renaissance* (1874). Pater did not see a Ruskinian "fall"; rather, he saw a reconciliation of pagan and Christian elements effected by an interaction of opposites—the same opposites of Christian and pagan, faith and rebellion, orthodoxy and antinomianism that he saw in every age, including the Gothic. Thus, Daley argues, did Pater undermine Ruskin's "overdetermined historicism" and work against his devotion to the abstract and absolute.

A discussion of Hellenism, so central to Oxford life in those years, concludes Chapter Two. Pater's Hellenism was derived in part from Johann Joachim Winckelmann, source of the prevailing nineteenth-century idea of ancient Greece as an intellectual golden age characterized by balance and restraint. "Winckelmann," written in 1867, attributes an ideal critical spirit to the German art historian, but also charges him with a temperamental inability to recognize a dark strain in Greek art. Pater's view of the Greek psyche, Daley suggests, was influenced by Ruskin, who had begun to emphasize Greek awareness of pain and horror in volume five of *Modern Painters* (1860). As usual, however, Pater drew a different conclusion. Whereas Ruskin looked to the Greeks as models for ethical behavior, Pater admired their capacity to turn ideas into sensuous form. As various critics have noted, Pater, like Winckelmann, was particularly concerned with the sculpture of young males and shared his underlying aim of legitimating masculine love by associating it with the "pure" and "spiritual" Greek ideal. Pater capitalized on an established discourse: through the writings of Benjamin Jowett, Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill, and others, Victorian Hellenism and Greek studies at Oxford were identified with political liberalism and university reform, but Pater radicalized that discourse by writing what was in effect an apologia for the homosexuality associated with the Oxford Hellenes.

Ruskin's disapproval of this Oxford milieu probably fueled his condemnation of Greek culture. His hortatory Slade lectures stressed that "the art of any country is *the exponent of its social and political virtues*" (quoted on 90). Ruskin's messianic character—nicely evoked by Daley in Chapter Three—fired up the undergraduates. Meanwhile, Pater too was attracting a following with ideas on Leonardo and Michelangelo formed in response to Ruskin. When Ruskin vilified Leonardo as skeptical, relentlessly curious, and drawn to the grotesque, Pater praised him for the same qualities. Pater saw the *Mona Lisa* as capturing a beauty "wrought out from within upon the flesh—the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions" (quoted p. 98). Her figure, like the pastorals of Wordsworth, is a "survival" of past ages: she offers the "fancy of a perpetual life." When Ruskin characterized Michelangelo in an 1871 Oxford lecture as the "chief captain of evil" of the Italian Renaissance by virtue of his overemphasis on strong emotion and artistic skill, Pater, shortly afterwards, used much the same qualities to associate the sculptor with the vitality of the Florentine Middle Ages (hallowed ground for Ruskin).

Chapter Four locates the two writers' most significant discussions of romanticism in two essays: Ruskin's "Franchise," an 1873 lecture at Oxford, and Pater's "Romanticism," an essay published three years later and included as the last essay in the 1889 collection *Appreciations* as a postscript and, it would seem, critical manifesto. "Franchise" was, for Ruskin, the romantic temper, fueled by passion but characterized by discipline and restraint—and notions of right conduct. Originating in twelfth-century France and of course associated with the Gothic, it was equal in value to the classical temper. Although the classical was devoted to truth and therefore invested with greater authority, both were governed by the law, and Ruskin celebrated both, at least in this lecture. He used the idea of franchise to condemn the modern romantic revival for its lack of restraint. Pater, predictably, praises that very quality, exalting Emily Brontë's Heathcliff for having the exaggerated passion, the grotesquerie of Virgil's "trees shrieking as you tear off the leaves" (quoted p. 126). Restraint does figure in Pater's view of romantic art, but only as the best means of heightening aesthetic perfection.

The social implications of these divergent views are brought out clearly in the two critics' comments on Victor Hugo. Daley connects Ruskin's sense of horror at the grotesque nature of Quasimodo to Victorian anxiety over French corruption. Pater, on the other hand, enlists French fiction (and criticism, particularly that of the notorious Baudelaire) in the cause of building his case against a repressive Victorian society. He champions unrestrained desire and emotion, finding it even in French Gothic, Ruskin's source for "franchise," going so far as to find some French poetry of the Middle Ages "almost insane" in its animistic expression (quoted p. 128). Daley sees Pater's version of romanticism as a coded discourse for the promotion of liberal ideals of personal liberty and individualism—with tolerance for homosexuality the ever-present subtext. And so, although his delicate, allusive style differs profoundly from the lofty dogmatism of Ruskin, Pater too had social aims, and it is with these that he sought to "rescue" romanticism from the nineteenth-century critics who thought it a corrupting force.

Yet this rescue failed, in Daley's view, since the nineteenth-century debate over the social value of romanticism has continued unabated. Twentieth-century Marxists and New Historicists have condemned it for evading social and economic realities. T. S. Eliot, Irving Babbitt, Yvor Winters, and others have criticized it for promoting an adolescent version of liberty. Defenders of romanticism have been fewer in number. One is Jacques Barzun, whose 1940 essay "To the Rescue of Romanticism" gave Daley his title.^[3] Barzun, writing at a time when Hitler and Mussolini sought to appropriate romanticism for their own ends, is more explicit than Pater about the social utility of romanticism, citing its relativity of moral values, sincere interest in diversity, and promotion of individual perception as antidotes to totalitarianism. Although Barzun's essay is not about Pater, Daley suggests that Barzun's "defense of romantic passion and restlessness . . . is in large part an effort to undo the seamy, unwholesome image of the romantic that Pater himself, especially in his early essays, helped create and perpetuate" (136).

It is only in his conclusion, curiously, that Daley discusses one of these early essays, "Poems by William Morris," written in 1868. Pater wrote of Morris's "incurable thirst for the sense of escape" and, as Daley puts it, "repeatedly and dramatically associates romanticism with transgression, license, the actual crossing of limits" (136). Pater saw Morris as a

representative of the modern romantic school, which was a "refinement" of medievalism but with an even "higher degree of passion." Daley finds this view "outrageously anti-Ruskinian" as well as anti-Christian (137). The Conclusion to *The Renaissance* was originally published as the second part of this 1868 essay. In this context the oft-quoted exhortation in the Conclusion "to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy" casts a more lurid glow. Pater's early essays on Coleridge and Morris might have been considered to good effect in an initial chapter, together with Ruskin's "Nature of Gothic." Art historians might also prefer a more chronological examination of the artistic periods under consideration, beginning with the Greeks and ending with the nineteenth century.

Although Daley's method is primarily textual analysis, he separates himself from those "intertextual" scholars who posit the death of the author, declaring his insistence on "a degree of authorial agency" for the two critics and aligning himself with a more "historicized view" (14). Daley does provide some context on the Oxford milieu, but this slender study assumes a familiarity with Victorian culture—Daley, like Pater, is an allusive writer—and readers will have to go elsewhere for information on the broader context of Victorian intellectual life as well as the private lives of these two writers, so clearly important to their theories of art.

The Rescue of Romanticism shows its origins as a dissertation in its thorough documentation of the critical commentary on Ruskin and Pater. It breaks little new ground, but it does succeed in its aim of substantiating significant correspondences between the two. In so doing, it explores crucial ideas on the development of modernism in the British tradition. It will probably be of more use to scholars of English literature than to art historians, but the latter can profit from this distillation of the two influential critics' ideas on the slippery concept of romanticism. And Daley's formulation of the process by which Pater converted Ruskin's oracular vision into a modern exploration of the creative sensibility can enlighten all students of the nineteenth century and beyond.

Julie L'Enfant
Associate Professor
Department of Liberal Arts
College of Visual Arts
St. Paul, Minnesota

Notes

- [1] Harold Bloom, "The Crystal Man," introduction to *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, Columbia University Press, 1974), x.
- [2] Wendell Harris, "Ruskin and Pater—Hebrew and Hellene—Explore the Renaissance," *CLIO* 17, no. 2 (1988): 175, quoted in Daley, 58-59.
- [3] Jacques Barzun, "To the Rescue of Romanticism," *The American Scholar* (spring 1940): 147-58.