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The Quest for Insight and a Congenial Philosophy in Lieu of Materialistic Comfort: Marius the Epicurean as an Alternative to the Victorian Realist Novel of Formation

Abstract: The novel of formation, or the Bildungsroman, is among the most popular types of fiction in Victorian England, especially with realists. Opposing realism and representing one of the most influential late-nineteenth-century avant-garde trends is aestheticism. Its mentor, Walter Pater, is mainly known and appreciated as the theoretician of this innovative movement rather than a fiction writer. His novel Marius the Epicurean is written in the tradition of the Bildungsroman, but, by its thematic and narrative elements, the text departs from the socially and morally concerned realistic novel of formation. Having found no congenial philosophy and ending prematurely his life, the protagonist fails in his formation, but his continuous search and sampling of different philosophical systems reify Pater's aesthetic doctrine and the belief that "success in life" is "to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions" and to maintain the spirit connected to the intense but fleeting chain of impressions as powerful but transitory moments of experience. To reveal the literary significance of the novel, to disclose its non-realistic pattern and to explore the ways in which Pater employs the tradition of the Bildungsroman as a means of engaging with philosophical and aesthetic issues represent the aim of the present study.

Key words: Aestheticism, impressionistic criticism, Realism, Bildungsroman.

1. Introduction

The producers of literature share a similar attempt to institutionalize a system as the result of their creative effort, and differ according to the modalities chosen to reify such an attempt. Authors are also differentiated by being referred to as "traditional", when they conform to the established literary conventions, or as "innovative", when they reject the normative and prescriptive tradition. In literary history, the terms *innovation* and *tradition* are also used to refer to different periods, movements and trends. In this respect, innovation represents a line of development having its origins in the Renaissance which continued in the Baroque, was suppressed by the classical tradition but revived by Romanticism, was

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developed by late-nineteenth-century avant-garde trends and diversified by twentieth-century modernism and postmodernism. Tradition is a developmental line having its origins in the ancient period which, revived in the Renaissance, changed, developed and was institutionalised in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century neoclassicism, was rejected and replaced by Romanticism, but became present again on the literary scene as nineteenth-century realism, and continued and was diversified by the twentieth-century writers of social and realistic concern.

Every new literary period, movement, and trend results in and rejects the previous ones on the basis of the opposition between normative tradition and experimental innovation. Tradition and innovation are parts of a single process of literary change and development, contrary but interrelated, emerging in different periods under different names and in the system of different movements, trends and literary works, rejecting and succeeding each other, but from the second half of the nineteenth-century to the present day co-existing as two distinct dimensions of literature.

Regarding Victorian England, some elements of the main 'enemy' of Romanticism, neoclassicism, re-appear in the second half of the nineteenth-century in the system of the likewise conventional, normative and socially concerned realism, which emerges almost unchanged in its thematic and structural perspectives in the twentieth-century. Opposing the Victorian traditional realistic concern is its contemporary innovatory and experimental art, which manifested as impressionism in painting and, in literature, symbolism, as well as aestheticism, and the post-Romantic and neo-Romantic styles.

In the Victorian age, the dominant genre was prose fiction and its dominant type was the realistic novel. True followers of Richardson and Fielding are Thackeray, Dickens, Eliot and other exponents of realism, who produced a type of novel that became the most popular form of entertainment and subject to the principle that requires fidelity to actuality in its representation as well as the moral effect of art.

Though apparently highly normative and conventional, realism is not regarded as a wholly unified trend, especially concerning the issue of the relation of individual to society. Realism is often divided into a low-mimetic perspective (Thackeray, Dickens) and a high-mimetic one (George Eliot, Mrs Gaskell, Trollope). Also, "High Realism" and the novel of "pure realism" co-exist with realistic novels having romantic elements, or novels as romances, novels of domestic realism, and even the sensation novels. As for the development of realism, there is "the less realistic generation of Dickens, Gogol and Balzac leading on to the more realistic generation of Eliot, Tolstoy and Flaubert, in turn leading on to the hyper-realistic generation of the naturalists" (Harland 81). In general, concerning the realist writers, "it is evident that it is not to the story that they attach most importance, but to the social, the economic, the political lesson which is to be delivered from it" (Beach 55). However, since "Victorian literary discourse intersects with many other important cultural discourses of the period, most prominently religion, science, and political economy", there are these and other discourses that divide the Victorian novel into sub-genres, which come close to or depart from realism, "such as the historical novel, the domestic novel, the silver fork novel, the detective novel, the industrial novel, and the science fiction novel" (Shires 68). To these sub-genres, one should add the novel of formation, or the Bildungsroman, a very important type of nineteenth-century fiction. The Bildungsroman came into existence not in England but Germany with Goethe's *Wilhelm*

Meisters Lehrjahre (1795-96) and in turn gave birth to related fictional forms of Entwicklungsroman, Erziehungsroman and Künstlerroman.

2. The Unity and Divergence of the Victorian Realist Novel of Formation

The standard definition regards the Bildungsroman as a type of autobiographical fiction which renders the process of growth and formation of a character in his/her both biological and intellectual development from childhood till early maturity. There are many other definitions used by critics, such as “the novel of youth, the novel of education, of apprenticeship, of adolescence, of initiation, even the life-novel”, where education can be understood “as a growing up and gradual self-discovery in the school-without-walls that is experience” and youth can imply “not so much a state of being as a process of movement and adjustment from childhood to early maturity” (Buckley vii-viii).

The main thematic perspective in a Bildungsroman is the formation of personality, and to achieve character formation means to work out one’s destiny, to fulfil expectations, and to accomplish as an individual. Produced in the age of realism yet also discussing the issue of the spiritual and moral progress, the novel of formation focuses mainly on the growth and development of the protagonist within the context of a clearly defined milieu. Thus, the final formation and initiation imply a search for a meaningful existence within the social, including social integration and professional and financial success.

In England, in particular, the Bildungsroman became one of the most favourite literary models for Victorian realists, because its fictional pattern, consisting of the literary treatment of the process of development and formation of a character in relation to society, offers the necessary extension and complexity to the literary concern with individual experience and social background.

Like with other types of the Victorian novel, the novels of formation both come close to and depart from realism, which is even the case of those Bildungsromane that are traditionally considered as realistic. In other words, the characteristics of realism are common to most Victorian novels of formation, but these characteristics receive different thematic perspectives. At the moment of their publication, David Mason already noticed the differences between *David Copperfield* and *Pendennis*: “Why is Mr. Dickens, on the whole, genial, kindly, and Romantic, and Mr. Thackeray, on the whole, caustic, shrewd, and satirical in his fictions?” (Mason cited in Davis 301-302). There is also a clear contrast between the realistic Bildungsromane of one writer: *David Copperfield* (1850) shows a maximalist young writer who romantically believes in the power of the individual to shape the future in spite of all determinism, whereas *Great Expectations* (1861) reveals a mature, realistic author understanding the impossibility of escaping the influences of the milieu.

In a realistic novel, the major concerns are the contemporary to the writer realities of social background (social concern) and human existence (the concern with individual experience). The human condition is reflected in relation to the social background, both aspects being attentively observed, faithfully represented in the text in a simple and direct mode of narration with the highest possible degree of impartiality on the part of the writer. In *David Copperfield*, although society receives a panoramic representation, a complex

picture, the concern is with the individual rather than milieu, whereas in *Great Expectations*, the social background, which is clearer and more concisely rendered, is a stronger concern than individual existence. In *Jane Eyre* (1847), a famous Bildungsroman written by Charlotte Brontë, there is more of a balance between the social concern and the concern with individual experience; for instance, Jane leaves Rochester as being determined by both social (according to Victorian ethics, it is immoral to be a mistress) and individual (the refusal to be inferior in a father-daughter-like relationship) standards.

Moreover, in a realistic novel the relationship between the human condition and the social background is presented and analysed in relation to the principle of (cause and effect) determinism, meaning the effects and influences of society on the individual. In *David Copperfield*, Dickens follows a romantic perspective in which human personality is highly emphasised and the character is a master of his destiny, independent, and able to fulfil personally in spite of all social interaction and determinism. The determinism of the milieu is strong here but not successful; or rather, there is no real social influence or effect on the development of personality. Hence the success of the character formation in *David Copperfield*, unlike in *Great Expectations*, a novel in which the character is highly individualised but reveals strong bonds with the background. The protagonist in formation is dependent on his milieu; he is subject to social determinism and as such subject to inner and outer change. Social determinism is strong and successful; society influences and affects in a negative way the development of personality, and hence the failure of the character formation. In *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist is also highly individualised and reveals strong bonds with the milieu. The female personality in the process of formation is dependent on society and subject to determinism, but also rebellious and self-confident. Though social determinism is strong and in most cases successful, unlike Pip, however, Jane manages to accomplish and impose successfully her personality in a male-dominated society.

Also, while French realism is more scientific and speculative, and Russian religious and mysterious, the Victorian realistic fiction concerns itself mostly with ethical issues. The moral lesson in *David Copperfield* regards the importance of character to follow moral values and inner drives which, if properly assumed and kept unchanged, represent the source of accomplishment. In *Great Expectations*, the moral lesson also refers to the necessity to follow ethical principles which, if changed or eradicated by the effects of social determinism, lead to the failure of formation. Likewise, in *Jane Eyre*, the emphasis is on the adherence to moral values and inner stimuli which, if fought for and imposed on others, represent the source for personal accomplishment and acquirement of a social status.

Finally, in a realistic novel, the representation of the relationship between individual and society excludes supernatural and idealistic elements, meaning that the milieu and human existence should be true to life and reflect semblance to reality. In his two novels of formation, Dickens excludes the fantastic element, but, unlike in *Great Expectations*, in *David Copperfield* the writer exaggerates with the melodramatic, sentimental and idealistic tone, as well as the individual traits of the characters. Charlotte Brontë allows the intrusion of romantic elements in her narrative, in particular gothic, and the exaggeration of the individual traits of characters (such as the cruelty of Jane's aunt, or teacher Temple as the feminist ideal of a fully independent female personality).

As Bildungsromane, these three novels are united by common thematic perspectives and, in the context of realism, the novels differ in the treatment of the theme of character

formation and the emerging ideas in relation to this theme. The narrative movement of *David Copperfield* develops around the theme of the development of personality in relation to milieu, where the formation of personality is a success on personal, professional, and social level in spite of social determinism. On the contrary, in *Great Expectations*, the theme of the development of personality in relation to society prompts the idea that the formation of personality is a failure on personal, professional, and social levels as the result of obstructing social determinism. Like in *David Copperfield*, in *Jane Eyre* the theme of the development of a female personality in relation to the social background reveals that the process of formation of personality is a success on personal and social level in spite of social determinism.

The formation of personality in relation to the background remains the main thematic line in these three as well as other realistic Bildungsromane, in which, as in realism in general, the author emphasises the realistic principle of fidelity to actuality in its representation, of being true to life, the social concern and the issue of determinism, the moral and didactic value of literature, while attempting to avoid what is subjective and fantastic in literary expression. Nevertheless, there are cases in which a writer like Charles Dickens or Charlotte Brontë could not avoid the heavy reliance on the sentimental, emotional, subjective, or mysterious element, thus revealing some still strong connections to romantic or even earlier literary traditions.

The protagonist of the realist novel of formation is required to achieve social success, for which the necessary condition is the character's spiritual change. Actually, the inner change is more than necessary; it is inevitable as well as reified by action or external stimuli which determine the inner perspectives of existence. In order to achieve formation, the character must reach a proper correlation of inner/spiritual/romantic perspectives in the process of formation (intelligence, moral strength, emotional and imaginative capacity) with exterior/practical/realistic perspectives of formation (social integration, professional and financial success). This aspect of the Victorian novel of formation is best expressed in *David Copperfield*, for example, or in *Jane Eyre*. In other words, the hero in development must avoid any unilateral, one-sided consideration of the formative process, for, though successful as distinct parts, the inner and outer perspectives once divided cause the failure of psychic completeness and individual formation. This is the main reason why in *Great Expectations* and *The Mill on the Floss* the success of formation is a mere failure.

Thus, personality formation consists of both spiritual and social development, where the spiritual aspect includes mainly intellectual or moral maturation, or both. However, the realistic Bildungsromane focus primarily on the external, materialistic, practical, in general socially related component of formation. As indispensable to this social concern, the realists would often treat thematically the moral element, which to them represents the most important spiritual issue in the process of character formation.

But there are certain authors of Victorian Bildungsromane that refuse to speak about the social accomplishment and focus primarily on the inner component in the individual's formative process. Moreover, in their concern with the insight of the character, these authors often reject the principle of moral maturation and focus instead on other subjective and spiritual elements, such as religion, philosophy, aesthetics, knowledge, intelligence, self-discovery, and the entire range of emotional and psychological states.

By being concerned with individual experience rather than social and moral issues, Victorian non-realistic novels of formation reveal a more radical departure at once from the

traditional realistic Bildungsroman and from the realistic novel in general. Emily Brontë with *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Thomas Carlyle with *Sartor Resartus* (1836) and Walter Pater with *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) are some of those writers who conceived and argued differently from the realists that for the formation of personality the insight is more important than the milieu. Among them, Pater offered an alternative to Victorian realism and positivism on both theoretical and practical levels, as a producer of both critical thinking and imaginative writing, as we shall see presently.

3. Marius the Epicurean as a Bildungsroman Reflecting Aestheticism

After Romanticism proclaimed the freedom of artistic expression, by the second half of the nineteenth-century there were fewer rules to be followed, hence the more artistic experimentation and diversity of trends and movements, along with a greater variety of critical approaches to art and literature. Representing ‘innovation’, opposite to naturalism and realism, and continuing the romantic paradigm, were the principles of aestheticism, Parnassianism, symbolism, decadence, hedonism, impressionism, and the entire spectrum of late-nineteenth-century artistic avant-garde trends. The major emphasis is on the idea that art must be autonomous, which has its starting point in the 1830s with the French writer, painter, and critic Théophile Gautier proclaiming the doctrine of *l’art pour l’art*. With Gautier claiming that art has no utility and Poe theorising the “poem *per se*” and rejecting “heresy and other critics”, the history of criticism encounters the objective theory of art, by whose standards art is autonomous, self-sufficient and serves no other purpose (moral, didactic, political, or propagandist) than the pursuit of beauty, and should accordingly be judged only by aesthetic criteria.

These are actually the main principles of Aestheticism, or the “art for art’s sake” doctrine, an important movement in the second half of the nineteenth-century, dominated in Britain by Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. The main theoretician of aestheticism in England, Pater actually introduced the ideas of French aestheticism into Victorian England and coined the phrase ‘art for art’s sake’ in English. He also introduced the impressionistic methods in criticism and wrote on style, beauty, reception, and hedonism. Pater’s most famous and influential book was *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), which set the impressionistic criticism as a new trend in art criticism and focused on the effects of a work of art on the viewer. Here, Pater displays at full length his aesthetic hedonism, advocating

a refinement of sensation in pursuit of an ultimate truth in Art and Life and in order that an ecstasy of passionate response might be maintained. In the face of the transience of life, he suggests, the cultivation of the momentary appreciation of the beautiful, and therefore of the ‘truthful’, could serve to fire the spirit. (Sanders 461)

Unlike Matthew Arnold, who believed that art had the power to transform the cultural milieu, Pater and Wilde argued that art is self-sufficient and quite useless. Aestheticism

developed a theory reflecting the French influence of Symbolism – not of Mallarmé and Valéry as much as of Gautier and Baudelaire – combined with native ideas, but its roots go back to the romantic doctrine of Kant, Schiller, Coleridge and others. In Europe and Britain alike, aestheticism established itself as a movement containing both critical theories and artistic practice. The view of aestheticism that art is superior, self-sufficient and has no use or moral effect, emerged in opposition to the dominance in that period of realism, positivism, historical and scientific thinking, and “in defiance of the widespread indifference or hostility of the middle-class society of their time to any art that was not useful or did not teach moral values” (Abrams, Harpham 4).

Walter Pater is among those author-critics who use, or rather materialise, their own artistic or literary theories in their literary texts, such as Wordsworth reifying his theory of the origin of poetry from the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in his poem *Tintern Abbey*, or Sartre expressing his own existentialist views in *The Flies*.

In the novel *Marius the Epicurean*, his most valuable legacy to imaginative literature, Pater exemplifies the principles of aestheticism, but the thematic movement of the novel goes much further beyond it and interpolates various other discourses ranging from philosophy, history, religion and culture to literature, language, hedonism, the experience of childhood and others. Among them, the concern with language and style is revealed in the presentation of the revolutionary writer Flavian, a friend of Marius, who actually embodies the condition of the writer at the *fin de siècle*, which is Pater’s own period, a period in which “the literary conscience has been awakened to forgotten duties towards language, towards the instrument of expression: in fact it does but modify a little the principles of all effective expression at all times” (Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* 72). Pater and Wilde share the belief that an original, aesthetically valid literature is achieved not through generation, but through *restoration*:

Like Flavian, they endorsed a refined ‘literary programme’, which advocated the assaying of each individual word for its precise and variable values, and which displayed a commitment to the revelatory power of etymology and an extreme care for style. (Macfarlane 163)

The debate on language and other various discourses are linked by the fictional pattern of the novel of formation in which the formative experience of the protagonist represents a design necessary to the author not only to illustrate through sophisticated sentences the perfection of prose style and the ideal of aesthetic life, but also to elaborate on ancient philosophy and religious beliefs and clarify his own philosophical and aesthetic position. The ancient principles of Platonism and Stoicism and especially of Epicureanism and hedonism are juxtaposed to those of the newly emerging Christianity to form a complex framework for the discussion of aesthetic issues and for identification of a congenial religion and philosophy of existence in an age of uncertainty, change and transition, which Pater regards as resembling his own period.

Caught in the whirl and searching for a stable philosophy of existence is Marius, a young Roman, whose “sensations and ideas” and “the intellectual powers at work serenely”, rather than social presence, constitute the substance of his intellectual development. The hero of the novel “is both an invented and a real character, being no specific historical person, but

‘a precise and faithful sum of emotional tendencies, elements of thought and all the inner life of the age’” and the “imaginary portrait” of the protagonist “merges with ‘a sequence of aesthetic and philosophical analyses’ characterising his thought and the ways he experiences inherent tensions and problems of his time: above all the transformation of paganism into Christianity” (Prochazka 200).

But *Marius the Epicurean* is first of all concerned with individual existence, tracing the growth of a human personality towards becoming a healthy adult and in this way resembling the traditional Bildungsroman:

Following its eponymous hero from boyhood on a farm in the Roman countryside to young adulthood in the orbit of Marcus Aurelius (and thence to an untimely but noble death), this historical fiction turns on the evolution of its hero’s philosophy of life, which acquires new refinements and emphases as he reflects on experiences, acquaintances, and teachings encountered on his journey. (Mao 68)

In terms of the thematic level of the text, Pater’s novel is clearly written in the tradition of the novel of formation, and most of its elements correspond to those of a typical Bildungsroman literary pattern.

First, in a Bildungsroman, a sensitive child (sometimes orphaned or fatherless) lives in a village or provincial town. Similarly, born in a patrician family and growing up in the rural Etruria of second century Italy, Marius loses first his father and then mother.

Second, a Bildungsroman emphasises the importance of the formative experience of childhood, and often the child is in conflict with his/her actual parents, especially father, or any parental figures, representing the trial by older generation. Marius, however, enjoys a happy existence amid beautiful nature and countryside, old traditions and religious rituals, learning and accepting them, as in the visit to a sanctuary of Aesculapius.

Third, in a novel of formation, the child leaves home to enter a larger society, usually a boarding-school or city, for education or employment. The departure is determined by the parents’ death, the conflict with the older generation, or other external stimuli, or by an inner stimulus, such as the desire for experience that the incomplete, static atmosphere of home does not offer. The death of Marius’s mother and his departure for Pisae to begin his studies in a boarding school represent the end of his childhood.

Fourth, the character of a Bildungsroman passes through institutionalized education and/or self-education through readings and socializing with others. Marius discovers the universe of literature, namely Apuleius, and, like Dorian Gray, embraces the hedonistic principles by the help, or rather influence, of another person, here Flavian, his new friend.

Fifth, a young person now, the character of the novel of formation seeks for social relationships with other humans and to diversify the experience of life. Marius embraces the philosophy of Heraclitus and Aristippus, not before he cares for Flavian who dies in agony after falling ill during the festival of Isis. At one point in nursing his ill friend, Marius “almost longed to take his share in the suffering, that he might understand so the better how to relieve it” (Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* 87), which indicates not only the goodness and moral strength of his character, but also an empathy revealing the solidity and sincerity of a romantic friendship:

In literature of the period, characteristically, the nature of friendship is often tested or intensified during periods of illness, as one character succeeds or fails in nursing another. In Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, the central protagonist displays loyalty to his first friend in remaining with him throughout an infectious – and fatal – disease. (Oulton 26)

Sixth, in a Bildungsroman, the protagonist in development extends further the entrance into the larger society, usually city, and his/her experience of life is now the search for a place in the world, a working philosophy, a vocation and social accomplishment. On his way to Rome, “the most religious city in the world”, Marius is befriended by Cornelius, a young knight. In Rome, Marius falls now under the influence of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius and the ideas of Plato and Stoicism. “The ideas of Stoicism, so precious to Marcus Aurelius, ideas of large generalisation, have sometimes induced, in those over whose intellects they have had real power, a coldness of heart” (Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* 215), and, in Marius's case, they also make him question the values of Epicureanism.

This is already the next, seventh, thematic unit in a Bildungsroman, which includes undergoing the ordeal by society, often implying one's professional career. Marius is a misfit in the milieu, disillusioned with Rome, his occupation as amanuensis, and social experience in general, among which the Emperor's indifference to the suffering of the people in the amphitheatre makes Marius also question the values of Stoicism. Moreover, the speech of Marcus Aurelius strengthens the hero's realisation that “paganism no longer means the highest degree of joyful view of life”, for the speech “is ‘a remarkable stylisation of a spiritual fin de siècle’, where the mask of harmony and joy falls, revealing ‘an awful sadness, a feeling of emptiness, a suppressed horror of transitoriness, a fear’” and only “the strong will and firm moral criteria of Marius' friend Cornelius and the influence of Caecilia can help the hero to overcome this crisis and find an antipode to pagan sadness in ‘Christian joy’” (Prochazka 202).

Eighth, the character of a Bildungsroman has to resist the trial by love, meaning sentimental career, which usually involves two love affairs, one humiliating and another exalting. In Marius's intellectual development, the sense of love is intermingled with those of peace and purposefulness that emerge during the visits with Cornelius to the household of Cecilia, a young widow.

Ninth, in a novel of formation, the protagonist passes through moments of spiritual suffering and pain, demanding that the hero reappraise his/her values and life-philosophy. From hedonism to Epicureanism, Platonism and Stoicism, but remaining an ascetic Epicurean by temperament, with Cornelius and Cecilia, in the last part of the novel, Marius encounters his last philosophical and religious experience, which is that of the newly emerging Christian faith. As with other doctrines, however, Marius does not engage intellectually with the new religion. The author himself, through the voice of his heterodiegetic narrator, does not help the reader: the novel remains open-ended and the reader wonders whether Marius would have embraced the Christian doctrine had he studied and examined it better.

Tenth, the final step in a Bildungsroman, the protagonist, in his/her early adulthood, experiences epiphanies that lead to (or should determine) his/her final initiation and formation. The formation of personality could be complete or relativistic, or not existing at all; that is, the final stage of the formative process implies the success/failure dichotomy, or

a third possibility of partial success/partial failure. In Pater's novel, sometime earlier, at the end of 'Part the Third', before visiting Cecilia's house, Marius experiences a spiritual epiphany on a perfect day of tranquillity and beauty during one of his visits to Sabine hills. Later, with Cecilia and the Christian community, Marius experiences as epiphanic moments the liturgy and other Christian rituals that offer a sense of peace and beauty and as a result appeal aesthetically to the protagonist. The aesthetic potential of Christianity, in particular Catholicism, as rendered by Pater, has been often discussed by critics, such as by Milos Marten in his 1911 essay on *Marius the Epicurean*:

The aesthetic charm of the Catholic church, its power to develop everything that expresses the better part of human mind, its elevating notion of the human essence: all what centuries later will be expressed by Dante, Giotto, the builders of cathedrals, or great ritualists like Saint Gregory, all this we can vaguely see anticipated in these magic times at the end of the second century. (quoted in Prochazka 202)

However, neither his epiphany nor the aesthetic connection established with the Christian community, and not even his keen interest in any philosophy, determine Marius to embrace the new faith. And neither his epiphany nor the newly encountered philosophical system of Christianity provides Marius with satisfying perspectives for existence. The protagonist, still in pursuit of a congenial philosophy, is overcome by spiritual agony determined by an acute sense of emotional and intellectual failure, alienation, frustration and isolation. His spiritual crisis is sustained by the fact that the new religion is weak at its beginning, persecuted as it is by the authorities and competing with Rome's older and much stronger philosophies. Overcome by solipsism and a sense of mortality, Marius revisits his family household, repairs the premises and burial places, and on the way back to Rome is arrested together with Cornelius on suspicion of being Christians. Only one of the men is Christian, but it is Cornelius not Marius who is set free. On his journey to Rome as captive, Marius falls ill and is abandoned to die. Ironically, in his last days he is tended and surrounded by some poor country Christians who assume him to be a believer, which Marius actually is not, and he dies as a pagan amid the fervent praying of people who make of it a sanctified Christian death and who,

in the gray, austere evening of that day, took up his remains, and buried them secretly, with their accustomed prayers; but with joy also, holding his death, according to their generous view in this matter, to have been of the nature of martyrdom; and martyrdom, as the church had always said, a kind of sacrament with plenary grace. (Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* 351)

Not merely death, but the lack of a congenial life-philosophy, which he continually searched for but never found, renders Marius's formation a failure, in the line of Pip, Maggie Tulliver or Paul Morel. In showing his protagonist's pursuit of a satisfying philosophy, Pater is careful to distinguish between hedonism, which might pass as amoral among the Victorians who read his Conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, and Epicureanism, which advocates pleasure attained through modesty, austerity, serenity, ataraxia and aponia. Epicureanism and hedonism, as well as Platonism and Stoicism, are

contrasted to Christianity. Christian faith promises eternal life and offers hope for resurrection. Art and beauty are superior, because they promise nothing that they do not provide; they preserve integrity, because they do not pretend to provide anything else than themselves. Pater's position violates the Victorian religious and moral doctrines, and is even more aggravated by such ideas that, as humans have only "one chance", "without hope of a life after death we can only strive to make our lives on earth as rich in experience as possible", and that,

since we cannot hope to be rewarded in heaven for doing good on earth, it is better to abandon ourselves, if not to 'high passions', at least to art and beauty as offering more immediate fulfilment than religion, politics, or philanthropy. (Prettejohn 128)

In a footnote to the Conclusion to the third edition of his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1888) and afterwards, Pater writes that he "conceived" that such ideas from the Conclusion "might possibly mislead" some young men, in particular his Oxford students of aestheticism, and therefore he omitted the Conclusion in the second edition of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, but reprinted it in later editions with "some slight changes" to clarify and "bring it closer to my original meaning"; also, he claims in this footnote, "I have dealt more fully in *Marius the Epicurean* with the thoughts suggested by it" (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 246).

Marius, a typical figure in Pater's own genre of "imaginary portraits", is unable to fit in the environment; instead, he pursues sensation, perception and insight as an ideal in itself, the ideal of a purely aesthetic existence, and is eager to find a satisfying philosophy of life. For that reason, he continuously tests different philosophies and, like his creator in *The Renaissance*, promotes aesthetic pleasure, but remains in spirit an Epicurean displaying humility and asceticism:

How little I myself really need, when people leave me alone, with the intellectual powers at work serenely. The drops of falling water, a few wild flowers with their priceless fragrance, a few tufts even of half-dead leaves, changing colour in the quiet of a room that has but light and shadow in it; these, for a susceptible mind, might well do duty for all the glory of Augustus (Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* 319).

Set in ancient Rome at a time of transition from the classical to the Christian mind-set, the novel depicts Christianity from an aesthetic point of view and reifies Pater's ideal of an aesthetic life based on the pursuit of insight, perception and impression. In the Preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater introduces the term "impression" to argue that the key to aesthetic criticism is to "know one's impression as it really is". Impression means "not non-literary sensation, but the very instance of aesthetic representation" (Matz 13). Impression represents the highest form of truth, which "makes it a species of metaphor – a style of figuration that would reproduce the inchoate feelings that Impressionism locates between sensing and thinking", where "impressions bring to consciousness the same kind of truth that metaphor brings to language" (Matz 65). Such is the moment of Marius's mental analysis of his service to the Emperor:

Yet it was in truth a somewhat melancholy service, a service in which one must needs move about, solemn, serious, depressed, with the hushed footsteps of those who move about the house where a dead body is lying. Such was the impression which occurred to Marius again and again (Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* 222).

In the Conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater points to the modern world growing accustomed to different and continuously changing manners and methods – “to regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 246) – which might intervene between art and its perception. In their place, Pater advocates impressionistic criticism, which has very little to do with impressionism in painting. According to Pater, the artistic perception is a private experience, a personal understanding, consisting in a myriad of impressions emerging from the individual “inward world of thought and feeling”, or, as Pater puts it, in a “race of the midstream, a drift of momentary acts of sight and passion and thought” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 247). At first it seems that the experience of observation of art ‘buries’ the viewer under “a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality”, but when the objects of contemplation start to be reflected upon, the observation, or “reflexion”, “begins to play upon these objects” so they “are dissipated under its influence” and “each object is loosed into a group of impressions – colour, odour, texture – in the mind of the observer” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 248). The artistic perception changes from an observation “of objects in the solidity with which language invests them” to an observation “of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them”, and finally “the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 248). The experience of perception, involving observation and analysis, of the artistic object is thus reduced to a group of impressions, these individual “momentary acts of sight and passion and thought”, which are surrounded by “that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 248). Each one of these impressions “is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 248). Moreover, insists Pater, as the process of analysis goes on, these impressions of the individual mind

are in perpetual flight; that each of them is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also; all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 248-249).

It is, then, a human mistake to establish and follow rules and convention, or, as Pater puts it, “our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes two persons, things, situations, seem alike” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 250). Instead, one should let

himself be taken by that movement of impressions, that “passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations”, that “continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 249). To maintain the spirit connected to the intense but fleeting chain of impressions, to the powerful but transitory moments of experience – where every moment “some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 249) – represents “what is real in our life” and what “is success in life”. Life itself is fleeting, and, instead of pursuing some ultimate truths and theories, one should follow impressions, and let the spirit be free for at least a moment from any constraints of traditional theories, so that,

while all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist’s hands, or the face of one’s friend (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 250).

This moment of artistic comprehension has been equalled to the moment of epiphany in *Marius the Epicurean* and later in the works of modernists, in particular in Joyce’s fiction. In the experience of artistic reception, insists Pater, one should be free in his/her response to the artistic object, and never acquiesce in any theory or convention, such as that of Comte, or of Hegel, or even the impressionistic one of Pater himself. Instead, “what we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 250). Criticism, then, with its “instruments”, which are “philosophical theories or ideas, as points of view”, is needed to assist the viewer in artistic reception by helping “us to gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us” (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 251). And, concludes Pater, rejecting the normative and prescriptive types of critical analysis, criticism provides insight into philosophy, or unknown to the receiver theories, or conventional opinions on the object, without determining or influencing in any way the act of artistic creation and the receiver’s reception of the artistic object.

And Marius’s search for a rewarding philosophical system exemplifies this declaration from the Conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*:

What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own. Philosophical theories or ideas, as points of view, instruments of criticism, may help us to gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us. “Philosophy is the microscope of thought.” The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 250-251).

Therefore, even though the process of development of the protagonist has no concrete outcome and his formation is a failure, Marius's experience of life reveals the fulfilment of Pater's goal to achieve "success in life", which the author defines in the Conclusion as "to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy" (Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* 250), and which Marius successfully achieves.

Marius the Epicurean is a novel of character formation, tracing "the growth of a young person, the development of a sensitive individual", but, unlike the traditional Bildungsroman with its social concern, Pater's novel reveals "an intense interest in the soul's continuous shaping by the stimuli it meets" and a concern "with a relation of part to whole in which each moment contributes to the sum of moments that make up a fine existence" (Mao 68).

4. Conclusion

Victorian literature includes a number of movements and trends that co-exist during one period and as such reify the co-existence of traditional and innovative elements. Representing tradition, realism is a dominant literary trend in nineteenth-century British literature. Like on the Continent, in Britain it co-existed with a number of other trends and movements that represent alternatives to realism by continuing certain romantic attitudes, developing new principles, and, on the whole, rejecting the realistic ones. They constitute actually the real source of literary complexity in the Victorian period.

British literature, on the whole traditional, accepts late the literary innovation which in mainland Europe is already a dominant period, movement or trend. The innovation once accepted in Britain, it becomes a strong normative tradition, as with Romanticism, which is a strong tradition in itself rejecting deviations, changes or other innovations. Hence in Britain a strong post- and neo-Romantic trend in literature, whereas on the Continent, especially in France, due to the continuous attempt to innovate the literary discourse, and due to a mobile innovation, there is 'innovation of Romanticism' (post-Romanticism as a minor innovation and neo-Romanticism as a major innovation) but most important is 'innovation from Romanticism' (symbolism, aestheticism, impressionism).

Like on the Continent, in British literature there are important alternatives to realism and realistic fiction, which react against the social concern, moral outlook and consideration of characters as determined by the milieu and as social or moral types. Among them, the emphasis on art in itself in Aestheticism (Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood) and Symbolism (influence on Pre-Raphaelite poetry and later on Yeats) in literature, impressionism in painting, as well as in Britain rather strong post-Romantic (emotional determinism replacing the social one in Emily Brontë's gothic *Wuthering Heights* and the individualism and escapism of Victorian poetry in general) and colonial, also called neo-Romantic (Stevenson, Kipling and later Conrad) trends.

Aestheticism, as conceived by Walter Pater, asserts that art is self-sufficient, that there is no connection between art and morality, and that art should provide refined sensuous pleasure rather than convey moral or sentimental messages, have a didactic purpose, or be in some other ways useful. Pater shares with Henry James the belief in the aesthetic value

of fiction and the idea that the novel should be viewed as art and as the expression of the author's personal impressions of life, not just as a form of entertainment subject to the principle of realism that requires fidelity to actuality in its representation and the moral effect of art.

Unlike other Bildungsromane, *Marius the Epicurean* is not concerned with moral and social issues, not with the relationship of individual to society, not with cause-and-effect determinism in character development, but with the aesthetic education of the protagonist, his search for a satisfying philosophy of life, and the complexity and changing nature of the insight.

Like other Bildungsromane, Pater's novel reveals that the formation of personality is the main theme, the unifying principle of all elements, and the self-conscious thematic category of every Bildungsroman. The novel also shows that the change of the hero's outer condition is an element of development of the self rather than of its formation. Instead, formation requires certain premises, especially the attainment of self-knowledge through the change and reconfiguration of the inner structure of the protagonist as a result of some moments of spiritual crisis leading to the experience of epiphany, to the realization of one's self.

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