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| Aestheticism |
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| Aestheticism refers to a late-Victorian tendency to argue that art is its own justification and should therefore be judged by purely aesthetic criteria. Closely related to the doctrine of l’art pour l’art (art for art’s sake) put forward by Théophile Gautier and to the radical aesthetic theories of Charles Baudelaire, British aestheticism found its leading exponent in Walter Pater. His work had an immediate and profound impact on writers and artists like Oscar Wilde, who are sometimes referred to as aesthetes, and more often as decadents, and his lasting influence has been traced in the work of several major modernist writers. |
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The Greek word *αἰσθητικός* refers to ‘that which is perceptible by the senses’; in modern European thought, aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that analyses the ways in which artworks produce sensations in spectators and, more broadly, the nature and role of art. Originally, the aesthetic movement in British culture was a reaction against a utilitarian world view that left too little room for the pursuit of beauty. Mid-Victorian artists and writers like John Ruskin, William Morris and his Arts and Crafts movement, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood all criticized the plainness of the modern world that had been created by the industrial revolution. They advocated a return to the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and encouraged the creation of beautiful environments produced by handicraft. Since they emphasized the social and moral implications of art, their ‘aesthetic’ attitude differs from a more radical aestheticism that separated the pursuit of beauty from political, ethical, and practical considerations. This kind of aestheticism is associated with the influence of French theories, such as Théophile Gautier’s insistence on *l’art pour l’art* and Charles Baudelaire’s relentless emphasis on artistic and poetic novelty. Its main expression in English literature is the work of Walter Pater (1839-1894), a reclusive Oxford don whose writings on art were avidly read by a whole generation of *fin-de-siècle* aesthetes.  File: paterwalter.jpg  Pater’s most influential essays were highly subjective appreciations of works of art (ranging from obscure late-mediaeval French texts to the Mona Lisa) where he emphasized the necessity for readers or spectators to analyse their own private responses to art. In his infamous conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1873), Pater seemed to provide a philosophical justification for the restless pursuit of aesthetic sensations at the expense of all other considerations. The relativism that pervades his writings is obvious in the opening sentence: “To regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes of fashion has more and more become the tendency of modern thought.” Human existence was reduced to a series of loose impressions, each of which Pater saw as “the impression of the individual in isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner in his own dream of a world.” Faced with a potentially dispiriting sense of transience, the individual was invited to make the most out of each moment: “To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.” Such success could most safely be found through “the love of art for its own sake: for art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.”  In such formulations, Pater was radicalising the insights of German aesthetic philosophy, which had defined art as having a “purposiveness without a purpose” (Kant), and was also obviously echoing Théophile Gautier’s *l’art pour l’art*. His statements caused a considerable stir in Britain: young dandies saw them as a rationale for an amoral cultivation of beauty, and Pater stood accused of corrupting youth with unwholesome ideas. A quiet, publicity-shy man, Pater tried to limit the furore that his writings had unleashed: he insisted that morality, being part of human faculties, should not be neglected in the “harmonious development of man’s entire organism,” and he suppressed his conclusion in the second edition of *The Renaissance*, arguing that he had been misinterpreted. This was of little avail: Pater’s aesthetic philosophy became associated with writers and artists who were sometimes labelled as ‘aesthetes’ and more often branded as ‘decadents.’ The pursuit of extreme sensations, a taste for the artificial, the quaint, the bizarre, the divorce between beauty and morality could all be traced back to some aspect of Pater’s writings, or at least to a selective reading of his work. In the hands of Oscar Wilde, Pater’s ideas became popularized through extravagant attitudes that duly attracted publicity and controversy.  Pater’s aestheticism, however, was influential beyond the *fin-de-siècle* atmosphere associated with Wilde and other decadents. Echoes of his thought have been traced in the theory and fiction of writers who are associated with early modernism, like Henry James and Joseph Conrad, and in the work of such paragons of English modernism as Virginia Woolf or T.S. Eliot. Pater’s cosmopolitan openness to French and German aesthetic theories, his emphasis on subjectivity, on the relativity of both knowledge and existence, and on the self-reflexive and self-justifying character of art, all fed into various aspects of modernist thinking. Pater’s subtle, impressionistic style was quite idiosyncratic, but it also had its modernist admirers: when W. B. Yeats edited the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892­–1935*, he opened his selection with Pater’s prose description of the Mona Lisa, which he turned into a piece of free verse for the occasion.  Pater’s aestheticism was clearly instrumental in paving the way for the development of modernist thought in England, and his work is often discussed in studies that chart the rise of English modernism. |
| Further reading:  Works by Walter Pater  (Pater, The Renaissance)  (Pater, Essays on Literature and Art)  (Denisoff)    (Eastham)  (Freedman)  (Gaunt)  (Hamilton)  (Levenson)  (McGrath)  (Meisel)  (Walter Pater and the Culture of the Fin-de-siècle) |