Transfigured World
Williams, Carolyn

Published by Cornell University Press

Williams, Carolyn.
Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47553

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1844468
The representational dynamic of identity, self-division, and recollection that characterizes Pater’s historical reconstructions is a generalized version of the aesthetic or epistemological dynamic of identification, disengagement, and retrospection. My reading of Pater’s “aesthetic historicism,” then, emphasizes this homology between the dialectic of self-consciousness and his strategies for representing history. A sense of objectivity may be aesthetically reconstituted in the past, as the past, and correlatively, the past may be reconstructed through strategies of “impression” and distance within. It is to this last dimension of Pater’s aesthetic historicism that I now turn.

I have been exploring one system of figures in Pater’s work, figures that depict lines of development. His critical recreation in “Aesthetic Poetry” of a romantic genealogy with himself at the end of the line has provided a good example of that group of figures. The group portrays revival as the periodic refreshment of “the human spirit” in historical time. But another complex figure portrays the periodic “relief” of the human spirit as a recreative relation of the mind in the present to the historical past. These figures allude in their forms to questions of historical knowledge. In representing not so much what is known of the past but how it is known and how it is represented, these figures are implicitly or explicitly metafigural, for they represent a figure of aesthetic history at the same time that they represent the mind in the act of making the figure. Like the second level of the frame structure in Morris’s Earthly Paradise, these figures depict revival as the process of representation itself, the process of bringing the past back to life in the mind of the present.

Both figural systems represent the recollected unity of aesthetic history, with its dialectically differentiated parts, but they do so in different ways and from different perspectives. One figure is linear, the other a figure of enclosure or containment. One represents aesthetic history as already shaped, the other represents the mind in the act of shaping it. One figure portrays aesthetic history leading up to the mind in the present—and thus it effaces the aesthetic act of retrospection that inevitably constitutes it—while the other portrays the mind in the present looking back and encompassing the past. In Pater’s “poetics of revival” the two are related to each other in a number of ways, many of which I examine in the chapters to come. For now I will concentrate briefly on the figure of relief, which may be understood as Pater’s master trope of revival.
In “Aesthetic Poetry,” the figure of relief bridges between the two systems I have just outlined, to represent both the shape of historical development and the mind in the present making that shape. We are already familiar with the first sense of the figure: at certain times when aesthetic history takes a “new direction,” the division of one period from another creates a sense of “relief.” Pater allegorized that relief as dawn succeeding the dark, or as clarity and sanity finally recovered after fevered delirium. The emotional valence of “relief” at the removal of oppression suggests the presence of a subject to whom “the sensible world comes . . . with a reinforced brilliancy and relief” or to whom “there comes something of relief from physical pain with the first white film in the sky” (B, 193–94). But when Pater comments more directly on Morris’s representational procedures, the emotional value of relief is joined to an aesthetic and historical dimension: Morris’s “medievalisms . . . coming in a poem of Greek subject, bring into this white dawn thoughts of the delirious night just over and make one’s sense of relief deeper” (B, 197). And when Pater stands even further back to characterize the structure of Morris’s double revival, the figure of relief achieves its full sense of plasticity: Morris’s poetry provides “precisely this effect, the grace of Hellenism relieved against the sorrow of the Middle Ages” (B, 197).

Like “recovery” or “revival,” the word “relief” has an actively double meaning in Pater. On the one hand, “relief” signifies the removal or lightening of an oppressive force, the means of breaking monotony or boredom, the ability to enliven (“dephlegmatisiren vivificiren”), which is the “true service of philosophy” in the “Conclusion.” On the other hand, “relief” refers to a range of plastic, spatial forms in which figures rise against a plane surface with relative degrees of heightened effect. Relief is an art form that expresses the relation between levels of focus and distance as foreground to background, or figure to ground. And in both the emotional and the plastic senses, “relief” is Pater’s figure for aesthetic history. The emotional value of relief primarily expresses the achieved sense of historical difference. In imagining the forward movement of time, any age seen against the background of the previous age creates this feeling of “relief”; or conversely, through retrospection, the past projected against the background of the mind in the present also creates the sense of “relief” or the “sense of escape” from what otherwise would be an oppressive, solipsistic imprisonment.

The full range of the figure is felt when the emotional and the plastic senses join, as they do in a stunning passage toward the end of “Aesthetic Poetry,” quite near the paragraphs that now form the
"Conclusion." There Pater raises in explicit terms the questions of historical relativism and romantic self-consciousness, historical knowledge, and representation. What follows in the remaining pages of Part One is a close reading of that passage:

In handling a subject of Greek legend, anything in the way of an actual revival must always be impossible. Such vain antiquarianism is a waste of the poet's power. The composite experience of all the ages is part of each one of us; to deduct from that experience, to obliterate any part of it, to come face to face with the people of a past age, as if the Middle Age, the Renaissance, the eighteenth century had not been, is as impossible as to become a little child, or enter again into the womb and be born. But though it is not possible to repress a single phase of that humanity, which, because we live and move and have our being in the life of humanity, makes us what we are, it is possible to isolate such a phase, to throw it into relief, to be divided against ourselves in zeal for it; as we may hark back to some choice space of our own individual life. We cannot truly conceive the age: we can conceive the element it has contributed to our culture: we can treat the subjects of the age bringing that into relief. Such an attitude towards Greece, aspiring to but never actually reaching its way of conceiving life, is what is possible for art. (B, 196)

It is immediately apparent that this model incorporates the problem of historical knowledge as its first premise. There is no pretense made of direct access to the past: "we cannot truly conceive the age." Any hope for an "actual" revival is dismissed as "impossible" and disparaged as "vain antiquarianism," an aspersion that Pater casts elsewhere to differentiate his own method from a factual, distant style of historical report. What can be achieved is an aesthetic revival or a figurative representation of present access to a past age. In Pater's words, "we can conceive the element it has contributed to our culture." In "Aesthetic Poetry," Pater praises Morris for the "charming anachronisms" that result from that poet's balance between distance and closeness in observation: "while he handles an ancient subject, [he] never becomes an antiquarian, but animates his subject by keeping it always close to himself" (B, 195). Just as in the "Preface" (where the aesthetic critic first asks, "What does this object mean to me"?), here, too, Pater is concerned with the particular kind of validity possible when the object is known first subjectively and only then disengaged or set at a distance—in this case, the distance of historical difference.

1. See his remarks on Carlo Amoretti in "Leonardo" and on the "new Vasari" (Crowe and Cavalcaselle) in "The School of Giorgione" (R, 99–100, 143–47).
In Pater's present inquiry, the "object" is a chosen time in the past. The "zeal" involved in choosing the object precipitates a division within the self, as well as an act of "isolating" one age from the rest of historical time. "It is possible to isolate such a phase, to throw it into relief" against the rest of historical culture and against the mind in the present. One way to highlight the results of this particular figure would be to point out that the consciousness of the subject in the present is portrayed at once as the active force that "isolates" and "throws" a past age into relief and as the receptive background against which the past age is thrown. The "isolation" achieved this way is of course only relative, provisional, or partial, for the past age is still located "within" as well as projected "against" its background or context in the present self. As Pater's essay on Coleridge made clear, no sharp, absolute "outlines" may be drawn around the modern object of knowledge; in its plastic sense, this figure spatially portrays the object within its "conditions."

The figure of relief is therefore a model of "relative truth" or contextual knowledge. To "know" an object, it is necessary to establish a distance, and this figure of self-division generates the sense of relative distance by "relieving" the object so that it emerges into clear visibility against its background without detaching it fully from that background. Here "distance" within the self represents historical difference, as "distance" within time can be figured within the self. As a model of relative knowledge, then, the figure of relief imagines historical difference within the self at the same time that it projects romantic self-division as historical periodization.

The crucial assumption that makes the logic of this figure possible is Pater's belief in a certain homologous and reciprocally expressive relation between the individual and general historical culture. In the present passage the relation is expressed as a structure of mutual containment in which the culture of all the ages lives "within" each individual at the same time that each individual lives "within" it. As Pater puts it, "the composite experience of all the ages is part of each one of us," and reciprocally, "because we live and move and have our being in the life of humanity, [it] makes us what we are." It is a striking fact that unlike the other representational relations we have been examining, Pater does not acknowledge this relation as a figurative strategy, but identifies with it totally as an unquestioned article of faith. As such it has a crucial importance, for it underwrites his aesthetic historicism.

If the individual person and the "life of humanity" are mutually internalized, they participate in the same "spirit"; they have the same "character." This is a familiar idea in the period, but it is important at the outset to discriminate three interlocking levels of conceptualization operating in Pater's version of this period concept: that of the individual, historical person; that of the immediately surrounding historical context, the Zeitgeist or "spirit of the age"; and that of the overarching "world-spirit," or Geist, a transhistorical category generated from and projected beyond any "actual" historical phenomenon. McGrath is right to argue that Pater rejected the notion of absolute spirit, but his understanding of Zeitgeist reaches in that direction. On the synchronic side, Pater's Zeitgeist is the "spirit of the age," but on the diachronic side, Zeitgeist is the "time-spirit," an overarching spirit evolving from age to age. It is in this latter sense that Pater's use of Zeitgeist often reaches toward Geist, and in this latter sense Pater usually calls it the "life of the human spirit," the "life of humanity," or the "mind of man."

In the passage under discussion here, Pater brackets the "spirit of the age" and considers the relation between the individual person and the "life of humanity" over all the ages. However, already we have frequently seen him hypostatize a Zeitgeist—as, for example, in "Aesthetic Poetry" he speaks of the "medieval mind," or in the "Conclusion" he speaks of "modern thought." The hypostasis involved in generating the concept of the "spirit of the age" is characteristically achieved as a dialectical sublation in Pater—for example, when he posits the "medieval mind" as an enveloping category to resolve the opposition between Christianity and courtly love, thus establishing a "higher" unity over the space of supposed historical difference. Likewise, on the largest level, the transhistorical Geist is projected in order to unify without annihilating historically different ages in one overarching development. These totalizing moves on the level of historical representation should seem familiar, for they recapitulate what we have seen on the individual level, where the sense of continuous identity is achieved as a result of the dialectical subsumption of impression and disengagement in retrospection.

The pervasive debt to Hegel in Pater's thinking about history may be seen most clearly here, as my use of the terms Zeitgeist and Geist suggest. Pater's knowledge of Hegel has been well documented. Early


4. As well as my use of the verb "to sublate," which is the usual English translation of aufheben: to negate or cancel, but also to preserve by elevating as a part of a dialectical synthesis.
in his career Pater read the *Phenomenology*, the *Logic*, the *History of Philosophy*, and the *Philosophy of Fine Art*—most, and perhaps all, in the original German. His interest in Hegel was well-known to his contemporaries, and it was said that he owed his Brasenose Fellowship to his knowledge of German philosophy, especially Schelling and Hegel. Indeed, his interest in Hegel was part of a recognized movement, for during the decades of his greatest productivity Pater was friendly with several of the leading Oxford Hegelians. And of course by Pater's day there is a long native literary tradition of attention to German idealist philosophy and aesthetics, whose most important early-nineteenth-century figures are Coleridge and Carlyle. Even philosophers whose projects lay in entirely different directions had absorbed elements of this influence, as Mill's famous 1827 essay on the "spirit of the age" makes clear. There Mill identifies the very belief in a "spirit" of the age as the chief defining characteristic of the spirit of his own particular age.

Several scholars—notably Anthony Ward, William Shuter, Peter Allan Dale, Donald L. Hill, Billie Andrew Inman, F. C. McGrath, and Wolfgang Iser—have traced the Hegelian influence in Pater's conceptual framework and to some extent in his literary form. Ward points out the particular appeal for Pater in Hegel's description of historical change, which fully takes account of the "flux" and yet provides stability in the concept of the overarching *Geist*. Up to this point, I have been most interested in the systematic homology that Pater draws between phenomenological experience and historical change, which is reflected in the interlocking aspects of his method: his aestheticism and his historicism. In general, this homology may be seen

as a forceful reminder of Pater's pervasive Hegelianism, but in the
chapters to come, I concentrate also on the effects of this system of
interlocking levels of generalization, under whose auspices the spirit
of the individual person, the spirit of the age, and the overarching
spirit of humanity become reciprocally expressive.

We must constantly remind ourselves that these are figures, each
one unifying disparate phenomena under the aegis of a personal spirit.
I am not so much interested in demythologizing this Hegelian system
of historical representation, though that worthy project has been un­
dertaken by others, in Pater's age and in our own. Instead, I am primar­
ily interested in how it works, in relation to other elements of struc­
ture and texture in Pater, as literary form. In synchronic terms, the
relation between the individual and the Zeitgeist or "spirit of the
age" is usually figured as a relation of microcosm to macrocosm,
emphasizing their analogous content or homologous structure. But in
addition to the synchronic relation, Hegel's model takes into account
the diachronically homologous relation between the individual life
and the "life of the human spirit" unfolding in time. In other words,
the homology is figured both spatially, as a structure of containment,
and temporally, as a process of development.

The biological concept that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny offers
us a scientific version of this latter conception of the relation between
individual and type over time. Pater works again and again with this
notion that the development of the individual person recapitu­lates
the development of the culture at large. Because the late-nineteenth-
century conception of the relation between individual and surround­
ing culture was conceived as both "spiritual" and "organic," it is
easily identifiable also as romantic, and perhaps it could be specifically
distinguished as late romantic by saying that the "spirit" in question
is that of history not nature. It is important to recognize that both the
"spirit of the age" and the "life of the human spirit" are projec­ted on
the ontogenetic model, as both organic and personal, even though
they are explicitly understood to be collective or transpersonal. The

1977). Gould argues that the biological concept of phylogeny may have been originally
derived from categories of cultural analysis. For this, and for discussion of confusions
between cultural and biological applications of the concept of the ontogenetic/ phyloge­
netic relation, see ibid., pp. 115–66. Gould discusses the literary "survival" of this
notion long after its scientific validity had been shaken; he notes the aesthetic analogy
often drawn between earlier, "primitive" cultures and individual childhood; and he
traces the influence of recapitulationist theories on Freudian psychoanalysis. For an­
other literary discussion of this concept, see W. J. Harvey, "Idea and Image in George
passage under immediate consideration itself displays one such result of conceiving the aesthetic history of Western culture as an individual person's life. Personal memory and historical retrieval are conflated, with the allegorical result that classical Greece becomes the "childhood" of the Western world, the mythic, pastoral past we cannot "actually" recapture.\textsuperscript{10}

This entanglement of the spiritual, the historical, and the biological becomes richly suggestive in Pater, for the relation drawn in Pater between the individual and the surrounding or overarching historical culture (which I have related now to a German and English tradition of historical transcendentalism and to the biological and early anthropological conceptions of ontogeny and phylogeny) is also clearly recognizable as a secularization of Christianity. The \textit{Geist} is a romantic and secularized conception in the sense that "spirit" is an ideal, overarching, and transcendent projection of phenomenological process. We could say that the concept of the \textit{Geist} marks a stage in what Pater calls the "secular process" (PP, 10), a stage in which the transcendent is no longer understood as wholly other but is introjected, on the one hand, to establish the romantic self, and projected outward, on the other hand, to establish this overarching, ideal vision of history. In the passage under discussion, the spirit of history replaces the God of Acts 17:28, the God in whom "we live and move and have our being." And, since the experience of historical "relief" is possible because "the composite experience of all the ages is part of each one of us," history is figured as the new muse, filling us full of its spirit, divinely inspiring each one of us as if from "outside."

This biblical allusion is an instructive case in point, for Pater's intertextual strategy offers a good example of the sort of shift in context that produces an aesthetic effect. The force of this particular allusion asserts the divinity of the \textit{Geist} by appropriating the Pauline description of the Christian God to describe "the life of humanity." In a doubleness that is characteristic of secularization-effects, the Christian text is secularized and converted into a support for Paterian-Hegelian historicism, even as that historicism remains partially Christianized. In this respect, Pater's biblical language is particularly poignant and ironic, for he expresses an "aspiration" toward the impossible but nonetheless ardently desired retrieval of classical Greece in the very terms of what—historically and imaginatively speaking—

\textsuperscript{10} The notion that the "childhood" of the Western world was spent in ancient Greece is a commonplace of German Idealism, occurring in Winckelmann, Herder, Goethe, Hegel, and even Marx. On Marx's famous lapse into this romantic myth, see Maynard Solomon, ed., \textit{Marxism and Art} (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 423.
stands between him and the realization of that desire: the historical fact of Christianity.

The other biblical intertext in this passage, from the story of Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3:4–21, elaborates Pater's view of the historical fact that Christianity intervened between the classical Greeks and his own late romantic, late nineteenth century. In doing so, it reminds us of the Christian answer to the question of personal revival. Pater transposes the skepticism of Nicodemus into the aesthetic and historical register: “to come face to face with the people of a past age . . . is as impossible as to become a little child, or enter again into the womb and be born.” Of course, in its original context, Nicodemus’s question is answered with Jesus’ explanation that one can return, can be born again, spiritually. Again the trope of secularization reveals its characteristic ironic doubleness. On the one hand, this intertextual reference supports Pater's stoic admission that an “actual revival [is] impossible,” for it demonstrates the sense in which allusion strategically confuses historical difference; in this case, the traditional force of the gospel story has been turned to a secular use. But on the other hand, it forcefully argues that a spiritual or “imaginative” revival is possible by enlisting the Christian belief in spiritual “rebirth” or conversion on behalf of his belief in an imaginative, aesthetic, and historical revival. In this exchange, Pater commands the power of spiritual return for his own poetics of revival.

Finally, Pater's treatment of the relation between historical culture and the individual permits us to see here the beginnings of a theory of the unconscious. The theory is figured as a sort of collective unconscious, because “the composite experience of all the ages is part of each one of us” and no age can be “obliterated” or “deducted” or “repressed” totally. Pater's fervent tone, as well as the allusion to Christian rebirth, seems to express a wish that repression could be more effective, as if then he could “actually” come “face to face” with the people of classical Greece. In the spirit of Pater's rhetoric and logic of containment or internalization, it is as if the epistemological dilemmas of historical relativism and romantic self-consciousness are figured here as physical obstructions, as if historical experience were dense, occluding matter “filling up” the space of difference between present and past. If only that matter could be “deducted” or “obliterated” or “repressed”—Pater's wish seems to be—then we could see across the space of historical difference as if it were empty, transparent, and clear as air. But the matter needing to be “repressed” is the historical fact of Christianity
The Poetics of Revival · 77 ·

itself! If we correlate the terms of Pater's three-stage historical narrative (classical Greece, medieval Christianity, the modern age) with the Christian rhetoric of rebirth or conversion (as Pater does in this passage), Christianity itself assumes the surprising role of the former life of "sin" he would turn away from or "obliterate." Pater's wish to see, not through a glass darkly but "face to face," implicitly and ironically denigrates Christianity as that which blocks his view of the Greeks, as that which, in historical, personal (and latently sexual) terms, is the too, too solid body of adulthood.

Using the plastic figure of relief, however, the intervening ages can be imagined as "relatively" repressed, to form the effaced or indefinite background against which the chosen age is consciously "thrown" into relatively higher "relief." Thus classical Greece, for example, can be thrown into relief against—and can grant relief to—a nineteenth-century consciousness whose strategy is to repress the intervening ages in its favor. In linked individual and historical terms, the "poetics of revival" describes a dynamic of strategic remembering and forgetting. The same plastic figure portrays the unconscious as well as consciousness, strategic forgetting as well as aesthetically controlled recollection. What we know and remember is surrounded by and emerges from what we do not know, do not remember. What we know, in this model, is not the past itself, but its configuration within our own culture, the shadow it casts, the shape it has impressed upon the background of our present consciousness. That plastic "impression" within "each one of us" may be externalized, "thrown" or projected away from the self again, and thereby recovered, revived, and represented as "relief."