BODY AND LITERATURE

Essays on sensual experience, aesthetic form and bodily/textual identity

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Introduktion

De følgende arbejdspapirer blev præsenteret ved magister-seminaret *Body and Literature*, d. 28.-29. November 2001 (Institut for litteraturhistorie, Århus Universitet).

Seminarets generelle tema 'krop og litteratur' rummer i sig en mængde mulige forbindelseslinjer. Mindst to synes indlysende: Litteratur og kunst, litteratur og identitet. Den førstnævnte – litteratur og kunst – fremhæver litteraturen som én kunstart blandt andre og fremhæver derved i særlig grad den æstetiske form. Dette fører frem til det første fokuspunkt: *Sanselig erfaring og æstetisk form*. Den sidstnævnte forbindelse udfordrer selve forestillingen om identitet, i forhold til teksten og i forhold til kroppen. Derved fører den frem til det andet fokuspunkt: *Krop og identitet*.

Introduction

The following papers were presented at the M.A.-seminar *Body and Literature*, on Nov. 28th –29th 2001 (University of Aarhus, Dept. Of Comparative Literature).

Within the general theme of the seminar 'Body and Literature' a vast number of possible connections can be made. At least two seem obvious: Literature and art, literature and identity. The former – Literature and art – emphasises literature as an art-form, one among others, thereby emphasising the notion of aesthetic form. This leads to the first focuspoint: *Sensual experience and aesthetic form*. The latter questions the very notion of identity, in relation to the text and in relation to the body, thus leading to the second focuspoint: *Body and identity*.

BODY AND LITERATURE

Indholdsfortegnelse:

Del 1:

Del 2:

Hanne Tværmose:

Martin Amis's Teeth

Abstract:

Reflecting on Philippe Lejeune's generic definition on the autobiography I find it lacks certain elements. It does not concern itself particularly with the role of the author or the internal structure of the text. The paper propose an altered version of Lejeune's categories that takes these issues into consideration. It analyses Martin Amis's autobiography Experience (Vintage, 2000) with this altered version of Lejeune – more specifically the role of the "I" and the textual treatment of his physical teeth.

Resumé:

Philippe Lejeunes genremæssige definition af autobiografien mangler visse dele. Den er læserorienteret, og Lejeune glemmer at definere forfatteren/autorens rolle til bunds. Han beskæftiger sig heller ikke med tekstens interne struktur. Dette paper foreslår en ny version af Lejeunes skematiske genrekarakteristik, der tilgodeser disse pointer. Dernæst analyseres Martin Amis' autobiografi Experience (Vintage, 2000) ud fra denne udgave – specielt med fokus på subjektets rolle og den tekstuelle behandling af Amis' fysiske tænder.

I.

Since we are dealing with body and literature and the body in literature today, I have brought along a photograph of Martin Amis taken from his autobiography, *Experience*. This photograph is from the beginning of the 70ies, and along with the rest of the photos in

the book, you cannot see his teeth here. This has a very obvious reason, namely that he is incredibly ashamed of his teeth and they have actually been a lifelong curse for him. On doing this paper, I found myself fascinated by several things in this work, and I am going to focus on two of them here:

1. The status and condition of the ”I” in *Experience*.
2. The role of Martin Amis´s teeth.

To give an account of how the ”I” works in *Experience*, I want to begin with an overall definition of the genre; autobiography.
Philipe Lejeune defines it as a:

> ”Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.” (”The Autobiographical Pact”, p. 4)

In his generic definition, Lejeune takes a starting point in the position of the reader. He states four different categories.

1. *Form of language*
    a. narrative
    b. prose
2. *Subject treated*: individual life, story of a personality
3. *Situation of author*: the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical
4. *Position of the narrator*
    a. the narrator and the principal character are identical

b. retrospective point of view of the narrative (”The Autobiographical Pact”, p. 4)

Together, these four points form the basic condition of an autobiography.

However, because Lejeune takes a starting point in the position of the reader, he fails to take into account the generating effect behind the work. He does not ask how this piece of work ended up on his desk – he merely focuses on the readerly proces of decoding. But the role of the reader can not be interpreted without taking into account the generating effect behind the work, because these two are interdependent.

What drives the author of an autobiography to write is the desire to be acknowledged. In a secular version of the genre, this acknowledgement must come from the reader (and not, as it is the case for St. Augustine, from God). The reader must approve of the author’s life, including the choices he has made as well as the road not taken. The author seeks confirmation and this is what the reader can and must give to fulfill the performance.

Thus, I propose an altered version of Lejeune’s generic definition with a fifth category that concerns the generating part of the work. This category could be named:

”generator/goal: confirmation/verification
by the reader”.

We have now widened Lejeune's definition and included an authorial intention that incorporates a textual dimension and a readerly dimension. However, we must also consider the authorial figure. The subject of an autobiography has a more complex position, than the subject of a 'regular' piece of fiction, since it must configure itself within the text and at the same time constitute itself outside it. Lejeune defines the subject of the autobiography as a three-fold position containing an author, a narrator and a protagonist. I propose an altered version of this definition that takes the formal need to constitute a reality outside the autobiography into consideration.

external author – author – narrator – protagonist

The position of the external author has direct reference to reality – it folds itself around/about the text. It constitutes the reality of which the subject of the autobiography and the reader of the text are part, and at the same time it refers to the textual positions of the "I". The author-position is situated on the border of the text, whereas the narrator and the protagonist position and construct the literary subject within the text.

This modified version of Lejeune's generic definition makes it possible to dig deeper into the elastic field of the subject of the autobiography and consider the various positions it may take while narrating its own story.

On contemplating the "I", the subject in Martin Amis's autobiography, one finds that it constitutes itself through various

sets of discourse. Sometimes, the narrative tends toward fiction, sometimes toward pure, unreflected fact (for instance the inserted letters from Amis to his parents from the 1960ies and 70ies), and sometimes toward a literary or theoretical discussion. These various sets of discourse woo different positions of the narrator.

However, in this case the narrator takes us through the different sets of discourse without changing position in the reader's mind. This is due to the fact that the field of the "I" in *Experience* is a self-reflective field. A continual theme throughout the book is the relation between fiction and reality. Factual episodes are constantly referred to as being used in Amis's fiction. The "I" itself has an awareness of its division into the sub-categories: external author-author-narrator-protagonist. However, we are not dealing with a self-conscious "I", but with an "I" that is aware of its generic constraints and plays with them. The aim of the book is to give a "clear view of the geography of a writer's mind" (p. 7), but the writer's mind is full of fictitious "I"s (as the "I" itself states several times), and thus the personal pronoun forms a half fictitious, half factual "I", reflecting upon its character.

Let me show you how this works with a rather long quotation from *Experience*:'

> "'The Forest Ranger', I informed my boys, 'is out of hospital.' They nodded solemly ... Years earlier, with their mother, on a trip to Vermont: the Nobel Laureate was to link up with us at a market in a small town near his house. He arrived in a jeep and dropped down from it wearing some kind of municipal combat jacket with (I think) the words FIRE SERVICE stitched

into its shoulders. I told the boys he was a forest ranger. And they couldn't be blamed for believing me. That's what he looked like, towards the end of a summer of writing, walking, cycling and chopping wood. And now such exchanges as

- Who are you going to see?
- The Forest Ranger.

or

- Who said that?
- The Forest Ranger.

or

- What are you reading?
- The Forest Ranger

have become commonplace... I talked to Saul on 9 January (Notebook: 'completely himself. Janis's voice so *moved*') and a week later I would see him, in Boston, on my way to Los Angeles and my rendezvous with John Travolta.

In *Ravelstein** (2000) – and doesn't *that* look weird? – the narrator, hospitalised and on the threshold of death, seems to be entertaining himself with hallucinations, delusions – 'fictions which did not have to be invented'. Bellow writes:

"A male hospital attendant on a stepladder was hanging Christmas tinsel, mistletoe and evergreen clippings on the wall fixtures. This attendant didn't much care for me. He was the one who had called me a troublemaker. But that didn't stop me from taking note of him. Taking note is part of my job-description. Existence is – or was – the job"

I second that. Existence still is the job.

* I have seen *Ravelstein* in three versions. Some of the quotes in this section have been cut from the final draft. In his foreword to the compact fictions that make up *Something to Remember Me By* (1991), Bellow writes: '[W]e respond with approval when Chekov tells us, "Odd, I have now a mania for shortness. Whatever I read – my own or other people's works – it all seems to me not short enough." I find myself emphatically agreeing with this.' There followed, in 1997, the powerful but minimalist novella, *The Actual*. So Bellow's return, with *Ravelstein*, to an earlier, freer, more voice-driven exuberance is an astonishment to me. I have to keep reminding myself that the author was born, not in 1950, but in 1915." (p. 210 – 211)

This is a good example of how different kinds of discourse are put together to form an image of the writer's mind. Through the style, we see how the "I" is aware of the narrating situation, as well as its function as respectively protagonist, narrator and authorial figure. The first "I" (in "I informed my boys") is controlled by the narrating situation and is thus mainly a protagonist "I" in an anecdote being told. The second "I", '(I think)', shows the uncertainty of an external authorial figure, who is caught up in the narrative drive. The personal pronoun in "I told the boys he was a forest ranger" is again the anecdotal protagonist speaking, while the next sentence ("And they couldn't be blamed for believing me") is a narratorial comment

upon the situation byt the author. The ”I” in the footnote is the author with an incorporated readerly fuction – it is in a sense the reader of its own text as well as of Bellow’s. The finalizing ”I” in ”I second that. Existence still is the job.” can be seen as either a meta-commentary upon the narrator’s tripartite situation, or as an authorial, literary comment – or as both.

The ”I” is at one time manifold and united in its self-referential character. The self-reference thus (paradoxically) become the stabilizing effect behind the experiencing ”I”. With the act of self-reference, the ”I” takes the reader through various sets of discourse wtihout loosing touch with itself *or* the reader.

II.

This stabilizing effect that shapes the ”I” is operated by a very real object. Martin Amis’s teeth act as a metonymy for the enunciation, and at the same time as a metaphor for the creative proces.

Amis’s teeth take up a substantial part of the autobiography, as does e.g. the disappearance of his cousin Lucy Partington in the 70ies and his father Kingsley Amis, who was also a writer (and this is merely to show that his teeth are not the only thing he babbles on about for 400 pages). The closeness in the relation between speaking and writing for Amis and the reverent theme of fact in fiction and vice versa makes way for the trope of the teeth as a metonymy for enunciation. Furthermore, his teeth are the source of his creativity.

> ”I hadn’t been to a dentist for five years. I had been writing a novel for five years. I said: If I get into the dentist’s chair I’ll

never get out. I'll finish the novel. Then I'll get into the chair." (p.73)

He is simpy afraid that he will lose his creative energy by loosing his teeth. And, actually, not only that:

"Teeth were clearly, or apparantly, connected to rank – " (p. 119)
"The other key dental connection, of course, is with sexual potency." (p. 120)
"I sometimes believed that sex and teeth would be coterminous. […] In some of my more tremolous fantasies I thought that I would slip out of the country and head off to a land – Albania? Uzbekistan? South Wales? – where nobody else had any teeth either." (p. 121)

The visual image of the teeth literally generates the personal pronoun by hissing it out. Thereby it functions as a metonymic figure for the act of enunciation and the shaping of the "I". The sub-categories of the "I" (external author-author-narrator-protagonist) refer to the configuration of the actual, pronounced "I", whereas the creative proces includes them all. The visual image of the teeth transcends the sub-categories of the personal pronoun by acting as a metaphor for the creative proces. This is Amis's way of translucing the body that speaks – the body that speaks in (and out of) autobiography.

The role of the teeth does not stop here. By acting as a metaphor for the creative proces, they become the *vehicle* in the authorial proces of achieving and ensuring verification and acknowledgement of his life from the reader. The appeal for understanding and confirmation comes through the verbal and visual image of his badly kept, half-rotten teeth. Thus, the bodily image of Martin Amis's teeth act as the generator of the creative proces, as well as the plea for acceptance by the reader.

So even though the teeth are not shown in the photographs, they appear as clattering tropological figures throughout the autobiography.

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CV:

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romanform og er pt. i gang med en opgave om nationens fremstilling i litteraturen.

Thomas Hebsgaard Nielsen:

Thomas Mann, or: The Irony of Tuberculosis

Abstract:

The paper presents a reading of Thomas Mann's 'Der Zauberberg'. On one hand the novel is read within a sociological-historical framework (the novel as a 'Zeitroman'). On the other hand the paper focus on the subtle way, in which disease throughout Mann's work interacts with irony.

Resumé:

Essay'et er en læsning af Thomas Manns 'Der Zauberberg'. På den ene side læses romanen i en sociologisk-historisk optik (romanen som 'Zeitroman'). På den anden side fokuserer læsningen på den subtile måde, hvorpå sygdom og ironi flettes sammen igennem hele Manns værk.

I.

Shortly after having finished The Death in Venice, Mann writes a letter to his publisher: "I am currently working on another short-story, which I more or less think of as an ironic version of *The Death in Venice*". Then the first World War breaks out and Mann has to wait untill after the war to finish his story. In 1922 he writes another letter and remarks: "The short-story has somewhat grown". That short-story was *Der Zauberberg* (ZB)

This wonderful understatement is not just a good example of Mann's irony. It gives us a pretty important key to understanding this monstrous novel, which is, perhaps, the best-known of Mann's works (though it never aqquired the popularity of Buddenbrooks. None of his works ever did). The monstrousity of the novel (the immense length, the seemingly endless discussions, the overwhelming number of cultural and literary references) tends to overshadow the rather simple fact that it is a pretty funny book. It has the rare quality of leaving the reader bored and amused at the same time – which isn't easy to achieve. Conscious of this Mann in 1939[1] – at a seminar - urged the students at Princeton University to read the ZB twice. Not just because it was a good novel – but because you were bound to be bored to death the first time you read it.

And indeed, it is a novel which imposes upon the reader its own notion of time. The chapters seem to get longer and longer. The first chapter in my edition is 21 pages long – the last is 245! Far from being a coincidence, this is of course a part of the authors agenda. The more the reader gets into the novel, the more he or she is dragged into that particular notion of time which we find at the Sanatorium: Time as repetition, as 'Wiederholung' of the same tasks, the same routines over and over again. This concept of time we might call, "time as confirmation of identity through repetition" – and of course at the same time it comes very close to being an abolishment of time altogether. The young Hans Castorp comes to

[1] Bruno Hillebrand "Theorie des Romans"

visit his cousin at a Tuberculosis Sanatorium in Switzerland for a period of three weeks – and he ends up staying there 7 years. The opposite notion of time is of course the concept of time of the Italian Ludovico Settembrini, another patient at the sanatorium, who defends a more classical aproach: Time as difference, time as development and progress, time as change.

Both notions of time are at play in the novel and in a way mirrors a specific feeling that is dominant Thomas Mann's work: The feeling of belonging to a time and a place, which has ceased to exist – the feeling of belonging to a world, which does no longer exist but continues to haunt the present like a ghost. ZB is not just a monster in the formal sense (in that it shares these features which we normally ascribe to those novels called the monstrous novels of the early 20th century) – but a monster in the basic sense that it is a ghost, haunting a world to which it doesn't belong; a huge dinosaur, belonging to a lost world; a literary fossile, containing the dichotomies and contradictions of it's time, but being send off to – and being activated in - the after-world. Or – to speak less metaphorically – in the world and setting of ZB I see a symbol of certain social arrangments of pre-war Europe, a certain socio-economical order only possible in an industrialized, capitalist economy still intact, ie. unshaken by the world wars. And ZB becomes a swan-song of that form of existance; of "die ästhetisch-bürgerliche Gesellschaft", the bourgeois society, which in that specific form ended in 1914.

II.

So, in ZB as throughout the 'Gesamtwerk' Mann writes from within the bourgeoisie. This is a very important thing to keep im mind when reading Thomas Mann: He does not try to portray the bourgois society from the outside; he is always writing from within. And so, the dichotomies which are dominant in Manns works – the dichotomy between citizen and artist, between ethics and aesthetics – are not dichotomies between the bourgoisie and something outside of the bourgoisie; rather they are expressions of tensions inside the bourgoisie. Gustav Aschenbach, Hans Castorp, Jonathan Leverkühn – they all embody and display the tensions of this bourgois socio-economical order. But they are not positions outside the bourgoisie – and conversely, none of them really manage to establish plausible alternative positions.

Like Venice, the magic mountain isn't a place outside of or in opposition to bourgeois society but rather a place where society looks upon itself. And for Hans Castorp as for Gustav Aschenbach it is the disease that triggers the chain of events. But unlike the very potent Oriental Cholera of Death in Venice, the tuberculosis of Hans Castorp is more doubtfull. Two dark spots on a blurred X-ray-plate and a bodytemperature that almost never rises above 38 degrees celcius – it isn't exactly what most people would consider alarming signs of serious illness. And most of the novel Hans Castorp feels quite well –indeed, the patients of the sanatorium eat, flirt and discuss with a passion and at a rate one wouldn't expect to find among seriously ill people. But as Doctor Krokowski says, you

should never ask the patient how he is doing – it is the job of the doctor to let the patient know how he or she is doing! And Hans Castorp willingly complies, with the naive-ironic remark that it probably is for the best, since – after all – you do have to be ill before you can get well!

So, like beauty disease seem to lie mainly in the eye of the beholder. And the body as a sign to be read thus plays a double role in the novel. On one hand the common denominator of the sanatorium is – of course – disease, the fragility of the flesh, the bodily decay and the ever-present death (indeed, people do die at the magic mountain). On the other hand, among the patients there is an almost joyful obsession with the body and the bodily functions – measuring body-temperature gets close to being a religion at the sanatorium. And one evening during supper Frau Iltis (an elderly woman with whom Castorp is only remotely aquatinted) approaches Hans Castorp, whispering to him in a low voice and with glowing cheeks, that her body-temperature has risen. I quote: "I almost have a fever, she said, with a voice not quite devoid of hope" (end of quote). After that Hans Castop decides to enjoy his supper at a different table in the future.

Indeed, fever, disease and the ever-present possibility of death bind the patient together in an intimate, almost erotic, way. And of course a dominant theme of the novel, is Castorp's metting with Clavdia – a female Russian patient at the sanatorium. She is an exotic woman of lagging manners (Hans Castorp is fascinated with the noise, she always seems to make) – and of a rather doubtful moral. As the cousin Joachim points out: She is supposed to have a

husband somewhere in Russia - but wears no wedding-ring. And I quote: "After hearing *this*, Hans Castorp measured 37,9 degrees" (end of quote). Once again the body-temperature becomes a metaphorical (and of course ironic) expression of emotional excitement. And this is characteristic of Thomas Mann as well: That physical features and bodily functions become ironic expressions of a rather problematic emotional life. And bodily excess becomes a symptom of underlying disease and decay: The outspoken ugliness and beauty both become symptoms of disproportions: Dwarfs and giants alike are monsters.

Like Tadzio in Death in Venice, Clavdia is the seduction from the east. For some reason, the erotic and bodily seduction in Mann's works often become part of an east/west-dichotomy. There is an north/south-theme as well but that is more a question of intellectual-mythical setting: Often the protagonists will move (or even undertake a journey) from the north to the south in order to displace the cultural setting that will enable them to embody and display certain problems and dichotomies. But that is precisely what it is: A displacement and not really a profound change. The true strangers often come from the east: Ida Jungmann in *Buddenbrooks* (the *Preußin* that comes to Lübeck),Tadzio in *Death in Venice*, Clavdia in ZB etc. I am not really sure why this is so but I suspect you could trace some of these themes back to the German romantic movement. The intertwining of erotisicm and bodily decay and the fascination with the East were dominant themes of the romantic period. Of course the East that was being discovered back then was the Orient, whereas the exciting East of the 1920's was Russia and Eastern

Europe. But still I think there is a substantial influence. And I believe that a great deal of the symbolic of the ZB is best understood against the background of the myth of the *Venus-Mountain*, der Venusberg – a mediaeval myth that became pretty influental in the later stages of German Romanticism. The myth of the Vennusmountain deals with the ambiguity of gender and death. And it is precisely this ambiguity that I find in ZB: That death is associated with origin (das Ursprüngliche), a certain form of fullness – but also (and just as much) with emptyness and confusion. In *Buddenbrooks* for instance I find a stronger tendency to associate the death-experience with *Steigerung*, with some sort of insight – but not so in ZB. When Hans Castorp in the important chapter *Schnee* comes close to facing the death, he is haunted by this ambiguity in that he envisions different scenarios and dichotomies. But I don't find any convincing attempt to choose, let alone synthesize.

III.

The problem of dichotomy is of course most pronounced in the discussions between the rather classical defender of Enlightenment ideas Ludovic Settembrini and the more complex revoulutionary-aristocratic Leo Naphta. They engage in long and seemingly endless discussions on the most different subject-matters and more than anything else in the book, these discussions contribute to the encyclopediac attempt of the novel: The attempt to embody and display the cultural horizon and intellectual tensions of the bourgeois world. The sheer amount of cultural knowledge and the fact that Settembrini is attempting the intellectual 'raising' of Hans

Castorp, makes it somewhat tempting to see in ZB an element of the *Bildungsroman*. Indeed, for Castorp, the *questioning* and *philosophical speculation* begins at the sanatorium – and they would appear to be vital parts of any spiritual *Bildung*. But there is something about Castorps life at the sanatorium that prevents us from calling it a spiritual or intellectual progression or *Steigerung*. In Bruno Hillebrands book ('*Theorie des Romas*') it is being suggested that the specific subject-matter of the *Bildungsroman* is "the journey out of introversion into social activity". If anything, the opposite holds true for Hans Castorp: He comes from a society into which he seems to fit perfectly (in the words of his contemporaries, he is "obviously on his way to great positions in life") – and *then* undertakes a journey that leads him away from a "normal" life as a productive part of his society.

The problem is of course that all this discussing and questioning and philosophizing doesn't really *get* the young protagonist anywhere – and you would expect any *Bildung* to lead to at least some sort of insight. So we might state his problem as follows: The experiences that the *story* yields doesn't have any real impact on the *protagonist* of the story – or as Mann writes in the beginning: "The story of Hans Castorp is eminently worth telling, not because of Hans Castorp but because of the story". There are several reasons for this sharp distinction between story and protagonist: It has to do with the distinct irony of Thomas Mann, it springs from certain artistic concerns of the author (he wants to write a novel in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* but he doesn't want to write a *Bildungsroman* – etc. etc.) – but most importantly, it

is a inevitable part of the historical situation. In short I might state it this way: Hans Castorp lives in and is confined to the bourgeois world of pre-war Europe. His story is being told for and only gains its significance in a post-war context. This is where I return to the statement of the beginning of this speech: belonging to a world that has ceased to exist. Simply put, the problem is not that Castorp doesn't gain any insight from his experiences – the problem is that he *can't* possibly do so, since they only gain their full meaning and importance in a world to which he, Hans Castorp, doesn't belong; namely the traumatized Europe of the 1920's. And maybe for this reason, throughout ZB we can find a number of small anachronisms which aren't of vital importance to the novel, but still remarkable to find in the work of an author who is known for his fondness of the historically correct details. During the winter 1907/08 Hans Castorp supposedly learned about the works of the physician Rutherford and the so-called 'planetary model' of atomic structures. But in reality Rutherford didn't do the actual experiments untill around 1912 – and then it took another few years for his discovery to be publicly known and accepted. When Castorp first comes to the sanatorium in 1907, it advertises (in the brochures) with Doctor Krokowski as being an expert of psychoanalysis. It is perfectly possible that a doctor around 1907 would practice psychoanalysis – but I doubt that a respectable health institution at that time would actually have advertised it, since psychoanalysis didn't become a fashionable vogue untill the 1920's (in the first decades of the century, psychoanalysis wasn't something that respectable people went through) These are just small examples and might not be all

that important – but still remarkable anachronisms for an author like Thomas Mann. And they become somewhat more understandable if you consider the division between the setting and the story.

Of course one may ask if not all the great protagonists, the heros and heroines of literature share this feature of being 'out-of-place' or 'out-of-time'. Naturally, in the great novels of the 18th and 19th century you have hundreds of protagonists who are unable to transform experiences into insights, heros and heroines that can't transform their knowledge into action etc. etc. By all means, the great novelists of the 19th century seem *very* fond of these protagonists that are notoriously unable to act or learn – Fontane and Effi Briest, Flaubert and Emma Bovary to name but a few. But is their inability to transform (experience into insight, knowledge into action) marked by the same radical necessity of cultural history that we find in Mann's Hans Castorp or in Kafka's Josef K. or in Musil's Ullrich ? Hans Castorp is a rather simple young man, to be sure, but his inability of conversion is not a psychological problem – as I suspect it would be for the majority of the 19th century writers. Indeed, for most of the great writers around the first world war the problems that the protagonist face when trying to understand the world, the self or the other are not part of a psychological *inability* but a historical *impossibility*. And maybe for this reason, the protagonists of Franz Kafka have gained such immense popularity and have become almost archetypical symbols of this specific time: Starting out – as they always are - with a lost trial, they eminently embody the impossibility of understanding or belonging to the story

being told. There is no way that Josef K. can ever win his trial or even begin to understand what he did to deserve it – and conversely Hans Castorp *has* to be send out on the battlefield of the first world war to die together with world he belongs to - and is confined to. But the story, of course, survives him.

One may or may not agree with Thomas Mann in the extreme importance that he ascribes to the first world war as a turning point. After all, Mann was an author, not a historian – and understanding the works of this author also means understanding that particular feeling which probably found its most famous expression in the words of Arnold Hauser: "The 20th Century began in the summer of 1914 – and by the time we got to 1918 the century was already old".

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Germay 2000-2002. He is currently working on a thesis on Søren Kierkegaard's influence on German modernist prose-fiction.

Peter Westergaard:

The Erotic Mood - A study of Walter Pater's The Renaissance

"Now contemplation and desire, united into one, inhabit a world where every beloved image has bodily form,and every bodily form is loved" (William Butler Yeats, Phase 15)

Abstract:

The topic of this paper is the figural representation of the body in Walter Pater's The Renaissance and how these figures succeed in generating pleasure into the reader. The paper seeks to investigate how Walter Pater as a critic endures philosophical illogicality and self-contradiction; how he remains shameless on the level of rhetoric, but immediately upon entering the level of real circumstances (the body) he becomes shy and, in consequence, much more seductive. In The Renaissance there is always an understated erotic sensitivity which indirectly arises from the embarrassed figuration of the text.

Resumé:

Arbejdspapirets emne er den figurative gengivelse af kroppen i Walter Paters bog The Renaissance, og hvordan det lykkes disse figurer at generere lystfølelse hos læseren. Dette arbejdspapir vil undersøge, hvordan Walter Pater som kritiker både kan rumme filosofisk inkonsistens og selv-modsigelse; hvordan han kan være uforskammet på det retoriske plan, men

i det samme han møder de realistiske omstændigheder (kroppen), bliver han sky og som en konsekvens heraf meget mere forførende. Der er i The Renaissance altid en underspillet erotisk sensitivitet, som opstår indirekte af de forlegne figurationer, som er i teksten.

Introduction

Walter Pater is considered by many as one of the great British art and literary critics of the nineteenth century and his importance can be compared with that of Coleridge, Lamb, De Quincey, Arnold and above all Ruskin. Of all these, he is perhaps that critic which has had the most importance for twentieth century criticism and poetry. We can find traces of him in many of the great authors a long way into high modernism. Yet the most obvious heir to Pater's theory was, of course, Oscar Wilde, who, as reported, almost always carried *The Renaissance* with him as his personal bible, and even when he went to prison for his homosexuality, *The Renaissance* was the first book he received[2]. However, it is important to note that Wilde's criticism was a radicalization of Pater's aesthetics which Pater himself could not always approve of. But also Pater's own aesthetics can be seen as a radicalization of, for example, Matthew Arnold. Arnold had asserted that the "aim of criticism is to see the object as it really is."[3] Pater was able to take this further into a more subjective perspective where it was the impressions of the critic that counted, as he expresses it in *The Renaissance*: "the first step toward seeing one's

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[2] Michael Levey; The case of Walter Pater, p. 21

[3] Harold Bloom (ed.); Walter Pater; p. 1

object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly."[4] (p. xxix) Of course, Wilde with his wit and eloquence, brought this to a grand statement which in a sense ended the argument: "The primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not."[5] This suggests that Pater is to be found in the middle of this gradual radicalization, and his criticism can be characterised as an impressionistic mode of reception which has not entirely discarded the object, yet the object cannot be understood without the beholder's own impression.

History of the body

The experience of *The Renaissance* is closely connected to the impression of the physical body, which is in focus through Pater's work and is crucial for the development of Pater's account of the Renaissance. Pater formulates it in the following way:

This outbreak of the human spirit (in the Renaissance) may be traced far into the middle ages itself, with its motives already clearly pronounced, the care for the physical beauty, the worship of the body, the breaking down of those limits which the religious system of the middle age imposed on the heart and the imagination. (p. xxxii)

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[4] The page numbers for quotes from The Renaissance are indicated in brackets at the end of the quote throughout the essay.

[5] Ibid. p. 2: The connection between these three quotes is originally suggested by Harold Bloom

In his idiosyncratic empiricism, it is the experience from watching or reading about the body that gives the critic insight into a work of art, because art (in the Renaissance) essentially is the representation of the body. Yet, in Pater's aesthetic theory, the body of the critic is also a way to gain knowledge about the world and a way to understand art, as Pater says about Winkelmann's reception of Hellenic art:

This enthusiasm (from art), dependent as it is to a great degree on bodily temperament, has a power of reinforcing the purer emotions of the intellect with an almost physical excitement.(p. 122)

Art has the ability to create a direct physical impact on the beholder, and we could say that Pater's idea about getting pleasure from gazing at art is everywhere closely connected to concept of the pleasure of the body. He seems to require from the critic that he has a "bodily temperament," which means that the critic has to deploy the receptivity of the physical body when he contemplates art. In my interpretation, Pater essentially understands the pleasure of art as an erotic mood, which I will attempt to reveal in the following part of this essay.

Before proceeding, it would be worth noting that from Pater's perspective the body is not only a mode of receptivity, but it also has importance for the expression of an idea. It is mainly through the body or the representation of the body that the Renaissance artist expresses himself and his ideas. Art is literally the embodiment of the idea and art is the external manifestation of the

inward idea in sensual form. Pater clearly puts emphasis on the sensual part, and for him the idea is not absolute. It is rather the relative spirit of the time or the *Zeit-geist* which has manifested itself in the particular work of art. The idea of an absolute and transcendental knowledge is replaced by an awareness of the immanent, as Pater formulates it:

Philosophy serves culture, not by the fancied gift of absolute or transcendental knowledge, but by suggesting questions which help one to detect the passion, and strangeness, and dramatic contrast of life.(p. 148)

In Pater's aesthetic theory, the outward has taken precedence over the inward, and the body is a way to externalize the aesthetic mood, and make it an outward phenomenon. One has to grasp the physical world before one can capture the idea, and the idea is only a servant of the sensual. Yet he has not discarded the idea entirely; the idea is still a way to enrich the aesthetic experience of the body. Pater has in a sense pointed out the physicality of thought in art, and how ideas in art never can be totally separated from their sensual manifestation.

Philosophy of the flesh

The reason for Pater's "anti-philosophical' aspirations could have their origin in the hedonism that he directly or indirectly utters in his text. Roland Barthes has in his book *The Pleasure of the Text* explained how the concept of pleasure always is reaction against intellectualism. Barthes' text has in many ways affinities to Pater's

text; they are both dealing directly with the pleasure that arises from reading or beholding art, and both texts have at the same time a clear 'reader-response' approach towards the their art object. Barthes formulates the contradiction in the following way:

On the right, pleasure is championed *against* intellectuality, the clerisy: the old reactionary myth of the heart against head, sensation against reasoning (warm) "life" against (cold) "abstraction": must not the artist, according to Debussy's sinister precept, *"humbly seek to give pleasure"?* On the left, knowledge, method, commitment, combat, are drawn up against "mere delectation.[6]

The Renaissance seems to display the same contradictions: it also vacillates between sensation and abstraction without deciding where to belong. It does not come to any synthetic conclusion between pleasure and philosophy, but they do seem to be reconciled practically. Pater is using philosophy pragmatically to build up his aesthetic attitude, as he expresses it:

Philosophical theories or ideas, as point of view, instrument of criticism, may help us to gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us. 'Philosophy is the microscope of thought.'(p. 153)

Philosophy is a tool that serves the development of the aesthetic sentiment, but it also contributes to the elaboration of a representation of the body which is everywhere present in *The*

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[6] Roland Barthes; The Pleasure of the text, p. 22-23

Renaissance. In a way, the body is the foremost rebellion against speculative idealism and repressive religion. The focus on the body is a revolutionary practice in the Renaissance, and it signifies freedom for the worshippers of the body, as Pater expresses it:

One of the strongest characteristics of that outbreak of the reason and the imagination, of the assertion of the liberty of the heart (….) was its antinomism, its spirit of rebellion and revolt against the moral and religious ideas of the time. 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.(p.16)

The representation of the Renaissance body is a reaction against metaphysical systems. This suggested that pleasure is a way to collapse the rigid Christian idealism of Middle Ages. For Pater, the focus on the body is a return to a more natural representation which can refute romantic absolutism.

Pleasure of the text

To comprehend Walter Pater more fully, we must analyse just how the text 'pleasures' its reader, and how the text essentially seeks to reproduce the pleasure from Pater's own contemplation of art. In this matter, I use some of Iser's thoughts in his essay, *The reading process: a phenomenological approach,* where he stresses the importance of gaining pleasure from a text while reading it. Here, Iser tries to

understand the dynamism of a text and the mechanism behind a literary work when it captures its reader. Iser says in this essay:
Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for established connections, for filling in the gaps by the text itself.[7]

Though, Iser is clearly speaking of the "story" in this quote, it can still be helpful for us in our understanding of Pater's literary technique and how he seduces us with it. But before going any further it is important to mention that there are at least two perspectives on pleasure in connection to Pater's text: on the one hand we have Pater's own pleasure from contemplating art, and on the other hand we have our own pleasure from reading Pater's text. This is again a distinction between the text in itself and us as readers; however, in Pater's case it is important to notice that we as readers are fundamentally in the same situation as Pater himself: we cannot understand Pater's pleasure without understanding our own pleasure. From Iser we understand that the pleasure is very much connected to the unwritten part of the text, and it is through omissions and gaps that pleasure from reading arises. It is only when we are not told everything that we suddenly become attentive. This can be related to the concept of the body, as Barthes

[7] David Lodge (ed.); Modern Criticism and Theory; p. 216

suggested in *The Pleasure of the Text*, where he argues that it is the body in the text which gives the reader pleasure, and it is also through our own body we as readers "understand" the text. While thinking about literature, Barthes says:

Is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes*? In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) there are no "erogenous zones" (a foolish expression, besides); it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve);it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance.[8]

Of course, Barthes proceeds to compare our desire to know the end of the story with the hope to see the sexual organ. Perhaps, this is not directly the case in *The Renaissance*, but there is always an implicit desire to see the body, and perhaps therefore indirectly a desire to see the sexual organ. Desire is the main dynamism in *The Renaissance* and it is very closely connected to the concept of pleasure.

I will now turn to an example from Pater's text where he describes his own impression from seeing the body, but as we will notice it is more refined than just looking directly at the body; this may be because of the time in which it is written (the Victorian age), but it is

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[8] Roland Barthes; The Pleasure of the text, p. 9-10

also a veiled attempt to seduce the reader, as I will argue in the following. The passage is taken from Pater's Botticelli essay where he describes the painting of Venus rising from the sea:

What is strangest is that he carries this sentiment into classical subjects, its most complete expression being a picture in the *Uffizii*, of Venus rising from the sea, in which the grotesque emblems of the middle age, and the landscape full of its peculiar feeling, and even its strange draperies, powdered all over in the Gothic manner with a quaint conceit of daisies, frame a figure that reminds you of the faultless nude studies of Ingres. At first, perhaps, you are attracted only by a quaintness of design, which seems to recall all at once whatever you have read of Florence in the fifteenth century; afterwards you may think that this quaintness must be incongruous with the subject, and that the colour is cadaverous or at least cold. And yet, the more you come to understand what imaginative colouring really is, that all colour is no mere delightful quality of natural things, but a spirit upon them by which they become expressive to the spirit, the better you will like this peculiar quality of colour. (…) The light is indeed cold – mere sunless dawn; but a later painter would have cloyed you with sunshine; and you can see the better for that quietness in the morning air each long promontory, as it slopes down to the water's edge. Men go forth to their labours until the evening; but she is awake before them, and you might think that the sorrow in her face was at the thought of the whole long day of love yet to come. An emblematical figure of the wind blow hard across the grey water, moving forward the dainty-lipped shell on which she sails, the sea 'showing his teeth' as it

moves, in thin lines of foam, and sucking in, one by one, the falling roses, each severe in outline, plucked off short at the stalk, but embrowned a little, as Botticelli's flowers always are.(p. 37-39)

Whether or not Pater expects his readers to know the painting, it is still strange that Pater never mentions the nakedness of Venus. He only says that it reminds him of the nude studies of Ingres, but he never describes how she looks; how her body is represented; the closest he gets is by mentioning the expression of her face. It seems like Pater deliberately overlooks the nakedness of Venus, and this gap in his description is even stranger, when he loses himself in description of the colour and the surroundings. At first, he pays close attention to draperies, their design, and how it alludes to the time in which the picture is painted; then he proceeds to mention the sunshine, the sea, and finally the flowers. Meanwhile, he mentions nothing about the body of Venus, which is unavoidably there in the middle of the picture. Yet the more the body disappears the more it appears in the imagination of the reader, and the more powerful the image of body becomes. This method of looking a little bit away to what has affinity to the body, makes the reader more eager and curious. One gets the impression that it is too dangerous to contemplate the naked body directly, and it has therefore to be described by what is in its immediate vicinity. One of the peculiarities in Pater's descriptions is that it almost succeeds for him to animate the picture because we are led to imagine Venus' innermost feelings. All the time Pater is projecting his own impression into this painting, and he constantly focuses on the

physical appearance, but he continually omits the most important feature: the body.

Obviously, this is in keeping with Iser's description of the dynamism of a text, where the reader is intrigued by omission, the gap, and the hole. The allusion to an erotic meaning of the gap, as suggested by Barthes, is not surprising when we read this passage, and we could say in continuation of his thoughts that what exactly goes on in this description of the painting is "appearance-as-disappearance." The erotic mood is of course unmistakably underlined by the ending description of the foam, and the water sucking in the roses.

In my analysis of the eroticism of *The Renaissance,* it is important to interpret how Pater describes the relation between human beings in a work of art. Pater appears to understand the meeting of people (especially male to male encounters) as erotic. For instance, when he describes Michelangelo's *Creation of Man* from the Sistine Chapel, we get a clear impression of how Pater perceives the meeting of Adam and his creator as an erotic encounter:

Fair as the young men of the Elgin marbles, the Adam of the Sistine Chapel is unlike them in a total absence of that balance and completeness which express so well the sentiment of a self-contained, independent life. In that languid figure there is something rude and satyr-like, something akin to the rugged hillside on which it lies. His whole form is gathered into an expression of mere expectancy and reception; he has hardly strength

enough to lift his finger to touch the finger of his creator; yet a touch of the finger-tips will suffice.(p. 48)

Again, Pater moves the perspective a little bit away from the body itself to something more peripheral to the figure, (which the painting also wants you to do). Instead of describing the body, he focuses on the two fingers and let them represent the whole body. The fingers as phallic symbols are obvious, and they can be seen as an indirect substitute for the sexual organ, but this alone does not explain how Pater succeeds in establishing this encounter as significantly erotic. Before going any further it is worth noticing the bizarre allusions to the pagan satyrs. They are especially strange when we consider that this picture is situated in the most important church of Christendom. However, ancient Greek culture had a special significance for many scholars at Oxford at the time, and particularly for the homosexuals[9]. Ancient Greece was regarded as a place where the erotic relationship between men was unproblematic, normal, and legalised. This is also underlined in the essay on Winkelmann where Pater suggests that one can grasp the Greek spirit only if one also has the ability to contemplate the beauty of men. The description of the painting in the Sistine Chapel has to be seen within this context. But the satyr also alludes to hedonistic aspect of Pater's aesthetic perspective. Satyrs were known from Greek mythology as goat-like creatures who lived in

[9] See Linda Dowling; Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford.

the forest in sexual promiscuity and by Pater's use of them in his description, he succeeds in projecting a kind of sexual pleasure into Adam.

The body of Adam is, of course, not mentioned with its proper name but referred to as "the whole form." In spite of this Pater succeeds in animating Adam as a figure full of reception and expectancy, which explicitly alludes to the sexual desire. Pater translates the physical appearance into something emotional, and it is especially when the body is understood emotionally that it becomes erotic. Not before the body of the painting is animated can it represent the divine desire that Pater seeks to find in the image. But the erotic element is only fully comprehended when we interpret the main motive in Pater's description: the touch of the two finger-tips. What makes this an erotic encounter is obviously the "touch" where the two bodies suddenly become close to each other, and it is through this closeness which aspires to contact that the erotic arises. This can be understood as a transgression both on the level of the physical but also on the level of the sacred. On the physical level, it is the almost impossible touch of two bodies that succeeds as an erotic fulfilment whereby the bodily solitude has been overstepped. This is also the case on the sacred level; it has succeeded for Adam to become in touch with the divine, and in that sense he has exceeded the step between profane and sacred.

We as readers are seduced by this image not so much because of the vivid description of the body, which in fact is absent, but because of the representation of the divine desire. In fact, we could say that the reader is seduced by the desire for desire. As in the

painting of Venus, Pater in this passage wants to describe how desire is represented in art, and afterwards he wants us to desire that desire. Pater is perhaps after all not so much interested in the body in itself, but in the desire for the body, and that is the dynamism of his text.

Until now we have mainly dealt with how Pater understands the body in painting, but Pater is of course closer to an aesthetic theory based on the representation of the body when he describes the Greek sculpture. It is here he finally finds the ideal expression of beauty and the complete representation of the idea in sensual form, and this is what he takes pleasure in. Pater desires to emphasise the sensuous over the idea, and he wants describe how the sensuous is always connected to pleasure that arises from the sensual. Pleasure never comes from the idea alone, and it always has a physical origin. Sculpture has an immense importance here because it has the most concrete representation of the body; however sexuality is always ambiguously represented in Pater's text and I will seek to analyse this in the following passage, which is from the essay on Winkelmann:

The hair, so rich a source of expression in painting, because, relatively to the eye and the lip, it is mere drapery, is withdrawn from attention; its texture, as well as its colour, is lost, its arrangement but faintly and severely indicated, with no broken or enmeshed light. The eyes are wide and directionless, not fixing anything with their gaze, not riveting the brain to any special external object, the brows without hair. Again, Greek sculpture

deals almost exclusively with youth, where the moulding of the bodily organs is still as if suspended between growth and completion, indicated but not emphasised; where the transition from curve to curve is so delicate and elusive, that Winkelmann compares it to the quiet sea, which, although we understand it to be in motion, we nevertheless regard as an image of repose; where, therefore, the exact degree of development is so hard to apprehend. If a single product only of Hellenic art were to be saved in the wreck of all beside, one might choose perhaps from the 'beautiful multitude' of the Panathenaic frieze, that line of youths on horseback, with level glances, their proud, patient lips, their chasted reins, their whole bodies in exquisite service. This colourless, unclassified purity of life, with its blending and interpenetration of intellectual, spiritual, and physical elements, still folded together, pregnant with the possibilities of the whole world closed within it, is the highest expression of the indifference which lies beyond all that is relative or partial. Everywhere there is the effect of awaking, of child's sleep just disturbed. All these effects are united in a single instance – the *adorante* of the museums of Berlin, a youth who has gained the wrestler's prize, with hands lifted and open, in praise for the victory. Fresh, unperplexed, it is the image of man as he springs first from the sleep of nature, his white light taking no colour from any one one-sided experience. He is characterless, so far as *character* involves subjection to accidental influences of life.(p. 140)

Pater is in a sense "closer" to the body in this passage than in the earlier descriptions we have dealt with, but in the same time he tries

to desexualise the body of the statues in this passage. He expresses later in the Winkelmann essay that "the beauty of the Greek statues was a sexless beauty,"(p. 142) but in the same time there can be no doubt that this passage is a perfect description of what the Greeks defined as perfect beauty, and this beauty was always partly connected to sexual pleasure. The "young man" was an important sexual object for the Greeks. Through all this, it is remarkable that the essay on Winkelmann does not elsewhere try to minimise the sexual allusions. It says explicitly about Winkelmann that he had: "fervent friendships with young men."(p. 123) So the entire essay vacillates between stating and denying sexuality, and this seems also be what is the essence of the just quoted passage. The sexual descriptions are obvious: "youths on a horseback", "patient lips", "their whole bodies in exquisite service", and "[…] with its interpenetration of intellectual, spiritual, and physical elements, still folded together, pregnant with possibilities […]." The language is loaded with allusions to sexuality, but at the same time the passage tries to seduce us to believe there is only purity and innocence behind it all. In the same passage, Pater speaks of the statue's being a "child's sleep just disturbed."[10] The reason for this may be the Victorian age, but it could also be that the half-hidden sexuality is the most seducing. Direct desire may be unpleasant for the reader,

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[10] This also suggests a paiderastic element in Pater's writing, which had an origin the Hellenic ideal that was prevailing at Oxford at the time - and of course in personal taste.

whereas the indirect representation of desire is pleasant. Pater always sticks to the allusions to sexuality; he never mentions it directly, and the effect is therefore much more powerful. One could say that Pater seeks the desire of the body, but in the same time he consciously tries to undermine the purely sexual and sublimate it to something higher.

On a larger scale there seems to be a gap between what Pater says explicitly and what he says implicitly, and the reasons for the contradiction could be what Barthes formulates in the following way: "The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas – for my body does not have the same ideas I do."[11] There are always two ideas competing simultaneously in Pater's text: On the one hand we have the ideas of the body, and on the other hand we have the concepts of the spirit, and this seems also to be reiterated in the tension between the philosophic and the anti-philosophic tendency that is everywhere present in *The Renaissance.* Moreover, Pater's text is never singular, and it has the ability to state contradicting philosophic views. The mechanism of the text is built on the tension between the body and the idea, and how this is resolved in sudden aesthetic moments, and that this is the desire and dynamism of the text.

If we are to conclude how the reader responds to this text and how *The Renaissance* itself is a responding text, it is important notice how desire always is prevalent in the descriptions of art. We as readers

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[11] Roland Barthes; The Pleasure of the Text, p. 17

participate in a chain of desire, which had its origin in a piece of art and it is then transmitted through Pater and into us as readers. The meaning of all desire is of course to be fulfilled, and this happens in certain aesthetic moments where we gain the ultimate pleasure, which Pater always strove after in art. This also means that we as readers understand the text best when we read with our erotic body.

Linguistic sensuality

In his book *The Pleasure of the Text,* Barthes asks the question: "Does the text have a human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body?" and answers it in the following way: "Yes, but of our erotic body."[12] To understand how *The Renaissance* represents an erotic mood in its interpretation of art, it is important to emphasise that this discourse is itself erotic. The erotic body is not something outside language, but everywhere present inside language. One could say that the erotic body is not only the object of discourse, but also the subject of discourse. The most obvious examples of the erotic discourse are found in the metaphors of the text. One cannot miss the fact that the touch of the hand seems to be a metaphor for how deeply your are touched by and absorbed in human ideas, as for example when Pater describes Abelard as one: "bent on trying all things by their congruity with human experience, who had felt the hand of Heloise, and looked into her eyes, and tested the resources of humanity in her great and energetic nature."(p. 5) The hand is one of the main

[12] Roland Barthes; The Pleasure of the Text, p. 17

ways by which Pater understands the physical aspect of art, and the hand is a metaphor for how the critic experiences art. In the Winkelmann essay, the hand is one of the central metaphors for how Winkelmann contemplates Greek sculpture, as Pater formulates it: "From intoxication Winkelmann is free: he fingers those pagan marbles with unsigned hands, with no sense of shame or loss."(p. 143) The erotic hand-metaphor is build on the metonymic closeness that hand has to the body. The body is always the last sign in the signifying chain, and the main erotic metaphors are constructed through their metonymic proximity to this last signifier, which is the body. We will see this displayed even more if we analyse the Mona Lisa description:

The presence that rose strangely thus beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all 'the ends of the world are come', and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed! All the thoughts and experiences of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the

vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants, and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea.(p. 79-80)

Let me first notice that Mona Lisa is described as object desired by men. But when described as a desired object, it is important to understand how she figuratively is represented in this passage. If we read the passage closely we will discover how almost every description has the body as its last referent. However, as in the image itself, it is always a part of the body which is represented, but this part is always standing as a synecdoche for the whole body. The entire body is never directly present – mostly because the image does not represent the full figure - but Pater imagines and projects his own ideas into the picture, and she becomes a whole person and manifest with the total body. In Pater‘s description of Mona Lisa, he makes obvious that she sits (whereas we cannot be sure in the picture whether she sits or stands,) and her timelessness is based on the omnipresence of her body in time, because she has been

everywhere in the world through history. And the sins, lusts, and desires can not be understood without taking the whole body into consideration. The last sentence of this quote says explicitly that she is an 'embodiment of the old fancy', and this must be understood literally. But the sensual element of this picture is not alone built on the imagery in this description. There is also in the language itself something excessive: everything is accumulated into sentences which almost explode in eloquence, and they are almost bursting with insertions. The aesthetic moment, can only be understood fully if we think of a 'linguistic orgasm', and this is of course also underlined when one of the most used verbs in *The Renaissance* is 'to penetrate.' Pater also several times describes the erotic power of art in terms of fire, as for instance as it is articulated in the most remembered quote from his book: "To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life."(p. 152) This seems to be a clear characterisation of the main desire of *The Renaissance*, but there is no desired object. This sentence is instead a description of how desire in itself is desired, and the word 'ecstasy' is crucial here, because it describes what was Pater's main attitude toward art, namely as something sensually overwhelming. We could argue that Pater's description of Mona Lisa basically is an erotic epiphany, but in the same time it is important to make clear that the sexual is never manifestly present, it is always an understated linguistic sensuality, which is displayed in *The Renaissance.*

The Renaissance as a queer-text?

Walter Pater's sexual proclivities are much debated, and there has been much serious writing about *The Renaissance* as a particularly homosexual text. This is most effectively done in Linda Dowling's book *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford.* Her text pursues how homosexuality became a dominant discourse at Oxford at the end of nineteenth century, mediated through Plato's philosophy, and how *The Renaissance* was representative of this movement. Linda Dowling argues that we cannot understand homoerotic elements of Pater's texts if we look only on "the complex surfaces of his prose"[13], we must also understand them as way of thought. In this essay, we have tried to understand how erotic figuration is a result of the philosophy of the body. However, Plato's influence on *The Renaissance* is very ambiguous, because Plato is not normally characterised as an exponent of a philosophy of the body; on the contrary, he is often recognised as the first to establish a philosophy that was based entirely on transcendent ideas. The philosophy of Pater seems to be an attempt, in an almost unplatonic sense, to describe how the body is the centre of all understanding. Pater's text is also never solely homoerotic, as we have seen in the passages quoted in this essay. One should almost say that it is *also* homoerotic, and there seems to be no limit for the erotic allusions in *The Renaissance.* Pater is never interested in limiting the erotic body, on the contrary, he alludes to all its possibilities, but everything stays with the potential and is never completely consummated. There is what appears to be a polymorphous sexual tone throughout

[13] Linda Dowling; Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford, p. 95

The Renaissance, but is it never outspoken and said aloud, and it is always juxtaposed by its antithesis: asceticism. The main thrust of the text seems instead to be an implicit circulation of desire, which is not restricted to any particular sexuality. Pater is not interested in fixed genders, but in the desire itself, how it is displayed in a piece of art, and how he can reproduce this experience for us as readers. Pater speaks about this in the final sentences of his conclusion:
Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion – that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened , multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. 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.(p.153)

This is what Pater advises the reader to pursue: the love of art for art's sake is a way to describe how art does not have a purpose outside itself; on the contrary it is to be desired for it own quality. Obviously, the desire of desire is comparable with the statement of art for art's sake. Only through art can the true desire be acknowledged without any particular object, because art is not to be seen as merely as an object in Pater's eyes. We are rather dealing with a subject that has many of the same qualities of a human being; and this may be the reason for that he uses such vague words as 'sweetness', 'manners', and 'charm' when he characterises art.

Pater's understanding of art is everywhere very close to how you would describe a person. Art gives the same passion, ecstasy, and love as a person from real life does, and one of the central metaphors of the text would be: art is a person with a body. The homoerotic motive in *The Renaissance* has its origin in Pater's attempt to grasp art as metaphor based on both sexes, and this may be the reason why Pater quotes Winkelmann saying: "I have noticed that those who are observant of beauty only in women, and are moved little or not by the beauty of men, seldom have an impartial, vital, inborn instinct for beauty in art."(p. 123) Again, art is not restricted to either male beauty or female beauty; it just suggests complete open mindedness towards art, because you are in a sense sitting in front of a person who has something interesting to tell you through her or his body. The erotic encounter is not associated with an idea of a body with a particular sex, but with a body with an emotion.

Conclusion

The artistic response to a text is controlled and initiated by the beholder's libido. Contemplation and desire has become united into one where the beholder participates in chain of desire, and 'reader response' therefore has to be understood mainly as projection of desire into a text. The gap between pleasure and idealistic philosophy is only solved through the concept of mood, but it is important to notice that it is everywhere an erotic mood that decides the approach to art and it is always initially grounded in a representation of the body. There is, however, no traditional subject/object division; instead everything seem to have equal

significance as subjects in the circulation of desire, which as phenomenon that takes place inside the beholder himself. A 'reader-response' analysis of *The Renaissance* should always take the concept of the desire into consideration because we cannot understand the mechanism of the text without basically understanding the pleasure that it generates. I have shown how this is displayed through the figures of the text and how it is inseparable from the discourse of *The Renaissance*. There is always an understated erotic sensitivity which arises from the rhetoric of the text. Walter Pater is a critic who endures philosophical illogicality and self-contradiction; who remains shameless on one level of rhetoric, but immediately upon entering the level of recognition of the real circumstances (the body) he becomes shy and understated and, in consequence, much more seductive.

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