renew philosophy!" And it may be seen in part as a fundamentally
dramatic strategy, like the negative capability of Keats’s Shakespeare.
Perhaps Pater’s prose technique can best be specified as late romantic
and post-Victorian by placing it between Browning’s dramatic monologues and Wilde’s critical dialogues: the one represents the lyric “I”
completely inhabited by the voice of a fictive persona, usually from
another age and culture; the other represents the “I” divided among
different “views” or opinions, each of which is represented by a differ­
ent personal voice and all of which are reunified only on the level of
the work as a whole. Pater’s style and strategies of voice arise from
his determination to recover a sense of unity that can still be expressed
in personal form. And in order to do this, he makes himself a medium
to the voices of the dead, a lyre to the winds of change. Pater’s prose
stages the achievement of modern voice as the medium of historical
re-collection.

5 · Historicism

The scandal provoked by Pater’s manifesto of aestheticism has been
well rehearsed.1 His suppression of the offending “Conclusion” in the
second edition, and his eventual reinstatement of it in the third after
he had “dealt more fully in Marius the Epicurean with the thoughts
suggested by it,” seem to testify to Pater’s deep concern at the charges
against his work. As we shall see, the strategy he develops in Marius
to “deal more fully” with the issues raised by the “Conclusion” is one
of painstaking historical inclusiveness. Yet one of the best of the post-
“Conclusion” anecdotes suggests that Pater had already achieved that
careful sense of self-possession through summing up the entire history
of his culture in an individualized yet representative critical voice.
That is the story of his scrupulously peevish remark to Edmund Gosse:
“I wish they wouldn’t call me ‘a hedonist’; it produces such a bad
effect on the minds of people who don’t know Greek.”

But when Studies in the History of the Renaissance was published
in 1873, it was attacked on grounds other than the supposed hedonism

1. Excellent discussions may be found in Hill’s notes, pp. 443–51; in the introduc­
and in Michael Levey, The Case of Walter Pater [Plymouth: Thames and Hudson, 1978],
pp. 141–44.
and immorality of its aesthetic "Conclusion." Mrs. Mark Pattison famously charged the volume with not being sufficiently "historical"; in fact, she complained in the *Westminster Review* that Pater's "title is misleading. . . . The historical element is precisely that which is wanting." ³ Intimidated by this criticism, and perhaps in retrospective agreement with it, Pater changed the title of his study in the second edition. He no longer called the volume *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* but, taking care to de-emphasize his claim to be writing history, he retitled it *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. From our point of view in the present, it seems clear that Mrs. Pattison was right, though it is possible to understand Pater's treatment of historical material as a coherent treatment even so. Pater's volume is *not* exactly historical. It is historicist.

In fact, it is precisely Pater's historicism that distinguishes his aestheticism from other versions of aestheticism in English. ⁴ Peter Allan Dale recently broke new ground in this area by placing Pater in a tradition of English critics concerned with the philosophy of history. Following Carlyle and Arnold, in Dale's study, Pater's work demonstrates what Dale calls his "complete historicism," or historicism "as Weltanschauung." ⁵ My aim in this book is to join the ongoing discussion of Pater's historicism by demonstrating the homology and interdependence of aestheticism and historicism in Pater's formulation—and then to explore the consequences of that relation in several of his major works. We shall then be able to see the extent to which Pater's literary strategies for representing a historical aestheticism—and an aesthetic historicism—in turn have shaped the tradition within which Pater places himself.

³. *Westminster Review*, n.s. 43 [April 1873]. Mrs. Pattison's remark may be found in Hill's notes, p. 285.

². This is a widely accepted view. See, e.g., R. V. Johnson, *Aestheticism* (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 74–75; Wellek, *The Later Nineteenth Century*, esp. pp. 396–99; Bloom, introduction to Pater's *Selected Writings*, pp. xv–xxi; and Inman, *Pater's Reading*, pp. xi, 94–95, 148–57. Johnson asserts that "Pater's historicism distinguishes him from other, more extreme exponents of aestheticism"; Inman finds its source in Renan, who "helped him relax into historicism"; Bloom alludes to Pater's "historicisms" in the plural, mentioning Renaissance, romantic, Christian, and Darwinian variants; Wellek deplores Pater's historicism as "Alexandrian eclecticism" and "historical masquerade" and claims that it "had to be transcended" by Eliot and Malraux.

⁵. Peter Allan Dale, *The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 171–255. Dale prefigures this aspect of my book by suggesting [p. 205] that "the attitude adopted by the complete historicist . . . is essentially an aesthetic attitude." He suggests "a special kind of conjunction in intellectual history—a conjunction which may also be observed to an extent not only in Dilthey, but in Meinecke, Croce, and Collingwood—between, on the one hand, the tendency toward a complete historicism . . . and on the other, the rise of a predominantly
The distinction between "historical" and "historicist" turns on a variant of the figurative "distance" of objectivity we have been contemplating so far. As I have been insisting, the aesthetic strategy of recreating a provisional objectivity crucially depends upon establishing a retrospective stance, even if that stance must be reconstructed moment by moment. To put my point another way: the characteristic stance of romantic self-consciousness serves to divide both the self from itself and the present from a past that can then be regarded at a provisionally objective distance. In the terms of this familiar romantic epistemological strategy, we can begin to see how historical distance comes into play as a form of "scientific" objectivity. Anything regarded in the past can be regarded in the aesthetic attitude as "given," different, and already formed. And as a sort of corollary, works of art acquire a special appeal in part because they seem to represent a hybrid of aesthetic creation and scientific or historical "data"; their obvious status as aesthetically "made" joins with a sense that their historical difference is securely "given." But at the same time, the "given" status of the work of art can be endangered when questions are raised about the ability of the mind in the present to cross the given distance between present and past.

Aestheticism's characteristic rhythm of identification and disengagement becomes especially complicated, and especially effective, when the object under consideration is a historical object. Separating the historical object from its "adjuncts" (as the "Preface" to *The Renaissance* recommends) eventually involves discriminating the particular characteristics of the object from other objects in its own time and place, but the "first step" as usual involves disengaging or differentiating the object from the sensibility of the observer in the present moment. Only after this dialectic of perception and detachment does the observer become an "aesthetic critic."

In all of his works, Pater attempts to represent historical objects and developments while simultaneously reflecting on the principles and difficulties of historical representation. Though he is known primarily for the closeness of his view, it is actually the intricate shifts between identification and disengagement that characterize the special power of his "imaginative sense of fact."6 His distinction in the aesthetic interpretation of life, which stands at the threshold of and points toward distinctly modernist concerns.

6. The phrase is Pater's, from his 1888 essay "Style" [A, 8]. In discussing "certain qualities of all literature as fine art," Pater strategically sets aside the distinctions between poetry and prose and between the "literature of fact" and the "literature of the imaginative sense of fact." Recently the latter phrase was chosen as the title of a special issue of *Prose Studies* devoted to Pater [ed. Philip Dodd, vol. 4, May 1981].
English critical tradition owes a great deal to this mobility, to the sheer variety of his poised positions and slippages along a double spectrum of possible identifications and disengagements in relation to an object, both within the context of his own present moment and across the space of historical difference. And it is this strategically historical self-consciousness that keeps his criticism from becoming a simple subjectivism, much less the solipsism he ironically portrays in the “Conclusion.”

Pater was concerned with the difficulties of historical knowledge and representation from the very beginning of his career. For example, in a discussion which begins his first published essay (on Coleridge, in 1866), Pater draws a sharp distinction between modern thought and ancient:

Modern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the “relative” spirit in place of the “absolute.” Ancient philosophy sought to arrest every object in an eternal outline, to fix thought... in a classification by “kinds,” or genera. To the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions. (A, 66)

We have already examined one of Pater’s many efforts to characterize modern thought, and we should note that here the effort to distinguish modern from another, different and “ancient” mode of thought is a more particularly historical strategy than that adopted in the “Conclusion.” Pater continues in a familiar vein. This philosophical conception of the “relative,” he goes on to say, has developed in the modern age under the influence of the sciences of observation:

Those sciences reveal types of life evanescing into each other by inexpressible refinements of change. Things pass into their opposites by accumulation of undefinable quantities... The faculty for truth is recognised as a power of distinguishing and fixing delicate and fugitive detail. The moral world is ever in contact with the physical, and the relative spirit has invaded moral philosophy from the ground of the inductive sciences. (A, 66–67)

I have already remarked the difficult and ingeniously ironic absorption of scientific method by Pater’s aestheticism; here we can begin to see the other dimension of his late romanticism—his historicism—responding to modern science and philosophy as well. But here Pater alludes to the science of biology, which is metaphorically as available
to the discussion of history as chemistry is, in the “Preface,” to the discussion of “elements” and their aesthetically fused “combinations.”

As a discipline, evolutionary biology joins the consideration of the individual organism and its history with a consideration of generalized “types” of organisms and their histories. In the passage above, Pater concentrates on the enormous difficulty of distinguishing one object from another when this distinction must be made diachronically as well as synchronically. How is it possible to discriminate the object, when each “type” is constantly “evanescent” into another? And how is it possible to know what is related to what in time, when those relations follow “inexpressible” and “undefinable” routes? These changes in time seem invisible and “inexpressible” while they are happening, apparent only after they have been accomplished. In other words, historical change can be perceived only after the fact, and then it might easily be misread.

Pater’s tacitly romantic equation of a historical culture with a living organism will produce some interesting results when he attempts to construct models of cultural history. But for now let us simply formulate the difficulty of the double relativity Pater is describing here. Diachronically, any object is related to the past through “undefinable” connections; synchronically the object is inextricable from its own historical context. Here is Pater’s discussion of these related problems:

Man’s physical organism is played upon not only by the physical conditions about it, but by remote laws of inheritance, the vibration of long-past acts reaching him in the midst of the new order of things in which he lives. When we have estimated these conditions he is still not yet simple and isolated; for the mind of the race, the character of the age, sway him this way or that through the medium of language and current ideas. It seems as if the most opposite statements about him were alike true: he is so receptive, all the influences of nature and of society ceaselessly playing upon him, so that every hour in his life is unique, changed altogether by a stray word, or glance, or touch. It is the truth of these relations that experience gives us, not the truth of eternal outlines ascertained once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change—and bids us, by a constant clearing of the organs of observation and perfecting of analysis, to make what we can of these. (A, 67–68)

The difficulty of distinguishing a “simple and isolated” object seems even greater here than in the “Preface,” for here the object must be separated from “adjuncts” both in its present and in its past. By the end of the passage, “he” has blended into “we,” with both object and
subject in constant motion—not parallel but correlative motion, for "we ourselves change" as a result of the "influence" of objects. Because "external conditions," too, are "shifting intricately as we ourselves change," motion is perpetuated on several levels at once.

But Pater's modernist motto from the essay on Coleridge—"To the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions"—does not mean that nothing can be rightly known. Rather, it expresses the recognition that a new "faculty for truth" must be employed if it is to operate within a field of relations so fluid and almost inconceivably complex. Otherwise, the very sensitivity to these "inexpressible refinements of change" could prevent the perception of form altogether. But Pater's motto also expresses the faith that a newer canon of "truth" than the scientific or verifiable truth of positive knowledge will emerge. If every hour these relations shift and must be "estimated" anew, the new "faculty for truth" is distinctly an aesthetic faculty. The new "truth . . . that experience gives us" is decidedly not the truth of the absolute or the "given," but the relative truth of the "made" thing. The "ancient" object had definitive "outlines" that separated it from its surroundings with unproblematic clarity, but in this essay (as in the "Conclusion") the modern object has been redefined as object and subject together, and the demarcating "outlines" must be redrawn internally, provisionally, figuratively. Here again, objective truth is for Pater succeeded not by radical subjectivism but by the painstakingly constructed "truth of relations."

At the very beginning of the same theoretical "Preface" in which he explains the aesthetic dynamic of identification and disengagement by revising Arnold's famous desire to see the object "as in itself it really is," Pater also differentiates himself from his other major precursor. He tacitly revises Ruskin by insisting on fundamentally historicist principles of aesthetic evaluation:

Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness. To define beauty, not in the most abstract, but in the most concrete terms possible, to find not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics. [R, vii–viii]

7. Pater seems to have been influenced in his developing idea of the "truth of relations" by John Stuart Mill's 1865 discussion of relativity in An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy. See Dale's discussion in The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History, pp. 174–79.
At first this seems to be a polemic in favor of the concrete particular as against philosophical abstraction, another of Pater's arguments for aestheticism as an antiphilosophical philosophy. But his polemic here must be appreciated as a plea for a particular kind of particularity—for a sense of historicity, a heightened sense of historical difference and concreteness.

Later in the “Preface” he makes this quite clear, and it is important to see the later statement as another thread in Pater's reweaving of Ruskin. Because all periods produce different forms of beauty, he argues, the important thing for the aesthetic critic to convey is the historical particularity of each form:

He will remember always that beauty exists in many forms. To him all periods, types, schools of taste, are in themselves equal. In all ages there have been some excellent workmen, and some excellent work done. The question he asks is always:—In whom did the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period find itself? where was the receptacle of its refinement, its elevation, its taste? (R, x)

This passage also highlights one of Pater's prime strategies for generating a sense of historical particularity. He “characterizes” an age by personalizing it, literally choosing a character whom he invests with representative value. He then makes that individual—who is often but not always an artist—represent the general culture of his age. As in this passage, the ultimate point of such a strategy is to discover the irreducible individuality of the historical period, with its “spirit,” but the means toward this spiritual end must be the visible and concrete evidence of the documents, legends, and works of art from the period.

The idea that the work or the life history of an individual artist or writer could represent the spirit of an age has all the force of a grand tautology, and it is historicizable itself as a particularly nineteenth-century representational strategy related to literary realism. This strategy uses one historical individual to stand for another, invisible, collective—but still historically particular—individual, the “spirit of the age,” or Zeitgeist. In this mode of representation, the generalization of a particular case is meant to convey the particularity of a general case.

8. Hill points out (Hill's notes, p. 294) that while this opening gesture would be recognized by most contemporary readers as a response to Ruskin, Pater was also responding to the abstraction of German aesthetic philosophy. His response was double, because he speaks against their abstraction in the same passage in which he reveals his understanding of their historicism. In addition to Hegel, Inman mentions Sainte-Beuve in this respect (Pater's Reading, p. 274).
If the "truth of relations" is doubly problematic—both because of the object’s relation to the subject and because of its relation to other objects in its historical context—then Pater addresses the first of these problems by revising Arnold, and the second by revising Ruskin. In other words, Pater’s aesthetic historicism is established through the act of historicizing his own chief influences. Pater makes his own place in the English critical tradition by taking a perspective on Ruskin and Arnold. By assuming this critical distance with respect to his own most powerful contemporary influences, he figuratively casts them further into the past. By subsuming their positions in his own and differentiating himself from them, he establishes his voice as more comprehensive, diversified, and therefore modern. He asserts his own critical identity, then, by opening a space of difference that is at once aesthetic and historicist.

Pater’s aestheticism and his historicism deal with the same tangle of relations in an attempt to establish the modern “truth of relations.” His aestheticism acknowledges the mind’s shaping activity in even the simplest perception of “isolated” form, but his consistent historicism adds another dimension to the difficulty—and to the possibility—of telling the “truth of relations.” Each method is involved in two strategic efforts: the effort to separate the present moment from the past, and the effort to separate the object of perception from its context in the present viewer. Whether the object of regard is understood to be in the present or in the past, the same dual effort is needed, to distinguish it from other contemporary and past objects and from its ground of knowledge in the present.

Historicism, then, like aestheticism (as the suffix again implies) is a systematic attitude of self-consciousness, a point of view or perspective proposing itself as a consistent, coherent method. This particular “ism” takes a reflective stance toward the constitution of historical knowledge. It names a mode, or stage, of historical consciousness in which one inquires about a thing in the past and at the same time questions the procedures of that inquiry and the meaning of its results.9 Pater’s modernist motto from the essay on Coleridge offers us

9. The word gained widespread use in the twentieth century, but it dates from the mid-to late-nineteenth century. Dale gives an 1895 use in which Lord Acton argues before a Cambridge audience that all things are subjected to “that influence for which the depressing names historicism and historical mindedness have been devised” (The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History, p. 3). See also Raymond Williams, "History," in Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, rev. 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 146–48; and Hayden White, "Romanticism, Historicism, and Realism: Toward a Period Concept for Early Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History," in White, ed., The Uses of History (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1968), pp. 45–58.
a way into the subject both of historicism in general and of Pater's own version of it. For when Pater's "modern spirit" enters the field of historical inquiry, that spirit becomes the spirit of historicism, searching out the way historical phenomena may be "rightly known"—that is, "relatively, and under conditions."

To "know" an object historically involves in the first place the effort to conceptualize it within the conditions of its own milieu in the past, to learn the circumstances of its growth or production in order to understand what it meant in its original time and place. This strategy of mentally replacing an object under the conditions of its own time and place is the foundation of historicist thinking. And initially, the strategy yields a sharper sense of historicity, an intensified awareness of the object's particular reality, a feel for historical difference. Allied to empirical observation in any other scientific field, contextual researches of this sort express one aim of history-as-science.

But the other aim of a science of history is to achieve in its way the standard of repeatability, to discover, by generalizing from its data, the laws that govern historical development. When such efforts to find "covering laws" attempt to test their results, they may seem to be involved in an attempt to predict the future, and Popper's critique of the "poverty of historicism" especially focuses on this particular extension of the method. Moreover, if the historicist attempt to formulate covering laws also aims to interpret the meaning of those laws and the patterns of historical development they generate, the science of history modulates into a philosophy of history. In this zone of disciplinary inter-filiation, scientific repeatability hovers close to mythic repetition. But the important point for us here is that "historicism" comprehends this entire range or spectrum of attitudes toward historical knowledge. The objects of knowledge range from factual data to generalized laws, from the particular reality of a time and place to the patterns of historical change over time and across space. In this full range of its senses, "historicism" is close in meaning to "history" as such, but with an intensified consciousness of its aims and operations.

On the other hand, if "historicism" is a mode of knowing historically, it also is a mode of not knowing; for the term also refers to a


range of skeptical attitudes toward the very possibility of historical knowledge itself. Like his aestheticism, which is proposed against the radical threats enacted in the second paragraph of the “Conclusion,” Pater’s historicism acknowledges a subjectivist skepticism about the very possibility of historical knowledge, and then goes on to resist that radical skepticism with a more moderate and regulated one.

The principle of placing each object under the “conditions” of its particular age begins as a strategy for knowing each thing “as in itself it really was”—“wie es eigentlich gewesen,” in Ranke’s famous phrase. 12 But that same principle tends uncannily to displace the very object of its research. The more one knows of its context, the more detail one accumulates, the less the object itself stands out; it begins to seem inseparable from the conditions of its age, contextually entangled and difficult to tease out. At first so positive an undertaking, the attempt to know a thing “relatively, and under conditions” seems finally to yield only a highly conditional sort of knowledge.

And there is a further problem. If the object in its own time can seem to disappear into its context, seen from an explicitly acknowledged perspective in the present it may likewise seem to disappear into the knowing subject. In historical inquiry, the “conditions” under which a thing must be seen in order to be “rightly known” are conditions both of the thing and of the knower: conditions of the object in the past, but also conditions of the individual perceiving mind in a particular culture at a particular time in the present. When we turn to the historical context in which the subject is entangled, we find the epistemological problem of subjectivity writ large. Analogous to solipsism but projected on the collective level, the threat of cultural relativism puts the very possibility of historical knowledge in question. To what extent are we limited in our efforts to understand another time or place by the assumptions of our own culture? To what extent do we project our historically specific categories onto the past, thus effacing its difference? Does the attempt to formulate generalizations inevitably lead to this violation? If the difference between cultures cannot be bridged somehow, the difference that makes for “history” in the first place may also make knowledge of it inaccessible.

Can we know the past? “Historicism” has been employed on opposite sides of this question, and each side of the question offers a complex

12. According to Inman (Walter Pater’s Reading, p. 228), Pater read some Ranke, but my point here has to do not with Pater’s knowledge of Ranke but with the similarity of Ranke’s position to Arnold’s. In response to positions like Arnold’s and Ranke’s, Mill’s Examination of Hamilton’s Philosophy argued very clearly—in an empiricist rather than an idealist context—that an object cannot be known “in itself.”
range of positions. The word has been used alike to express "the exaggerated belief that the study of history can recreate actuality or the opposite view that historical knowledge is impossible." Today, using the word to indicate either of those extreme positions is a reductive move, a failure to appreciate the complexity of the concept. The unthinking equation of historicism with radical relativism has prevented a proper appreciation of the method in our day, as surely as Popper's critique of historicism did in its day. Throughout the history of its use, "historicism" has always been a "struggle-concept," and its contradictory implications are a fundamental part of its full definition.

In other words, the contradiction between belief in, and skepticism toward, the possibility of historical knowledge lies at the very heart of historicism. In effect, it spans that contradiction, recasting it as a dialectical doubleness. The supple mobility of historicism as a method depends on the fact that it does not answer the problems of historical knowledge with an either/or response. Its method is rather to link opposite perspectives and to move between them, allowing each a continual modification of the other. The double dialectic I have been describing might usefully be represented in schematic form, as in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Historicism as a double dialectic](image)


As a feature of Pater's method, "historicism" will refer to this complex of possible strategies for overcoming, bypassing, or resolving (for working or for playing out) the epistemological difficulties of historical inquiry. A proper appreciation of the method recognizes its potential for playing across the entire range of attitudes and strategies between the extremes of naive positivism and epistemological nihilism, recognizing the pull of each extreme, refusing them equally. In this sense, Pater's historicism may, like his aestheticism, be seen as a systematic, mobile, skeptical, and finally reconstructive epistemology. 

Pater does consider the possibility "that nothing man has projected from himself is really intelligible except at its own date" (PP, 10), but he turns away from these nihilistic extremes of skepticism on the cultural level as he did on the individual level in the "Conclusion." Early in his career—as a matter of fact, in the same essay from which the "Conclusion" was taken—he shows that he has questioned the procedures of historical knowledge and has incorporated those questions as part of his perspective. But there, as always in Pater, the subject of interest is not history as such, but aesthetic history. Let us turn now to that essay, "Aesthetic Poetry," to read the conjunction of aestheticism and historicism at work.

6 · Aesthetic Historicism and "Aesthetic Poetry"

When Pater's historicism and his aestheticism intersect, a complex matrix of possible identifications and differences comes into play because the range of relations between the present and the past is articulated against the mobile relation between the self and itself. Pater deals with these complex relations in the same 1868 essay whose last paragraphs eventually became the "Conclusion," the essay now

15. This homology I am working out is meant to be a historical category, which belongs to a particular historical moment and which must itself be historicized, not an absolute. This late romantic, early modern moment—for which I am invoking Pater as the figure—falls between the rise of the social sciences and (crucially) before World War I. For histories of historicism, see Friedrich Meinecke, Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook, trans. J. Anderson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); Friedrich Engel-Janosi, The Growth of German Historicism (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1944); and Hayden White, "On History and Historicisms," translator's introduction to Carlo Antoni, From History to Sociology: The Transition in German Historical Thinking (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1959). Most of this work deals with postwar views of historicism. The earlier (nineteenth-century) history of historicism has not been sufficiently explored.