

“As the Wings of a Dove”:
A Possible Source for Pater’s Epigraph for His 1893 *Renaissance*

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I

Walter Pater published *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, a collection of his essays on aestheticism, in 1873. Then he revised the book three times and published each revised version in 1877, 1888, and 1893 respectively. In the fourth edition Pater added “*Yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove*” as an epigraph for the book. The epigraph is alleged to be from Psalms 68:13: “Though ye have lien among the pots, *yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold*” (*Authorized King James Version*. Emphasis in *Authorized King James Version*).

Donald L. Hill doubts the epigraph’s source from the Bible and says, “A study of this psalm will yield no easy understanding of the reasons why Pater took from it the words which serve as the epigraph for his book.”¹ And Matthew Beaumont, who edited and published the latest edition of Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, also refers to the words from Psalms 68:13 and defines the added epigraph as “enigmatic.”² Instead of Psalms 68:13, Hill proposes as a probable source Pico della Mirandora’s “happy use of the image” in a passage from Pico’s *Heptaplus* :

“Thus far we have discussed the celestial world, unveiling the mysteries of Moses to the best of our ability. Who will now give me the wings of a dove, wings covered with silver and yellow with the paleness of gold? I shall fly above the heavenly region to that of true repose, peace, and tranquility, especially that peace which this visible and corporeal world cannot give. Unveil my eyes, you ultramundane spirits,

and I shall contemplate the wonders of your city, where God has laid up for those who fear him what the eye has not seen, nor the ear heard, nor the heart thought”—*Omnia Quae Extant Opera* (Venice, 1557), p. 3 (trans. Carmichael, p. 106) (290-91).

Pico is known as one of those, in Pater’s words, “Italian scholars of the fifteenth century to reconcile Christianity with the religion of ancient Greece” (23). However, Hill’s proposal, employing Pico’s passage quoted above, is yet unconvincing because Pater’s sentence, if associated with Pico’s “happy use of the image,” might stand good as an epigraph for his essay on Pico in *The Renaissance*, but it is not good as an epigraph for *The Renaissance* itself, since the book is a manifesto for aestheticism in which the spirit of Hellenism is encouraged together with antinomian atheism and homosocial idealism.

II

In Swinburne’s *Atalanta in Calydon*, the Chorus apostrophize Love [Aphrodite; Venus] as “a mother of strife” and say:

We have seen thee, O Love, thou art fair; thou art goodly, O Love;
Thy wings make light in the air as the wings of a dove.
Thy feet are as winds that divide the stream of the sea;
Earth is thy covering to hide thee, the garment of thee.³

In the second line of Swinburne’s passage quoted above appears a phrase, “as the wings of a dove,” which Pater recycled, I would say, in his epigraph for *The Renaissance*.

Meleager, the protagonist of Swinburne’s *Atalanta*, says seven lines prior to the above quote, “for us the day / Once only lives a little, and is not found” (4: 273). What Meleager says here seems to be reverberated in Pater’s epigraph for his “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, “Λέγει που Ἡράκλειτος ὅτι πάντα χωλεῖ καὶ οὐδέν μένει” (186), which is, according to Jowett’s translation, “Heraclitus says ‘All things are in motion and nothing at

rest” (451). Furthermore, Pater’s another sentence in the “Conclusion,” that is, “Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening” (189), seems to be another echo of Meleager’s above-cited words.

In “Two Early French Stories” in *The Renaissance*, Pater says, “In their search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination, in their care for beauty, in their worship of the body, people were impelled beyond the bounds of the Christian ideal; and their love became sometimes a strange idolatry, a strange rival religion. It was the return of that ancient Venus, not dead, but only hidden for a time in the caves of the Venusberg, of those old pagan gods still going to and fro on the earth” (18-19). Pater’s phrase, “that ancient Venus, not dead, but only hidden for a time in the caves of the Venusberg,” seems to be still another reverberation of the fourth line of the Chorus’ above-cited passage, “Earth is thy [Venus’] covering to hide thee, the garment of thee.”

III

As Laurel Brake argues, “the years ... in Britain (1885-1891) are thick with civic and cultural formations which interrogate gender--heterosexual and homosexual, women and men, adults and children--in relation to the person but also to literature, and fiction in particular Although Pater died before the trials of Wilde in 1895, the enhanced and incremental danger from the press of the late 1880s, through which he lived and wrote, is palpable.”⁴ And Kenneth Clark also says, “Those in authority [at Oxford University], from Jowett downwards, viewed him [Pater] with suspicion and alarm.”⁵ I would propose that Pater added “*Yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove*” as an epigraph for the 1893 edition of *The Renaissance* in order to protect himself from those who regarded him as an influential deviant from orthodox Christianity and sexuality. Pater tried to placate his critics who were suspicious of his aesthetic atheism and homoeroticism and he used a biblical sentence from Psalms 68:13 as a motto for the final edition of his book.

Lesley J. Higgins points out that “in the [late Victorian] era’s aesthetic wars [where] ...

critics ... [were] warning would-be gallery-goers to avoid the unacceptably unconventional,” Pater sympathetically “summarizes the ‘courage’ required to articulate one’s critical ‘opinions’ ... in the opening paragraphs of ‘Mr George Moore as an Art Critic’” and Higgins cites Pater’s passage from his review essay on Moore’s book in *The Daily Chronicle* in 1893:

The writer [George Moore] of this clever book deserves to be heard about his opinions on fine art, and especially on the somewhat vexed subject of “Modern Painting”. He deserves to be heard, because he has a right to those opinions, having taken more pains than critics of contemporary art sometimes do to know from within what he is writing about; ... he writes with all the courage of the opinions thus sincerely formed, so as to keep the attention of the reader fixed to the very last page.⁶

Exactly in the same vein, in the 1893 edition of *The Renaissance*, Pater exerted his own “courage,” I would say, “to articulate [his] critical ‘opinions’” and added “*Yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove*” as an epigraph for the book.

IV

Interestingly, in his *Atalanta Chorus*’ description of the birth of Aphrodite, Swinburne himself alludes, as Rosenberg points out, “with a certain perverse appropriateness, to The Song of Solomon: ‘Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold thou art fair; thou hast doves’ eyes within thy locks (4:1).’”⁷ And it is true that the Chorus’ description of “the wings of a dove” reminds us also of Psalms 55:6 as well as Psalms 68:13.⁸ Swinburne is, indeed, notoriously fond of quoting the Bible in a subverting fashion. And Pater seems to have followed suit.

It is noteworthy that Pater recycles in “Winckelmann” another phrase from Swinburne’s *Atalanta*, “lordship of the soul” (164, 431). Here again Pater utilizes Swinburne’s words (“lordship of the soul”) to extol the Greek thought in which “the mind has not yet learned to boast its independence of the flesh” and refers to the Venus of Melos as an ideal example of Greek art (164). His intricately subtle use of Swinburne’s words in

“Winckelmann” is idiosyncratically Paterian. So is his handling of Swinburne’s *Atalanta Chorus*’ “as the wings of a dove” as part of the epigraph, “*Yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove.*”

As Clark says, “He [Pater] was a professed pagan, but inhaled, with voluptuous pleasure, the incense of High Anglican ceremonial” (11). So, feigning to quote Psalms 68:13, Pater at heart calls for “the return of that ancient Venus ... of those old pagan gods” (19). Thus, employing a seemingly enigmatic epigraph Pater sends an aesthetically encoded message to his sympathetic readers.

¹ Donald L. Hill, ed. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 290. Subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

² Matthew Beaumont, ed. Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 141n.

³ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne*. 6 vols. (1904: rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1972), 4: 273.

⁴ Laurel Brake, “The Entangling Dance: Pater after *Marius*, 1885-1891” in Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins, and Carolyn Williams, eds. *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire* (Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 2002), pp. 25, 29.

⁵ Kenneth Clark, “Introduction” to his *The Renaissance by Walter Pater* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961), p. 11.

⁶ Lesley J. Higgins, “The ‘Necessity’ of Corot and Whistler in Pater’s ‘Network’ of Painters” in Elicia Clements and Lesley J. Higgins, eds. *Victorian Aesthetic Conditions: Pater Across the Arts* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 50.

⁷ John D. Rosenberg, ed. *Swinburne: Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), p. 29n.

⁸ Kenneth Haynes, ed. *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 392.