Transfigured World

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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.¹⁵

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.
called "Aesthetic Poetry." There he takes the occasion of reviewing
the poems of William Morris to consider the principles, problems, and
possibilities of historical representation.

Pater opens with a crucial distinction between "aesthetic poetry"
and all other forms of poetry, and he bases that distinction on the
formal historicism of aesthetic poetry. The very quality that makes it
"aesthetic," he claims, is its poetic involvement in the question of
whether (and how) a past age can be represented in the present. Pater
argues that aesthetic poetry imitates a former age and poetic style,
not with the mimetic aim of reproducing the former age, but with the
antithetical aim of differentiating it from, and the synthetic aim of
comprehending it within, the present. Through this strategy of re-
presentation, the poetry of the present defines itself as modern, differ-
ent or distant from the past, older, wiser, and more "refined."

That refinement is the result of a two-stage historical process. All poetry
refines upon the primary material of life, nature, or sentiment, Pater ar-
gues, but "aesthetic" poetry refines specifically upon earlier poetry:

The "aesthetic" poetry is neither a mere reproduction of Greek or mediae-
val poetry, nor only an idealisation of modern life and sentiment. The
atmosphere on which its effect depends belongs to no simple form of
poetry, no actual form of life. Greek poetry, mediaeval or modern poetry,
projects, above the realities of its time, a world in which the forms of
things are transfigured. Of that transfigured world this new poetry takes
possession, and sublimates beyond it another still fainter and more spec-
tral, which is literally an artificial or "earthly paradise." It is a finer ideal,
extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal.
Like some strange second flowering after date, it renews on a more
delicate type the poetry of a past age, but must not be confounded with
it. The secret of the enjoyment of it is that inversion of homesickness
known to some, that incurable thirst for the sense of escape, which no
actual form of life satisfies, no poetry even, if it be merely simple and
spontaneous. [B, 190]

Aesthetic poetry redoubles the distance from the immediate, the di-
rect, simple, or real—what Pater calls here the "actual." It "projects
above," "sublimates beyond," or "extract[s] from" an already-ideal-
ized representation to represent a further ideal. And its specifically
"aesthetic" value results from the second stage of this representational
process. Pater's language strains to convey the several levels of intensi-
ification, transcendence, and repetition necessary to establish the re-

1. See passages in "The School of Giorgione" [R, 133 and 141].
fractory concept of re-refinement, the representation of a representation, the further transfiguration of an already-transfigured world. Here, as elsewhere in his work, he is keenly alert to the reduplicative or reflexive structures of representation in which the secondary or displaced position is also valued as “higher” or “deeper.” According to this theory, the “aesthetic” is the inverse of the immediate, and aesthetic poetry achieves the “sense of escape” through these shifts in the representational register, fictive shifts away from the “actual.”

But the most important thing to stress here is the fact that Pater characterizes this second stage of aesthetic refinement as taking place later in historical time than the first stage. In Pater, the “aesthetic” is generated as a distinctly historical phenomenon. The specific historicity of “aesthetic poetry,” as well as its sense of historical difference, must be maintained; it must not be “confounded” with the earlier poetry to which it strategically alludes. By the same token, its sense of history is generated as an aesthetic phenomenon, through strategies of self-division, displacement, and sublation. In other words, the “aesthetic” and the “historicist” are mutually implicated, generated as correlative functions, and represented in the same set of figures.

Characterizing Morris’s poetry now as a “strange second flowering after date,” Pater makes a sweepingly recognitive gesture that involves simultaneously recollecting and establishing distance from an original, “primary” growth. When he calls aesthetic poetry an “afterthought” of the “romantic school,” he explicitly historicizes aestheticism as a late romanticism, and in the process of doing so he constructs a peculiarly “aesthetic” literary history. The account of the literary history of romanticism that follows his definition of aesthetic poetry is certainly highly shaped—“aesthetic” in the sense of displaying its own artifice. But I mean also that his account of literary history is marked repeatedly by divisions and bifurcations, fulfilling the definition Pater has just offered of the “aesthetic” as the secondary, the intensified, and the refined, all by virtue of its self-conscious position later in historical time.

2. Compare the German mystic’s idea of the second rose in “White-Nights” [ME I, 13] and the chapter in Part the Third entitled “Second Thoughts” [ME II, 14–28].

3. Possibly an obvious point. But note the fundamental difference between aesthetic historicism and simple aestheticism. The systematic epistemological strategies I characterized as “aesteticism” may be described using the rhetoric of temporality; moreover, the negative “moment” of the aesthetic dialectic, the moment of detachment, re-creates its object in and as the past. Here, however, Pater projects the same structure as a function of historical, not phenomenological, time. Compare the distinction Paul de Man draws between the structures of irony and allegory in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” Blindness and Insight, pp. 187–228.
Pater begins by dividing the “romantic school” into two currents of historical revivalism: one a “return to true Hellenism,” the other a “sudden preoccupation with things medieval.” Having thus characterized the “romantic school” by reference to its basic, doubly-preoccupied historicism, Pater subdivides each of these two currents into earlier and later stages, and he argues that greater intensification or profundity corresponds in each case to a later chronological stage. The earlier stages of each revival were “superficial,” the later “stricter” and closer to the “genuine” or the “true.” At this point he replaces Morris’s poetry within the backwardly ramifying romantic family tree he has just sketched. He argues that Morris’s earlier poems are already “a refinement upon this later, profounder medievalism” but that his later poems excel the earlier by representing the refinement of both the medievalizing and the Hellenizing strains of romantic revival. In Pater’s theory, then, Morris’s poetry too is divided into earlier and later stages, and the later poetry reunifies romanticism itself by joining the second and more intense phases of both its revival movements. If Pater defines “the ‘romantic school’” as historicist to begin with, then aestheticism, as a refined and compendious “afterthought,” would be doubly so.

But my point has little to do with the accuracy of Pater’s history of romanticism—though his placing of Morris hardly seems dated even today—and much to do with its form, which is as late romantic as its argumentative content. Pater’s history is thoroughly dialectical and genealogical. He divides romanticism into parts synchronically (two always simultaneous strands of revival: medieval and Greek) and diachronically (each strand consisting of chronological stages), and when put in motion that very strategy of division establishes the notion of a putative “whole,” the overarching “growth” of romanticism. In other words, he describes a diachronic process as successive self-divisions within the “same” thing, departures from a source that are also returns to and recreations of it. With all the stately balance of a grand tautology, Pater’s argument creates a contextual background for Morris’s poetry, a background of divided and rewoven strands that imply a primary, first growth in order to rationalize the status of the “second flowering.”

The dialectical structure of this account, as well as the genealogical structure, is further and most remarkably underscored when Pater goes on to sexualize the story of literary history he has just set in motion. In order to understand the atmosphere of Morris’s medievalizing early poetry, he turns first to the history of the Arthurian legends and is at pains to show that—like Morris’s aesthetic poetry itself—
they were most poignant when removed from their original historical context: “In truth these legends, in their origin prior to Christianity, yield all their sweetness only in a Christian atmosphere” (B, 191). That full “sweetness” turns out to be none other than the historical strife between two rival forms of worship, religious and “imaginative,” described here as “a deliberate choice between Christ and a rival lover.” Pater turns then to characterize Provençal courtly love poetry, which emerged against the background of the Christian Middle Age, as “a rival religion with a new rival cultus . . . the rejection of one worship for another.” And the “jealousy of that other lover”—Christ—“for whom these words and images and refined ways of sentiment were first devised, is the secret here of a borrowed, perhaps factitious colour and heat” (B, 191). Both these genres of literature gain their heightened aesthetic effects against the contextual background of Christianity.

Pater’s pretext for this account is Morris’s title poem, “The Defence of Guenevere,” which he calls “a thing tormented and awry with passion like the body of Guenevere defending herself from the charge of adultery” (B, 191). But his subtext is the shape of modern history itself. Guenevere’s body, and her adulterous self-division, are implicitly allegorized to refer (on one level) to the historical development of courtly love and (on a further level of abstraction) to the secularization that accompanied the rise of Renaissance humanism. In other words, the “spiritual” meanings of Pater’s allegorical vignette are at once aesthetic and historical. The rival cult of “imaginative” worship supersedes the cult of Christ, who becomes in this story a lover turned away and spurned. In courtly love, then, the inaccessible object of sexual desire substitutes for the “absent or veiled” object of cult devotion, and the “aesthetic” poetry of that era (Arthurian romance and Provençal poetry, which Morris’s poetry then “sublimates beyond”) springs from that substitution.

Of religion it learns the art of directing towards an unseen object sentiments whose natural direction is towards objects of sense. Hence a love defined by the absence of the beloved, choosing to be without hope, protesting against all lower uses of love, barren, extravagant, antinomian. (B, 192)

The sexual energy of courtly love and the “borrowed, perhaps factitious, colour and heat” of its poetry are “imaginative” both because they are directed toward an absent object and because they are gener-
ated through a strategic displacement from a religious context to a more secularized context.

Like the body of Guenevere or Morris's poetry, then, the surprising (and suppressed) narrative of Christ and his rival lover is the vehicle of an allegory whose burden is aesthetic—in this case literary—and historical. Pater's sexualization of Christ turns out to be his strategy for representing the process of secularization. The element of sexuality finally serves to underline the graphically antithetical and dialectical structure of the modern literary history he is constructing. Interpreting courtly love poetry as "the mood of the cloister taking a new direction" and gaining thereby "a later space of life it never anticipated," Pater creates a spatial metaphor for a turn or trope in his aesthetically reconstructed vision of historical time. Provençal poetry turns the course of history away from the cloister, while at the same time the cloister clears "a later space of life" for itself within its ostensible opposite. In the most profound sense, however, that opposition is only apparent, because it does not mask the synthetic and relative truth that the language, mood, and strategies of courtly love poetry derive from the very background against which they emerge. Thus, in relation to Christianity, courtly love is portrayed as an antithetical, later development of the same, self-divided thing.

At this point we can see that Pater's theory of secularization itself serves as a model of how aesthetic effects and aesthetic value emerge in history. His chief example, Provençal poetry, derives its very "romance" from the background in Christianity within and against which it "rises." Pater argues that much of its "colour and heat" is "borrowed" and "perhaps factitious," because it was devised originally for "that other lover," Christ, whose "jealousy" now stimulates the antinomian, rebellious posture of the later, "imaginative" lovers. The "imaginative" then enfolds a triple implication—romantic, aesthetic, and also secularized—for it is precisely this shift from an "original" context to a "secondary" context that creates aesthetic value.

Pater's theory of secularization can be approached in other useful ways. We can attend, for example, to the revision of Ruskin entailed in Pater's decisive preference for Renaissance art over the Christian "Gothic" and to the anti-Christian stance that revision seemed, at the time, to imply. But from our perspective it is most important to recognize that Pater was "anti-Christian" only as a result of his charac-

5. On Pater's "emptying" of Ruskin's "moral aesthetic," see Bloom, introduction to Pater's Selected Writings, pp. x–xviii.
teristic strategy of internalization, disengagement, and ironic subla-
tion of Christianity, not through overt opposition to it. His antitheti-
cal stance was elegantly modulated, subtle, "refined," not "outlined" or harshly contrastive. The language, tone, and strategies of Christian aesthetics and Christian historicism weave through his passages—never rejected, but themselves exquisitely ironic, aestheticized, and historicized. Of course, to some this transformation seemed more dangerous to Christianity as a system of belief than any overt opposition could have been, and the most powerful reason for that reaction, I think, is the aesthetic effect of Pater's calm and distant "long view," reading secularization not as a nineteenth-century issue of controversy but as a persistent, centuries-long, modern tradition. He places the rivalry between Christ and "imagination" far in the past, where it seems to be a beautiful but remotely inaccessible issue—beautiful because remote and unchanging—now thoroughly transfigured and self-consciously historicized.

But my larger point here is about "borrowed" effects in general, of which the secularization and persistence of Christian effects is only a supremely pertinent example in Pater’s work and in his nineteenth-century context. Pater also considers, in both Marius the Epicurean and Plato and Platonism, the "secularization" of classical, pagan culture as it is absorbed into the Christian era. In all such cases, a shift out of the original historical and formal context not only adds a certain frisson of irony as a signal of aesthetic effect, but also creates that effect as aesthetic in the first place. The shift in context frees content or belief into form, detaches it from its original contextual function, and frees it to "play" rather than to work in the service of some disciplinary system, and the shift leaves behind an aura or residue of the formerly "sacred" (or "scientific" or "utilitarian" or "philosophical") function that has now been displaced as the "aesthetic." The "secularization-effects" I shall repeatedly analyze in the following pages are, then, like all "aesthetic" effects, secondary, derivative, and transferential. Their origins were fictively elsewhere, and they "speak of something that is gone." But that loss or distance can be translated; at least, the category of "the aesthetic" is generated in the first place as an expression of a conservative impulse, a strategy of believing that the losses incurred in historical self-consciousness may be redeemed. The "aesthetic" is meant to answer the transfiguration of loss with another, recreative transfiguration.

Pater describes this recreative transfiguration on several levels in his essay "Aesthetic Poetry." His overall strategy is analogical and allegorical, aiming to make the stages of development in Morris's
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poetry stand for the overall development in aesthetic history at large. I have shown how he uses Morris's early poetry to represent the moment when Arthurian romance and courtly love take over from the cloister, but the crucial turn of the argument involves what Pater sees as a stylistic shift in Morris's later poetry, after the medievalizing lyrics of The Defence of Guenevere. Pater calls this "change in manner . . . characteristic of aesthetic poetry" and praises it as a "simplification," an imaginative revival of an earlier, more immediate art. Yet it might at first appear to be a complication rather than a simplification, for the lyrics in The Defence of Guenevere, which were related to one another only thematically and tonally, were followed in The Earthly Paradise by a volume whose overall structure was dialectical, synthetic, spacious, and extraordinarily complex. In any case, on the level of its form, it is easy to see how Pater's response to The Earthly Paradise could generate his definition of "aesthetic poetry," for the work embodies the two-stage process of refinement and recollection we have come to recognize in more abstract terms.

The Earthly Paradise is a compendious frame tale, in part modeled on The Canterbury Tales, but with an additional historicizing level in the frame structure, to which Pater particularly responds. The situation given in the poem is this: A band of Norse wanderers, despairing of their search for the "earthly paradise," settles in a "nameless city" whose Elders are descended from the ancient Greeks. Each month, over the course of the year, they exchange stories with those city Elders. The wanderers tell a story from medieval sources, and their hosts in turn tell one from classical sources, both stories cast in an imitation of the style of their fictive present time in the Middle Ages. The whole cycle is reframed by lyrics marking and introducing each month's narratives, and the voice of those intercalated lyrics is implicitly the poet's own, speaking in the present time in which this past scene of tale-telling and all its diverse tales are re-collected. Thus the double-frame form of the work represents a two-stage revival of the past: the stories of classical antiquity are retold in the late Middle Ages, and then both medieval and classical stories are retold in the late nineteenth century. This formal scene of recollection across historical distance creates "literally an artificial or 'earthly paradise,' " the only earthly paradise it is possible to achieve in the modern world (B, 190).

According to Pater, Morris achieves his own "simplification" by recalling an earlier scene of revival and simplification. But on a more general level, Pater also makes Morris's later poetry representative of a "simplifying" historical development. He reads the change in
Morris's literary form as an embodiment of "a transition which . . . is one law of the life of the human spirit, and of which what we call the Renaissance is only a supreme example." In Part Two of this book I explore Pater's representation of the Renaissance more fully, but as we can see here, even the Renaissance, though "a supreme example," is "only" an example of "one law of the life of the human spirit."

If specific, unrepeatable historicity, on the one hand, and general laws of repeatability, on the other hand, mark the positive range of historicist representation, then this "law" is the "covering law" of Pater's aesthetic historicism, for it describes the repeating patterns he half creates and half perceives across the history of his culture. Pater does not attempt an explicit explanation of historical causation in this essay. Somehow "complex and subtle interests . . . sooner or later . . . come back with a sharp rebound to the simple elementary passions" (B, 195). But his explanatory model for historical revival is implicitly an aesthetic model: as the Renaissance revival resulted from the recovery of classical art and culture, so a modern, "aesthetic" revival comes about when or because the earlier revival has been strategically represented.

I emphasize the Shelleyan, prophetic strain in Pater's romanticism, attenuated though it may be, for it is very important to recognize that his aesthetic historicism is a productive program. By representing the formal mechanisms of revival, Pater hopes to bring about a revival in his own time. And he identifies with Morris's achievement of "literally an artificial or 'earthly paradise,' " because, to Pater, Morris represents not only the Renaissance but also the "aesthetic" recollection of both strains of late romanticism, and thus a renewed renaissance in his own contemporary art. If representing the Renaissance retrieval of classical art against the background of the Middle Ages can recreate the feeling of that Renaissance, then Pater in all his work is hoping to do the same. To emphasize that program, in "Aesthetic Poetry" Pater portrays the medieval situation in terms that are strikingly similar to his portrait of modern solipsism in the "Conclusion." He projects a threefold analogy between the Christian, the courtly lover, and "the medieval mind," all desiring an object out of their reach: Christ; the inaccessible beloved; and an "objective" sense of the real world of nature, a "real escape to the world without us" (B, 193). In a single essay,

then, Pater has characterized "modern thought" and the "medieval mind" as suffering from the same problem and needing the same "sense of escape" that aesthetic poetry provides.7

This sense of escape is bound up with the sense of revival, which Pater represents—in Morris's poetry as well as in "the life of the human spirit"—as a change in the natural light, the rising dawn a figure for a revival of imaginative earliness. On the one hand, he extends the logic of this romantic, mythic figure by equating morning with childhood. But Pater is divided in his representation of this change in the light, for on the other hand he refigures morning as convalescence, the experience of waking from a fevered dream or delirium, which brings "relief . . . with the first white film in the sky" (B, 194). If childhood is irretrievable, "recovery" is still possible also for the late, the old, and the sick or insane, and thus "recovery" in Pater carries the full sense of the pun: both recovery from illness, and imaginative or historical retrieval of loss. This doubleness emphasizes again the importance of the dark background against which the figure of renewed life emerges: because of the dreadful night that has gone before, "the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliancy and relief" (B, 193).

Along with the change in the light, the song changes. The aubade decisively supplants the nocturne as the favored genre for commemorating "mixed lights," times of transition between night and day, here used to represent times of aesthetic and historical transition. The "medieval mind" had been shut away from "the sensible world," too preoccupied with soul to remember the body of nature. But now the "absent or veiled" object is fictively re-presented or made to seem present again, and access to the world of nature, the world outside the self or soul, is again imaginably direct. With the rise of the Renais-

7. The place he assigns to Wordsworth in this scheme is interesting from the point of view of Pater's attempt to recapitulate the Renaissance revival in the nineteenth century. In order to praise Morris, he denigrates Wordsworth, whose simplicity he judges to be forced by comparison, or "sought out," not a "desire . . . towards the body of nature for its own sake" but "because a soul is divined through it" (B, 195). Wordsworth's earlier romanticism, then, is put in the position of the "medieval mind," so that Morris [and Pater] may again be affirmed in the later, Renaissance position.

8. As Paul de Man points out, the human figures that epitomize modernity are defined by such experiences as childhood and convalescence, by "a freshness of perception that results from a slate wiped clean, . . . the absence of a past that has not yet had time to tarnish the immediacy of perception" ("Literary History and Literary Modernity," in Blindness and Insight, p. 157). For a different interpretation of this figure, see Monsman, Pater's Portraits. Dealing mainly with the imaginary portraits, Monsman interprets the movement from clarity to delirium to imaginative rebirth as a mythic cycle based on the Apollonian-Dionysian opposition.
sance, the balance tips toward morning, and the world awakens once more to the sense of recovered originality, Adamic language, the "simple" and "direct" grasp of its objects, and the "primary" passions of an organic whole, composed once again of both body and soul.

Pater himself scrupulously underscores his awareness that this revival happens not in "actuality" but in stylistic or formal terms. "The song sung always claims to be sung for the first time," Pater argues, the word "claims" acknowledging the figurative and aesthetic nature of this awakening (B, 195; emphasis added). Morris's "simplification" of romanticism, as well as the historical simplification represented by the Renaissance, has been achieved aesthetically, or antithetically, through the negation of a negation. The first stage of refinement moves away from nature, denaturing art and the "human spirit," but the second stage brings a renaturalized return to the fiction of direct access, now understood as a fiction. The "aesthetic," then, represents not only the inverse of immediacy but also its simulacrum.

This process of simplification through complication is Pater's revised version of the familiar three-term, two-stage romantic itinerary—innocence, experience, and "higher" innocence; origin, exile, and return; unity, self-division, and the reunified incorporation of diversity—here projected in simultaneously historical and aesthetic terms. Pater's late romantic, aesthetic genealogies are constructed on the same dialectical model as his epistemological reconstructions; the dynamic of identity, self-division, and recollection describes them both. Both presuppose a unity that is divided against itself and articulated into its parts, which then are re-collected once again as an overarching identity. Pater generates figure after figure for this dialectical struggle away from undifferentiated unity, and the aesthetic reconstruction of a complex, revised, and antithetical representation. And in a certain sense these figures crucially presuppose that the aesthetic critic occupies a position at the end of time, because the effect or sense of "escape" can be generated only as a function of retrospection. By repeatedly constructing transvalued versions of the familiar romantic dialectic, Pater thereby continuously reinscribes his position at the end of the line.

9. For the most compendious treatment of this aspect of romanticism, see Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*. Abrams traces this strategy rather thematically than otherwise, and he is interested primarily in the secularization of the Christian paradigm, but he does securely establish the derivation of this narrative strategy from both Christian historiography and German romantic philosophy.