Introduction

I want to begin with a few words about the subtitle of this book: "Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism." The problematic and seemingly contradictory usage of the term "historicism" first alerted me to its great formal and conceptual potential. On the one hand, the term is often used to signal an attempt to know an object (a literary work, for example) by placing it within its contemporary historical context, and in this sense historicism seeks to define the specific historicity of the object. But on the other hand, the term often signals skepticism (whether mild or radical) about the possibility of such historical knowledge, and in this sense "historicism" is taken to be the equivalent of "relativism." These two senses represent contradictory but related positions—and in Part One, section 5, I take the contradiction into account by defining historicism in a more complex and flexible way, as a double dialectic.

Other senses of the term are also relevant to this study. In recent years the "new historicism" has succeeded "new literary history" as the dominant model in a continuing and intensifying effort to place literary and historical study in a fruitful mutual relation. Beginning with a consideration of the problematic involvement of text and context, one might regard the new historicism (in broad terms) as a renewed approach to contextual study which is informed by the analytical finesse of recent psychoanalytic, feminist, and poststructuralist theory. This book instead aims to consider one episode in the literary history of historicism itself. It is an especially interesting episode because Pater's historicism accompanies the aestheticism that has
been taken to grant the work of art a supposed “autonomy.” However, Pater’s notion of aesthetic autonomy is strictly limited, for though he does argue that the work of art should be free from utilitarian appropriation, he does not propose to appreciate it apart from its historical context. The interrelation of aestheticism and historicism in Pater’s work is my subject throughout, especially in the theoretical discussions of Part One. “Aesthetic historicism” names that interrelation.

In specifically literary studies, “historicism” often refers to a certain literary form familiar to readers of early-twentieth-century (“high”) modernism. The examples of Eliot’s Waste Land, Pound’s Cantos, Joyce’s Ulysses, and Woolf’s Orlando will serve to indicate the variety within this form of historical or literary-historical pastiche. A critique and revision of these strategies of composition—and the totalizing perspective they establish—is now being conducted under the aegis of the “postmodern,” and though they must be distinguished from one another, this critique reminds me of Pater’s own, late-nineteenth-century assertion of the re-collective and conservative impulses involved in any modernism. For Pater saliently argues that modernism is a recurrent phenomenon in history. His “appreciation” of composite art forms is one way he recognizes the particular sort of aesthetic value that accrues only through the repetitions and displacements of historical time. The critical voice that we in turn recognize as Paterian is just such a composite re-creation. My reference to Pater’s “aesthetic historicism,” then, also names his most fundamental literary form.

I have borrowed the phrase “aesthetic historicism” from Erich Auerbach, who used it of Vico. These implied connections, with Vico before him and Auerbach after, immediately place Pater in a tradition of historicist philology. Pater read Vico in 1866, and he seems to have found there a confirmation and historical precedent for his own deeply historical view of cultural forms. Today Vico’s New Science seems


uncannily prescient of Hegel and Darwin, who were certainly the more proximate sources for Pater’s genetic and evolutionary views of art history. In fact, Pater’s assimilation of Hegel and Darwin registers the particularly post-Victorian quality of his vision. His “aesthetic historicism” thus also refers to Pater’s Hegelian (and “Darwinian”) views of the evolution of art forms in historical time.

I have turned the phrase “aesthetic historicism” to my own uses here. My largest purpose is to argue the deeply interfused relation of Pater’s historicism and his aestheticism and to read that relation in specifically literary—as distinguished from philosophical—terms. One of the most important results of the current critical revival in Pater studies has been the growing sense of his pervasive historicism. It has long been recognized as the element that makes his aestheticism special and somehow stronger than any other late-nineteenth-century version of the aesthetic stance. But recently, in the work of Harold Bloom, Peter Allan Dale, Donald L. Hill, Billie Andrew Inman, Wolfgang Iser, and F. C. McGrath, we are beginning to get a clearer idea of exactly how it works. Dale, for example, argues for Pater’s “complete historicism” and places it at the apex of a tradition in English criticism which is centrally concerned with the philosophy of history.3

My theoretical approach to aestheticism and historicism is developed in Part One. Both aestheticism and historicism are strategies of epistemological self-consciousness and representation, and as such both offer systematic programs for what to look at and how to look. Both begin in skepticism, questioning the very possibility of knowledge, and both turn that epistemological doubt against itself in a dialectical revision of the grounds of knowledge. In this respect, Pater’s aesthetic historicism is in the mainstream of the Victorian reaction against romanticism and the consequent attempt to reconstruct a sense of objectivity. But even more than by virtue of its negative reaction, aesthetic historicism is decidedly postromantic by virtue of its positive and thorough absorption of romantic techniques of self-consciousness. In a fierce yet wistful embrace of necessity, Pater acknowledges from the beginning that the simplest act of perception is an aesthetic act. He turns to history—and in particular to the history

of art—to recover the sense of a world of objects external to the mind, though he realizes at the same time that history itself is in part the result of an aesthetic reconstruction. “Aesthetic historicism,” then, names the complex interaction through which Pater’s aestheticism and historicism stabilize, support, supplement, and correct each other.

As methods of knowledge or strategies of representation, both aestheticism and historicism begin with strict attention to the unique particularity of each object—the specific, unrepeatable nature of each event—and both finally press beyond that intense concentration in particularity toward an apprehension of form in general. On one end of this methodological spectrum we find Keatsian and Pre-Raphaelite detail, the epiphanic moment, and the Heraclitean flux; on the other end we find mythic repetition, the Yeatsian Vision, and a developmental continuity projected to organize and transcend the atomism of epiphanic moments. Once again, then, Pater’s aesthetic historicism may be seen as post-Victorian as well as postromantic, for it prefigures the bridge between science and mythopoeia that early-twentieth-century modernism was concerned to construct.

There has been an invidious tendency in Pater studies to treat Pater’s historicism separately from—and in many cases as the opposite of or at odds with—his aestheticism. This book argues against that tendency and for the notion that Pater’s aestheticism and his historicism represent homologous and absolutely interdependent procedures in a complex and coherent method. Either term is radically incomplete as a description of Pater’s critical method without the other, for they are not simply two “themes” in his work, but two sides of the same epistemological and representational coin. This thorough implication of aestheticism and historicism in his work is the precondition for—or the definition of—his own emergent literary modernism.

An extremely rich texture is generated by the mutual implication of aestheticism and historicism in Pater’s essays. My readings in Parts Two, Three, and Four are designed to explore this territory. The book’s entitling notion of a “transfigured world” comes from the review essay on William Morris, where Pater sets forth many of the strategies of his aesthetic historicism. There he defines the category he calls “aesthetic poetry,” by which he means the modern poetry of his contemporary moment, and—as I claim—his own “poetics of revival” as well. I have chosen as my epigraph a passage from that essay. All poetry projects its vision “above the realities of its time,” Pater argues, but “aesthetic poetry” seizes upon that already-transfigured world and re-creatively “sublates beyond it,” generating a second-order transfiguration: the transfigured world transfigured again. This formal
feature of "aesthetic poetry" is also a symptom of its historicism, for
the double movement of transfiguration marks a poetry that specifi­
cally incorporates and transforms the poetry of an earlier historical
period.

Several implications of my epigraph, each of them discussed much
more expansively in the argument to follow, should be noted here: first,
that the act of redoubling the distance from the "realities of the time"
revives a sense of those realities; second, that aesthetic value is gener­
ated in the second of these transfigurative moments; and third, that the
word "transfiguration" itself focuses not only on the production of a
figure from a previous figure but also on the transferential movement
that such figures recall in their forms. The first act of transfiguration
moves the figure "across from" or "beyond" or "above" the forms of
"realities" or "things" believed to have been directly accessible, origi­
nal, and present, things irrevocably lost even at the moment they are
represented. But the second act of transfiguration establishes a distance
not in relation to "realities" or "things" but in relation to other figures.
"Aesthetic poetry" is "literally . . . artificial" not only because its form
avowedly responds to art of the past, but also because that very form
reveals the irreducibly poetic function involved in historical imagina­
tion at the same time that it reveals the absolute impossibility of an
"actual" return, re-creation, or revival.

Against this background, I have chosen to focus on several central
Paterian figures and groups of figures. Each of these figures plays its
part in Pater's historical sense of aesthetics as well as in his aesthetic
re-creation of history. In my book, a "figure" is first a rhetorical figure.
In this sense, I have employed the word along the whole range between
its narrowest and broadest constructions to refer to an individual
instance of a figure, such as a particular metaphor, and to the general
use of a group of figures. I suggest several ways of understanding Pater's
fundamental strategies of figuration in this latter, broader sense. For
example, Pater's sense of time passing in the flux of present conscious­
ness works both within and against his conservative desire to recon­
tain fragments of time in some imaginary place, and throughout the
book I pursue a basic distinction between figures that attempt to
represent temporality and figures of spatial enclosure. Another exam­
ple is Pater's habit of constructing dialectical genealogies in order to
represent a sense of time's passage. Aesthetic value is figuratively
generated through the self-divisions, doublings, and reunifications
that compose these genealogies, and thus they serve to imitate the
shape of development as well as to demonstrate Pater's fundamental
premise that aesthetic value evolves in historical time.
Yet another example is Pater's elaboration of a number of figures to express the special nature of modern art. One group depends upon the composite assembly of fragments; another depends upon the common structure of figure and ground. In the latter case the figure may take several different forms. A point may be sharply focused within a surrounding field, or (in a variation of the same basic structure) a foregrounded figure or series of figures may be raised against an effaced background in high or low "relief." Pater uses this same figure to describe the production of modern art, the shape of tradition, and the momentary focus provided to the mind by aesthetic experience. Through my exploration of these figures of relief, then, I want to propose a redefinition of Pater's critical "impressionism" that will be based on this model of plastic form. The figures of relief make it clear that Pater's aesthetic impressionism is the correlative of his theory of historical expression.

One of Pater's broadest representational strategies involves figures of a different kind. For a "figure" is also an individual person whose life has been endowed, through the unifying agencies of retrospection, with a shapely form and a representative value. In 1906, slightly more than a decade after Pater's death in 1894, Henry James believed that Pater himself had achieved that stature. In a letter to A. C. Benson, James wrote of

> that strange touching edifying (to me quite thrilling) operation of the whispering of time, through which Pater has already in these few years, little as he seemed marked out for it—become in our literature that very rare + sovereign thing, a figure: a figure in the sense in which there are too[0] few!4

James's own aesthetic historicism here points us back to Pater's practice of retrospectively focusing on a few central and emblematic figures to map out his aesthetic histories. Pater embraced the aesthetic dimension of his retrospective enterprise. He recognized, in other words, that historical figures must always be construed in part as aesthetic re-creations. Like rhetorical figures, but specifically in the realm of historical representation, these personal figures coalesce such a number of confused, opposed, or intractably different forces that they cannot be united except through fictive means.

To construct a tradition using representative figures, a certain per-

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sonalization, simplification, and generalization of historical forces must take place. Like rhetorical figures, these historical figures punctuate the now-inaccessible complexity of past time with interpretable form. For though the individual life may be a historical fact, its retrospective form is a figure; and as a figure, Pater uses the form of the personal life to project a sense of unity in history. Unlike rhetorical figures, however, historical figures appear to be given (as “data”), not made. Pater is as committed to the historical reality of his figures as to their aesthetic forms, for it is through his faith in a provisional historical objectivity that he can reform and stabilize the flux of present consciousness. Thus, I read Pater’s representation of historical persons figuratively, but at the same time I am concerned to show the logic by which he engages their specifically historical value.

On another level, however, that logic is figurative as well, in the sense that the disposition of figures regularly reveals underlying assumptions that are not explicitly argued. My study seeks to follow the unspoken logic of Pater’s figures and thus to uncover the assumptions that subend his aesthetic historicism. I approach these assumptions not as ideas or simple content, but as forms, as habits of organization, as relations through which figures are implicated with one another to compose narratives.

For example, I am concerned throughout this book with Pater’s practices of generalization. While a focus on particularity is indispensable to the aesthetic agenda, the historicist’s attention ranges from historical particularity to general patterns of development. Thus, Part Two explores Pater’s development of “types” from “figures.” In The Renaissance the Paterian type emerges as a way of relating personal figures to their general culture in both its synchronic and its diachronic dimensions. Like the biological concept of species, Pater’s type is the general category without which an evolutionary narrative (in this case of art history) is inconceivable. Part Three begins with an examination of Pater’s Diaphaneità, the transparent character type through whom the forces of history are embodied and expressed. I continue Part Three by reading the vestigial effects of Christian typology in the narrative form of Marius the Epicurean. Pater’s historical novel secularizes and transfigures this traditional system of historical exegesis, whose types mediate between generality and particularity, identity and difference, continuity and change, repetition and novelty.

Not only Pater’s habits of generalization but also his view of the historical development of general categories comes under my analysis. In “The Child in the House” and in the Platonically styled vignette that I have called “The Anecdote of the Shell,” Pater describes the
process of aesthetic education as the acquisition and use of general categories over time. As the child develops, his "constant substitution of the typical for the actual" signals the imaginative projection of a transcendent "home" where his disparate experiences can be organized and idealized but where their original, hallucinatory intensity has been displaced (MS, 194). In the vignette from *Plato and Platonism*, on the other hand, the story of an individual education clearly stands for the collective development of general culture. There Pater argues that the acquisition of general categories is paradoxically beneficial for the refinement of intense perception, for those categories enable us more and more precisely to grasp the particularity of each object. By shifting the narrative of epistemological development from an individual to a general register, Pater attempts to read the timely increase in general categories as a gain, not a loss.

This shift in registers—from a focus on individual development to a focus on general historical development—is another of my continuous preoccupations in this book. We frequently find in Pater's works the following interpretive movement: a particular historical figure is presented in the vivid concretion of an original historicity; then all the disparate experiences and productions of that figure are summed up and interpreted as representative of the age; and finally both figure and type are read in relation to precedent and subsequent forms as one stage in the diachronic development of something more general still—the "art of Italy," for example, or "the life of humanity." What is initially approached in all its unique particularity soon becomes a vehicle for the abstract forces of History in general, forces that become visible only because they have been embodied or impersonated. Thus the correlative construction of progressively more inclusive wholes makes possible the construction of an overarching developmental narrative.

These linked levels of figuration depend upon a theory of historical expression that is most often associated with Hegel, in which the "spirit" of an individual (already a constructed whole) is taken synchronically to represent a "spirit of the age," and that presumptively unified *Zeitgeist* is then interpreted as one stage in the diachronic development of an overarching *Geist*. Though the Hegelian influence should be appreciated, in the pages that follow I have concentrated my attention on the figural relations within Pater's system of historical expression—rather than on assigning them precise sources in previous philosophy and literature. It is worth pointing out even here at the outset that the fourfold method of Christian exegesis—with its "literal," allegorical, tropological, and anagogical levels of interpretive access—also depends upon systematically linked figures of relative
historical concretion and spirituality. The typological description of history features progressive stages of prefiguration and fulfillment, each of which involves the simultaneous negation, conservation, and transcendence of precedent forms; and these transfigurative shifts in register have often been compared to the structure of the Hegelian *Aufhebung.* Both Hegelian and Christian systems operate across the dialectical spectrum with which I have characterized historicism in general, and I have been interested primarily in the secularization-effects that are generated as Pater transfigures elements of each. Pater’s assimilation of the Christian system reflects his tenacious hold on the concrete value of the historical figure. But all these historicisms—Christian, Hegelian, Paterian—exert formal pressure toward forms of transhistorical unity above and beyond the things of this world.

The narrative of continuous diachronic development reveals that pressure toward transhistorical unity. Thus, I am concerned throughout this book with the construction of the ground against which Pater’s particular figures of history play. In other words, I read the “ground” as a figure as well—a figure for the principle of continuity that underlies all the high points of a constructed tradition, a figure for the amorphous soil out of which new figures “rise.” We have perhaps become accustomed by now to noting the frequent recourse of historical narrative to organic figures of growth, but other aspects of these later romantic (or “modern”) figures of backgrounds and foregrounds have yet to be sufficiently defamiliarized. Taken together, figure and ground comprise another range of patently “aesthetic,” metafigural, second-order, self-reflexive figures that express the aesthetic and historical process of figural formation itself.

Thus when, in the sections on *The Renaissance,* I elaborate Pater’s various senses of aesthetic and historical “relief,” it is within this larger context that such readings take their place. In the sections on *Marius the Epicurean,* I am interested in Pater’s recursive play with notions of figure and ground, for the character of Marius is at once the central figure against the texture of its second-century background and at the same time his consciousness provides the fictive ground upon which the “real” historical figures of the second century are registered. Finally, in

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the sections on *Greek Studies* and *Plato and Platonism*, I analyze Pater's figurative approach to the inarticulate ground of his culture. He describes the beginning of history in aesthetic terms, as differentiation emerging from the prehistoric manifold of mythic character, and he treats the emergence of written culture from orality through a meditation on the "two-sided" figure of Socrates/Plato.

Narratives of continuous development testify to the pressure toward transhistorical unity, but in their modern, secularized forms such narratives are apt to displace teleology and defer or subvert the sense of closure. Thus the full vision of transhistorical unity resides in the comprehensive function of retrospection itself. I am concerned throughout this book with the figurative construction of retrospection—as the point at the end of the line, the place beyond time, the structure that organizes temporality. These spatial figures express the aesthetic desire that historical differences might be rationalized finally as parts of the same complex whole. As personal memory provides an overarching structure for the vagrant and evanescent moments of consciousness, organizing them as parts of an identity and casting them into the form of a development, so historical retrospection creates the form of "comprehension," in which understanding is represented as the synthetic activity of grasping disparate and discontinuous parts within a compendious and familiarizing relation.

This structural analogy between personal memory and historical retrospection reaches to the very heart of Pater's aesthetic historicism. For the place of transhistorical unity is most often embodied as the personal figure of an infinitely capacious mind. In *The Renaissance* this place of transhistorical unity is represented by the interiority of Mona Lisa, in *Marius the Epicurean* by the nineteenth-century narrative voice, and in *Plato and Platonism* by the synthetic capacities alike of Plato and of his late-nineteenth-century Interpreter. In *Plato and Platonism* (as well as elsewhere in his work) Pater transfigures and secularizes Bunyan's "House Beautiful" as his own favorite image of the transhistorical place where all the luminous figures of the past reside together, at "home" at last in a kind of aesthetic afterlife. Thus the very assumption of the retrospective position paradoxically—and figuratively—places the aesthetic critic beyond historical time, even as he bends his attention to the absolute particularity of things in time. And indeed, the Paterian persona depends upon occupying this position. The mind of the aesthetic historicist in any present moment represents that spacious repository where the world of temporal differences may be figuratively re-collected in one place.