

MUSICAL PROSE

(By Alice M. Winlow)

From language, the common basis of all interchange of thought, Walter Pater distilled a unique musical style. He uses words in which the juxtaposition of vowel and consonant is sheer music, the thought informs the sentence with its own color, the melody of utterance has its own inimitable curve, the nuances are ethereal in their delicacy.

Take his paragraphs on Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. The words come muted like a cry across thin open spaces; the music of the writing is like the ethereal music of the flutes in an orchestra. "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."

Walter Pater's dictum "All art constantly aspires to the condition of music" is supported in substance by his own art of prose-writing. In reading his essay on Leonarde Da Vinci one realizes how supremely he has attained his own artistic ideal, the perfect identification of form with matter. The sentences are exotic, luscious, fragrant, with silvery nuances, ethereal lights, as of some deeper spiritual meaning ever on the point of discovering itself to one.

Compare a sentence in this essay, "Through Leonardo's strange veil of sight things reach him so; in no ordinary night or day, but as in faint light of eclipse, or in some brief interval of falling rain at daybreak, or through deep water," to the opening phrase of Chopin's nocturne in B flat minor, repeated twice with exquisite translucency and poignant beauty. Both prose and music give the impression of curves of light threading green depths of water with silver.

In the essay on the Poetry of Michelangelo occurs the sentence, "... at last far off, thin and vague, the new body—a paling light, a mere intangible external effect, over those too rigid or too formless faces; a dream that lingers a moment, retreating in the dawn, incomplete, aimless, helpless; a thing with faint hearing, faint memory, faint power of touch; a breath, a flame in the doorway, a feather in the wind." In these phrases is a diminuendo of tenuousness, a thinning of the very sound of the consonants, so that each consonant becomes a more ethereal stop in the music of the vowels. It reminds one of Chopin's Mazurka in A minor with its incredible decrescendos and pianissimos.

In writing of the cadaverous color of a picture of Botticelli's, of Venus rising from the sea, he says, "All color is no mere delightful quality of natural things, but a spirit upon them by which they become expressive to the spirit." What vowel music is in this sequence of words! How the music of the language follows the deep and spiritual meaning of the words! He gets a similar effect, in a minor key, in "He paints the story of the goddess of pleasure in other episodes besides that of her birth from the sea, but never without some shadow of death in the grey flesh and wan flowers."

A modern authority on singing, Dora Duty Jones, has said, "As the angle of inclination of the tongue and palate or mouth varies with every vowel, the vowel resonances undergo exquisite and elusive changes which we liken to color." Walter Pater intuitively realized this for his words seem chosen with a sense of the color values of the vowels.

How the essayist's subject and expression "inhere and completely saturate each other" can be traced in innumerable outstanding sentences. "Michelangelo is always pressing forward from the outward beauty to apprehend the unseen beauty And this gives the impression in him of something flitting and unfixed, of the houseless and complaining spirit, almost clairvoyant through the frail and yielding flesh." In this sentence a spiritual sense of pressing forward is gained by the use of the letter "f" almost to the point of alliteration.

The vowel "i" with the short sound is used in the following passage to show suddenness and momentary effect. "A sudden light transfigures a trivial thing, a weather-vane, a windmill, a winnowing flash, the dust in the barn door: a moment—and the thing has vanished, because it was pure effect."

One cannot fail to notice the alliteration of the consonants "s," "c," "r" in the following beautiful passage. "To Da Vinci philosophy was to be something giving strange swiftness and double sight, divining the sources of springs beneath the earth or of expression beneath the human countenance clairvoyant of occult gifts in common or uncommon things, in the reed at the brook-side, or the star which draws near to us but once in a century."

He uses the bell-like consonant "l" to write a sentence of sheer music. "As for Leonarde, he came not as an artist at all, or careful of the fame of one; but as a player on the harp, a strange harp of silver of his own construction, shaped in some curious likeness to a horse's skull."

At times Pater's writing becomes almost spectral, occult and mysterious. To him Da Vinci's women are but the vehicles for the acting of subtle invisible forces, and his prose in the passage where he describes them takes on an ethereal quality; the vowels are the spirit, the consonants the flesh and bones, and their union produces a clairvoyant effect. There is a sense of a receding, as of something vanishing into the distance. An effect often gained by music.

In reading Walter Pater's essays on sculpture one senses most deeply the identification of form with matter. "That spirituality which only lurks about architecture as a volatile effect, in sculpture takes up the whole given material, and penetrates it with an imaginative motive The limitation of its resources is part of its pride: it has no backgrounds, no sky or atmosphere, to suggest and interpret a train of feeling; a little of suggested motion, and much of pure light on its gleaming surfaces, with pure form—only these. And it gains more than it loses by this limitation to its own distinguishing motives; it unveils man in the repose of his unchanging characteristics. Its white light, purged from the angry stains of action and passion, reveals, not what is accidental in man, but the god in him"

Fiona Macleod, whose prose is one of the glories of English Literature, is spiritually akin to Walter Pater, but his prose is filled with starlight, dawn, the winds of the sea, the fragrance of grasses, while Walter Pater's prose is filled with the strange green light seen through water, the faint thin light of desire losing its hold on the things of the world, the wan twilight of clairvoyant vision, the odor of the asphodel, but withal a sudden glory that transfigures what he writes of.

"Brahms dreams of pure white stair-cases that scale the infinite." Walter Pater dreams of stair-cases flooded with colored light from stained-glass windows, and leading to corridors filled with exotic fragrances. But again, his dreams too are flooded with pure white light, and he shows the province of Sculpture is to reveal the god in man.

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