Transfigured World

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with every other—within the logic, that is, of either metaphor—discrete form is understood to have been imposed by the eye, not to be inherent in the object. Together the metaphors suggest that what the eye can see is the merest mask for the unseen truth: that the chief activity of the world is its speedy decomposition.

With an eye to behold it, the world becomes a text to be read and deciphered, but a text understood to have been written in the very act of reading, composed by the will to envision design. Within the terms of paragraph one, the perception of form has been relegated to the status of personal wish or aesthetic illusion, a myth that modern science dispels with its brutal truth.

2 · “The Inward World of Thought and Feeling”

In the objective framework of paragraph one, then, subjectivity is cast in the role of irrelevant illusion, but in paragraph two the tables are turned. There the experience of the individual perceiving self is taken as primary, but the consequences are the same: the object again loses its definition, and the notion of a stable, unified self dissolves as well. Taken together, these opposite and interlocking discourses seem to suggest that “modern thought” in general—regardless of the specific mental processes or the particular disciplinary methods enforced—tends to dissolve subject and object in relation to one another, correlative. Pater himself made this destructive correlation vividly clear, in a passage that originally followed paragraph two and thus framed his discussion of “modern thought”:

Such thoughts seem desolate at first; at times all the bitterness of life seems concentrated in them. They bring the image of one washed out beyond the bar in a sea at ebb, losing even his personality, as the elements of which he is composed pass into new combinations. Struggling, as he must, to save himself, it is himself that he loses at every moment.¹

But the correlative relation of the two paragraphs should be clear even at the beginning of the second paragraph, where a rhetorical turn signals that a different position will be taken toward “modern thought” and

prefigures Pater's demonstration that another modern discourse leads to essentially the same conclusions. The blatant parallelism opening each paragraph—"Let us begin... Or if we begin..."—seems unmistakable, yet it has often been missed, along with its important implication that the two opposed discourses present parallel and interlocking hypothetical cases of "passage and dissolution."

Or if we begin with the inward world of thought and feeling, the whirlpool is still more rapid, the flame more eager and devouring. There it is no longer the gradual darkening of the eye, and fading of color from the wall—the movement of the shoreside, where the water flows down indeed, though in apparent rest—but the race of the midstream, a drift of momentary acts of sight and passion and thought. At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But when reflection begins to play upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force seems suspended like a trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions—color, odor, texture—in the mind of the observer. And if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed to the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. Analysis goes a step farther still, and assures us that those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, 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. To such a tremulous wisp constantly reforming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down. It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves. (R, 234–36)

To move us "inward" at the beginning of paragraph two, Pater first stages a loss of distance in relation to physical objects. As distance is
lost, the definitive marks of the object's "objectivity"—its externality and its wholeness—are perforce lost as well. Without distance between observer and object, there can be no perceivable definition, no "outline"; nor can there be the sense of a "sharp" and "importunate" external reality "outside," ready to "[call] us out of ourselves." This is the discourse of the "inside," of extreme subjectivity. If paragraph one took the extreme long view, paragraph two takes the extreme close view, in which subject and object are one, as the mind becomes the object of its own self-reflexive regard.

With his usual keen attention to etymological nuance, Pater reminds us of the literal significance of "analysis" and of a certain sense in which the scrutiny of mental operations must always tend to "break up" or "loosen" the coherence of the mind and its objects. When "reflection begins to play upon those objects," they are "loosened" into their separate sensory attributes; their coherence seems to be "suspended like a trick of magic." Again, as in paragraph one, but here even more explicitly, language "invests" objects with a solidity and coherence they would otherwise lack; names counteract "analysis" by creating the illusion of an overarching wholeness even where none can be directly experienced.

Reflection's "trick of magic" is also a trick of time. As in paragraph one, tropes of fragmentation, reduction, and acceleration express the connection Pater draws between the distance taken on an object and the resulting sense of time. In this case the crux of the equation is the notion of "impressions," the middle term between mind and object. United in the notion of the impression are the effects of fragmentation and speed, for like the "elements" of paragraph one, the "impressions" of paragraph two represent parts of objects in the perpetual motion of dissolving and "reforming." And this is a temporal, not spatial, phenomenon: "each of them is limited by time, and . . . as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also." Impressions are problematic, in other words, not only because they are mental phenomena rather than physical objects, and not only because they are representatives of parts rather than wholes, but also because they pass so quickly they cannot be grasped. Faster than the "currents" of paragraph one, their passage here is "still more rapid," the "race of the midstream."

Behind the words of this paragraph lie the empiricist epistemologies of Locke and Hume, but also and more immediately the critiques of Berkeley and Kant.\footnote{And many others. In addition to Locke, Hume, Berkeley, and Kant, Inman mentions Fichte, Bacon, Hegel, and Plato (\textit{Walter Pater's Reading}, pp. 182–92); see also Hill's notes, pp. 454–55.} Pater seems to grapple here with the difficult
notion that the long tradition of empiricist epistemology has undergone a dialectical reversal: a discourse instituted to counteract the classical form of idealism by relying on the evidence of the senses seems to have circled back to enunciate another, subjectivist form of it. And again the clue to this doubleness is the particular notion of the “impression” found in paragraph two. The empiricist sense-impression has been replaced by a subjectivist, idealist “impression” that has only a “relic” of “a sense” left in it, a distant reminder of the sensory experience that stimulated it in the first place. The difference between the empiricist “impression” and the subjectivist “impression” has to do with the one’s relative attention to the object and the other’s relative absorption in the mind’s own processes. Another way to draw this distinction would be to characterize the traditional empiricist project as an attempt to balance the claims of object and mind through the mediating agency of the “sense-impression.” But here Pater portrays a notion of “impressions” very far from their stimuli in the world of objects. It is true that elsewhere in Pater the notion of the “impression” retains a greater degree of fidelity to the evidence of the senses. In other words, in Pater’s explicit unfolding of his own theory of impressionism, the impression retains its empiricist role as the crucial mechanism of internalization from a real outside. But here in paragraph two, where Pater’s goal is to portray the extremes of subjectivism, the impression has accordingly lost touch with its objective source.

This second paragraph presents Pater’s famous late romantic restatement of the anxious agonies of solipsism. In attempting to provide another response to this problem, the “Conclusion” falls squarely in the philosophical and literary tradition of Johnson kicking a rock to prove Berkeley wrong, of Wordsworth grasping for dear life at the wall. Once again Pater places his words at the end of a modern tradition [which itself recapitulates a classical tradition, as his epigraph vigilantly insists]. As Wordsworth is more anxious than Johnson, Pater is more anxious than Wordsworth, and at the same time Pater is more familiar with the anxieties of self-consciousness, which are by now a traditional part of his late romantic literary culture. He pushes the literary tradition of romantic epistemology further toward its limits by figuratively expressing the danger as even more acute, reflexive, and involuted.

3. For my reading of Pater’s impressionism, see below, Part One, sec. 3; and Part One, sec. 7.

4. For a recent treatment of these anecdotes and of the romantic responses to the anxieties of solipsism, see Charles Rzepka, The Self as Mind [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985].
In Pater's representation of "modern thought," the mind can no longer resort to a physical, bodily, or common-sense solution: in the first paragraph the "physical basis of life" provided no solid ground, and here in the second no solid object can even be imagined for long. The Wordsworthian wall cannot be reached for its steadying influence, for it is no longer figured "outside," at the objective distance that makes it available to be grasped. Instead, in the famous Paterian figure, the wall is represented as constitutive of subjectivity, and "personality" has consequently become a figurative prison. The passage in which Pater gives us "the thick wall of personality" behind which each mind keeps "as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world" probably characterizes the extreme subjectivist position as vividly as any in English literature. But it is therefore crucial to recognize that if Pater uses this paragraph to enact his profound understanding of—perhaps even his temptation toward—the position of epistemological nihilism, he holds that position at a hypothetical distance from his own.

What are the consequences of figuring the "wall" as constitutive of subjectivity? Once the wall is figuratively located inside, its effect is to articulate another inside and outside, both figuratively contained within the internal territory of the mind. In the words of the figure, each individual mind is a walled-off, isolated "narrow chamber," and then inside each already-isolated mind is the solitary figure of a prisoner, a figure for the mind's dream of a world outside. The figure, in other words, is metafigural in structure and content: it depicts multiple and recapitulatory layers of containment, and it represents in spatial form, as a place or "scene," the essentially figural, aesthetic act through which the mind recreates the world. If the usual account of literary figuration represents the metaphorical figure as having an inside and an outside, a meaning conveyed by a linguistic vehicle or contained in a covering layer, Pater's figure (of the chamber) has another figure (of the prisoner) "inside" it, and that inner figure is a figure for the act of figuration (the mind's "dream of a world"). In bringing the Wordsworthian wall "inside," making it constitutive of subjectivity instead of a sign of the stabilizing world of external objects, Pater makes a figure for the mind in the act of constructing itself and the world together: both inside and outside have been recontained, both are now understood to be inside. Mind and object in relation to one another—the mind together with its object—is now the object of the mind's representations. Subject and object together have become the revised content or object of consciousness. This important Pater-
ian figure, in other words, represents the tradition of romantic epistemology as metafigural discourse.

This move of metafiguration—in which the mind figuratively steps outside itself in one further self-reflexive gesture, to represent itself in the act of representing itself and the world—provides Pater with a way to slip out of the "prison" of solipsism. On the level of meaning, the gesture is tantamount to the bracketing admission that every perception as well as every utterance is already an aesthetic creation, and on this level the metafigural figure has frequently been associated with literary modernism. Both paragraphs include this modernist avowal that the perception of form is generated in the eye of the beholder, or by language itself. But the figure of the prisoner is metafigural in a particularly spatial way, a figure of what I will be calling "recontainment." And it will be possible to see why this strategy of recontainment might be appealing when we note that the alternative model of mental activity at work in this paragraph—consciousness figured as "stream"—presents, in several senses, a much graver danger.

Of course, the metaphor of the "stream" of consciousness is the quintessential figure for the temporality of mental experience. As Pater's evocation of Heraclitus reminds us, you cannot step into the same stream twice. But paragraph two of the "Conclusion" gives us the passage of temporal experience in a vastly accelerated version, the "race of the midstream," moments of experience "in perpetual flight." By the end of the paragraph, all of experience has been reduced to "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." Throughout these first two paragraphs, Pater uses the word "passage" to characterize the Heraclitean "flux," the perpetual motion of physical and mental phenomena in time, but when the "passage of the blood" succeeds to the "passage and dissolution of impressions" here in paragraph two, the double and triple implications of the word begin to resonate. Here the word calls attention to the inability of the mind to grasp its own experience as that experience passes into the past.

In a certain sense, the problem is the very opposite of solipsism. When the mind turns to reflect upon itself, all it can observe are these "passages" of impressions, until the mind itself seems nothing more than the site of their passage. What, then, is the mind? Can it exert any control over this "drift"? Or is it capable only of registering the impressions as they pass? Is it a site at all, a location, a place? Are there depths below the surface of the "stream," where invisible things are stored away from the drift? As these questions indicate, this model too
has potentially spatial implications as well as temporal ones. Pater described the Kantian issue of the “substantial reality of mind” this way:

What remained of our actual experience was but a stream of impressions over the (supposed but) wholly unknown mental substratum which no act of intuition or reflexion could ever really detect.5

“Substantial” and “substratum” suggest the attempt to rationalize a metaphorics of depth to describe mental process, but those implications are more or less refused in paragraph two of the “Conclusion,” where the “relic” of sensory experience floats on the surface of the current as “a tremulous wisp . . . reforming itself on the stream.” What is really at issue here is the mind’s questionable ability to “grasp” or “apprehend,” to “hold” or “contain” anything at all.

Given the problems implied in the figure of the stream in its passage, it may be possible now to see how the figure of the prisoner might be relatively appealing to Pater. Even though that figure represents the “outside” as conjectural, unreal, and dreamlike, still the metafigural logic of the metaphor permits the faith that there is an outside into which the dreamer might wake, the prisoner be freed. The discourse of the “outside” in paragraph one admits of no such more objective realm, whereas the alternative metaphor of the stream in paragraph two questions the ability of the mind to hold or to grasp anything at all. By contrast, the figure of the prisoner depicts the mind in the act of holding on to the faith or “dream” of another world, an outside, objective world.6 If it portrays the mind completely isolated and cut off from the world, it also portrays the mind keeping its dream or faith securely inside, as content.

Of course, the figure of impressions in their passage on the stream of consciousness has its own version of this doubleness: if it portrays the mind with no control over what passes through it, it also portrays the mind free, unrestrained, and mobile—the very opposite of solipsistic, immobilized, and imprisoned. The two metaphorical systems are in many ways incommensurate. As in paragraph one, where we found contradictory figures for the incoherence of the material world—atomism and inextricable interrelation—paragraph two reveals contradictory figures for the impossibility of knowing: solipsism and mania, radical containment and radical noncontainment, the metaphorics of

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5. Hill’s notes, p. 455.
6. For variations on the figure of imprisonment and the desire for a “sense of escape” or a “sense of freedom,” see, e.g., “Aesthetic Poetry” [B, 190, 193] and “Winckelmann” [R, 231].
the “prisoner” and those of the “passage.” The problem that nothing stays in the mind for very long seems to be the opposite of the problem that nothing can get out, and their juxtaposition and doubleness indicate a confusion about the relation of these models. On the other hand, the ability of each to articulate, at one and the same time, both impediment and capacity suggests the sense in which they may overlap or dialectically interact (on the question of depth, for example). Each model has its aesthetic consequences, but in the largest sense they may be made to work together, each correcting the other in a model of mental activity that escapes the perils of “modern thought.” In the next section of this book, I shall show how Pater constructs this alternative model in elaborating his own discourse of aestheticism.

Finally, it must be noted that Pater stresses the inextricable inter-definition of subject and object not only in the figures for self-consciousness that dominate paragraph two, but also in the relationship that obtains between the two paragraphs. There are two discourses represented here, but together they form one argument, the parts of which interlock logically as well as rhetorically. By relating every subject to its uneasy grounding in “the physical basis of life,” and every object to its uneasy grounding in an isolated and ephemeral subject, Pater presents scientific objectivity and romantic epistemology as two opposing but correlative modes of deriving the radically relativist position at the extremes of “modern thought.” The inevitability of material annihilation makes the self irrelevant; epistemological nihilism makes the world of objects—and finally the mind itself—unknowable. Without at least a provisional outside, there is no inside; without solid objects, there can be no subject; without a provisional other, there is no certainty of “our own elusive inscrutable mistakable self.” Pater’s simultaneously late romantic, late Victorian, and early modern position in the English literary tradition may be seen in this intensified awareness that the problem of “objective” knowledge and the problem of “subjectivity” are intractably one and the same problem.


8. Pater’s formulation, in Hill’s notes, p. 455.