Transfigured World
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Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism.

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when it thus tacitly acknowledges that it is based already on other
interpretive interventions. We cannot "come face to face with the
people of a past age," Pater writes in "Aesthetic Poetry." Of a past age
we have only "the element it has contributed to our culture; we can
treat the subjects of the age bringing that into relief" (B, 196). Basing
his own interpretations on the "received" story rather than on scien­
tically established data, Pater concentrates on that very element, the
element a past age has contributed to his own present culture. These
are the stories "which every one remembers," whether they are true
or not (R, 99).

The facts are obscure, disputed, and indeterminate, and when they
are clear they are disappointingly meager, bare bones where flesh
and breath are wanted. Pater registers the difficulties of historical
knowledge in his recognition that all we have of the past are relics
that have somehow survived. He appreciates the composite forms that
testify to those accidents of transmission. The received story perhaps
is adulterated, perhaps entirely illegitimate, but a legend's question­
able status reinforces its interpretive value because it marks the effects
of the time that has intervened between Pater and the object of his
research. A legend is fact transfigured in time. Thus, a legend is all
the more true to the fact that the past is seen in retrospect from a
distant present, for a legend registers in its own questionable shape
the ineffable space of historical difference.

2 · Myths of History: The Last Supper

The word "legend" derives from the Latin legere, "to gather," and
behind the Latin lies the Greek legein, "to gather" or "to say," a
variant of logos, "speech" or "reason." That its ultimate derivation
from the logos has been transformed over the years into "legend"—the
name in English of a traditional story whose factual basis is assumed
though it has been transfigured during the course of its transmission—
is curiously appropriate to Pater's use of the word, for he nostalgically
but stoically lays to rest the belief in immediate, direct access to
knowledge and concentrates instead on gathering up whatever can be
received through historical mediation. In his modern, historical age,
to gather is not "to say" but to recollect what has been written. A
legend embodies, in Pater's words, what "every one remembers," that
part of the past which has survived in the present, in stories that are appreciated half historically, half aesthetically [R, 99].

But Pater begins his discussion of Leonardo’s legend by invoking the “legend, as the French say.” Referring to the French opens another range of nuance, for the French say légende is an inscription on an object, or a descriptive caption under an image, or an explanatory key to a symbolic system. Indeed, a legend often underwrites Pater’s interpretation of a work of art, and that interpretation usually refers ultimately to the working of history in general. With legendary fragments of the artist’s life as an explanatory key, works of art supply Pater with a vast symbolic system through which he reads the signs of History itself. In order to see Pater’s method at work over the course of an entire essay, I will concentrate in sections 2 and 4 on “Leonardo Da Vinci” but in section 3 I will make a detour to examine Pater’s own critical distinctions between history, allegory, myth, and symbol.

Pater introduces the essay by naming Leonardo as the painter “who has fixed the outward type of Christ for succeeding centuries.” This he presents as a historical fact, which came about despite the irony of Leonardo’s reputation for “holding lightly by other men’s beliefs, setting philosophy above Christianity” [R, 98]. Later Pater will build on this tension between Leonardo’s enormously influential representation of Christ and his legendary skepticism toward Christianity as belief, to characterize the doubleness of aesthetic history in general. But to posit it as a tension in the first place is to begin already having interpreted, and this particular interpretation is based on legend, as Pater easily and immediately acknowledges: “Words of his, trenchant enough to justify this impression, are not recorded, and would have been out of keeping with a genius of which one characteristic is the tendency to lose itself in a refined and graceful mystery.” Here the very remoteness of Leonardo’s life, the very absence of historical evidence, ostensibly supports Pater’s point. In order to find the suggestion of Leonardo’s apostasy, Pater returns to the first edition of Vasari, for in the second edition [he points out], “the image [of Leonardo] was changed into something fainter and more conventional” [R, 98]. The founding moment of this essay, in other words, is based on a search backward through the legendary sources, the acknowledged choice of one legend over another, and the preference for a story more vivid and antithetical over one more conventional and “faint.” The chosen story, too, is “closer” in time to its historical original. Pater reaches back toward the actuality of Leonardo’s life through a mediator less distanced than he in time, and he reaches past Vasari’s conventionalized revisions to the earlier, more colorful version of the legend.
Almost the entire first half of the essay is devoted to setting up a complicated interpretive framework based on the legends of Leonardo's life. Leonardo's illegitimate birth, his apprenticeship to Verrocchio, his interest in the occult, his lifelong preoccupation with smiling women, his homosexuality—all contribute to Pater's portrait of Leonardo as the possessor of secret wisdom. The epigraph Pater adds in the third edition, "homo minister et interpres naturae," only encapsulates as a literal legend the portrait that is quite palpable throughout: Leonardo "living in a world of which he alone possessed the key" (R, 107). A lover of "remote beauty," Leonardo "weighted" Italian art with the deeper, richer humanity "of a later age" (R, 105, 110, 103), for the "nature" Leonardo interprets is also quintessentially the nature of human personality, which he "embodied with a reality which almost amounts to illusion" (R, 111). He had learned "the art of going deep" and was

no longer the cheerful, objective painter, through whose soul, as through clear glass, the bright figures of Florentine life, only made a little mellower and more pensive by the transit, passed on to the white wall. (R, 104)

Pater hypothesizes here a mythically transparent, "cheerful, objective painter," in order for Leonardo to mark the historical difference from that clarity. As usual, aesthetic value is produced as historical effect: later, deeper, and more difficult of access. Sometimes, as Pater says, Leonardo goes too deep, "too far below that outside of things in which art begins and ends" (R, 112).

This conflict is expressed in Pater's "formula" for Leonardo ("curiosity and the desire of beauty") which establishes the idea of a dialectical struggle between knowledge and art. Leonardo's problem was the "transmutation of ideas into images" (R, 112). In that respect, the science of his age was not entirely antithetical to art, for unlike "our exact modern formulas" it was itself devoted to clairvoyance, divination, and alchemical transmutation, "seeking in an instant of vision to concentrate a thousand experiences" (R, 106). Though Pater detects in Leonardo's genius a "German element" that, "as Goethe said, had 'thought itself weary'—müde sich gedacht," yet in the moment of "bien-être" Leonardo's inspired execution enables him to embody the idea in the image and thus to refine a "cloudy mysticism" into "a subdued and graceful mystery" (R, 113–14). (Meanwhile, the German
and French tags insistently remind us of Pater's own synthetic transmission."

Like Leonardo's vision of nature, Pater's vision of Leonardo's life and work reveals a system of correspondences between things, "through which, to eyes opened, they interpret each other" (R, 103). He uses the legend of Leonardo's life as the key to unlock an interpretation of his work, and his interpretation of the work becomes the key to a significance even "more remote." Pater purports to see through Leonardo's legend to the mysteries of historical process. The famous passage on the Mona Lisa will seem less obtrusive and at the same time more profoundly important if we see it in its context, near the end of an essay that generates it as an emblematic recollection.

Not until the second half of the essay does Pater pause over individual works at any length, and then, too, biographical legend forms the chief support of his interpretations. When he turns to Leonardo's Last Supper, for example, he does not at first write of the visual appearance of the painting itself. He first approaches it through the legends that have grown up about its execution, its subsequent decay, and the many attempts to restore the painting. "A whole literature has risen up," he writes, and he singles out the comments of Goethe as perhaps the best. No matter how apocryphal, legendary, or interpretively variant the contents of the record may be, it is a historical fact that a tradition of commentary has "risen up," and Pater accordingly treats the legends and commentary as received historical "data." For example, he reports that a "hundred anecdotes" have been told about Leonardo's painstaking, hesitant, inspired execution of the painting. For Pater, the tradition of belief in Leonardo's careful execution is beyond dispute, whether or not he was actually as fastidious as the anecdotes claim, whether or not he actually refused to work except at the moments of "bien-être." Like Leonardo's "fix[ing] the outward type of Christ," these anecdotes fix in the minds of succeeding generations a portrait of Leonardo. Pater identifies himself with the received view of Leonardo's method, accepting the legend as that part of the past which has survived to become a part of his own present culture.

According to the anecdotes, Leonardo scorned the idea of art by "industry and rule" and worked only in the "moment" of intensity, yet at the same time he pursued a new method of execution because it "allowed of so many afterthoughts, so refined a working out of

1. I have been developing certain effects of the German influence. For the French influence, see John J. Conlon, Walter Pater and the French Tradition (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1982).
perfection" (R, 120). Passionate and careful, inspired and self-possessed by turns, both an artist and a scientist, Leonardo exemplifies in another age and medium Pater's understanding of aesthetic practice. Yet Pater's interpretation of Leonardo's legend turns on a significant fact from the technical history of painting. It turns out that Leonardo's new method—painting in oil on a plastered wall—though admirable in its refinement, was less durable even than fresco. The painting has faded terribly over the course of time. In other words, from a perspective in the late nineteenth century, Leonardo's image of "the outward type of Christ" is less fixed in any present, objective sense than it is through the tradition of copies taken from its original. Like Pater's image of Leonardo, it is impossible to grasp directly; it must be seen in large part through the mediation of others. Pater goes on to make the painting a vehicle first for the difficulties of historical revival and finally for the attenuation of Christian faith since the Renaissance.

First he comments on the secularization involved in Leonardo's image of Christ:

Here was another effort to lift a given subject out of the range of its traditional associations. Strange, after all the mystic developments of the middle age, was the effort to see the Eucharist, not as the pale Host of the altar, but as one taking leave of his friends. (R, 120)

Seeing in Leonardo's painting the portrait of Christ's humanity, Pater sides with Clément and Goethe against Rio, for Rio had argued against Goethe that the figure embodies a meditation on Christ's divinity. This interpretive choice also tacitly identifies in Leonardo an earlier stage of the "higher" or historical criticism of Pater's own modern moment. His quiet pun on "Host" (as the one who receives guests, as the Communion he offers them) is quintessentially Paterian. And in another characteristically Paterian shift toward a higher level of historical generalization, he interprets Leonardo's portrait of a human Christ as evidence of the Renaissance return to sensuality after the "mystic" representations of the Middle Age.

Pater then suggests that the painting has been etherealized by the fadings of time, that it owes "part of its effect to a mellowing decay" (R, 120). He concentrates on the passage of time as it is registered in the visible, formal features of the painting, which to his eyes gains in

aesthetic value from its evidences of great age and the accidental effects of change. To Pater, those accidents of history have an interpretable historical significance of their own. In an amazingly unconventional interpretation, he reads the very head of Christ to signify the waning of belief in Christianity over the centuries.

The head of Jesus does but consummate the sentiment of the whole company—ghosts through which you see the wall, faint as the shadows of the leaves upon the wall on autumn afternoons. This figure is but the faintest, the most spectral of them all. It is the image of what the history it symbolises has been more and more ever since, paler and paler as it recedes into the distance. Criticism came with its appeal from mystical unrealities to originals, and restored no life-like reality but these transparent shadows—spirits which have not flesh and bones. [R, 120–21]

Unlike the method of the “cheerful, objective painter,” through whose transparent soul the “figures of life . . . passed on to the white wall,” Leonardo’s dialectic of interiority—moments of inspiration followed by painstaking afterthoughts—produces translucent, fading figures, through which the wall soon begins to show. Pater’s metonymic passage through the painting to the wall enacts, in more than one respect, a metaphorical displacement. On the simplest level, the figures of the disciples become first ghosts and then the shadows of leaves, a double transformation through which Pater first rids the wall of the images of human life and then dispenses even with the ghostly copies of human form. The autumnal leaves that remain to shadow the wall duplicate that loss of life, because life is leaving them too: they are dying at the year’s end, and they are being displaced by their shadows. But more important, Pater makes our ability to see through these fading figures to the wall beneath them a figure for the demystifying process of secularization. As the images of belief fade in time, more and more we can see the blank wall they formerly concealed.

In this remarkable passage, Christianity itself appears to have been an aesthetic construct whose method of representation has not been equal to the forces of time. The painting fades in vividness despite all efforts to preserve it, and its fading reveals the blank ground against which an image of belief has been raised by the effort of human hands. Pater’s figure, in other words, is a composite figure, composed of

3. The last sentences (from “It is the image” to the end of this passage) do not appear in the 1893 edition but do appear in all other editions. The phrase “as it recedes into the distance” appears in the 1888 and 1900 editions; all others, including the Fortnightly, read “as it recedes from us.” See Hill’s notes, p. 233.
Leonardo's figures of Christ and the disciples, taken together with their background, and Pater's figure metafigurally records both the aesthetic act of projecting the image of Christ upon the wall, as well as the subsequent historical fact of its decay. Leonardo's "faint" and "spectral" figure "symbolises" to Pater the Renaissance attempt to return to the historical, physical, and "natural" reality of Christ, a reality now "paler and paler as it recedes into the distance." But Pater's figure, which consists of Leonardo's figures against their ground, symbolizes not just the historical process of secularization, but even more radically, the aesthetic act necessary to cover the blank wall with sacred images in the first place. This is a figure of historical "relief," in other words, here employed to express not the act of historical knowledge, but its opposite, the brevity of life in historical time, the fading of historical memory.

There is a cutting irony in the doubleness engendered by Pater's aesthetic historicism here. In retrospect, even the Renaissance attempt to renaturalize religious imagery seems to have reinscribed instead the "mystical unrealities" of the Middle Ages. The modern attempt to bring Christ closer by imagining his humanity rather than his spirituality has had the unexpectedly opposite effect of bleeding the image of its spiritual color and making his historical reality seem even further away. Pater shows that Leonardo "fixes" the "outward type of Christ" as human, he paradoxically "fixes" the moment when Christian belief begins to come unfixed, to fade into the "humanism" of modern representation. As Leonardo's fixation literally comes unfixed, it signifies to Pater not its original but the necessity for later copies. In this submerged allegory of the remorseless irony of secularization, the loss of spirituality has been figured as the loss of aesthetic form, which paradoxically creates the sense of greater spirituality—but this time as an aesthetic and historical effect. Images of human "nature" and aesthetic color avail only partially to represent spirituality, and always ironically; this particular Renaissance attempt to return Christian imagery to a more natural and sensual reality has produced instead the denatured effect of ghosts, specters, shadows, and transparencies. This attempt of "criticism" to return to "originals" has succeeded only in marking the distance from them.4

4. Monsman illuminates Pater's interest in copies and lost originals with a Derridean light; see, e.g., Pater's Art of Autobiography, pp. 22, 26, 58. I agree with Monsman (and Hillis Miller, "Pater: A Partial Portrait," Daedalus 105 [Winter 1976], 97–113) that Pater was acutely conscious of the infinite regress involved in a search for origins. Perhaps for that very reason I believe that, while it is important to pursue the poststructuralist critique of Pater, it is equally important not to equate Pater's own strategies of reading with poststructuralist strategies.
Another way to grasp this irony would be to examine the complexities of Pater's vertiginously shifting perspective here. On the one hand, the "humanism" of Leonardo's portrait of Christ identifies the Renaissance with the nineteenth century, and in this light the Renaissance represents a true difference from the Christian Middle Ages. The very term "Middle Ages" is a sign of this difference, which, from the point of view of Pater's modern synthesis, redefines the Christian era as the "middle" term in a three-term history, the "antithesis," in other words, of the classical age. But on the other hand, from Pater's late-nineteenth-century perspective of difference from both, the Renaissance difference from the Middle Ages collapses into likeness, all one continuously developing attenuation of Christian imagery. It seems, too, that the denaturing of the Christian tradition and Pater's heightened rhetoric are in an inverse and dynamic relation to one another, history and symbolism rising as belief fades. And characteristically, after this passage of densely compressed and heightened rhetoric, Pater re-anchors his discourse with a pivotal recourse to the historical facts. The next paragraph begins with the matter-of-fact, contextualizing statement that "the Last Supper was finished in 1497; in 1498 the French entered Milan . . ." (R, 121).

Pater's treatment of Leonardo's Last Supper represents one characteristic movement in The Renaissance. From the various legends of an artist's life, Pater moves toward the stability and objectivity of the surviving work. He concentrates intently on a particular object, appreciating the historicity of its appearance, the legends of its special creation, its history since then, and the effects of that history on its objective form. Together with his focus on the particular object, he begins to weave the sense of a deep correlation between the legendary life and the work. Both present Pater with aesthetically objective forms; both refer to the same period of original, specific historicity; and both have histories of their own, which show visibly in their forms. As Pater's correlation between the recreated legend and the surviving work attains a certain level of coherence, it generates a shift to a higher level of generalization. The special history of the life and work are then projected as a model for historical process in general. Finally the object with its special history exists in Pater's prose within a penumbra of symbolic, allegorical, and mythic associations.

When Pater writes that the image of Christ in the Last Supper "symbolises" a certain history, he uses that term to pretend that the meaning he has assigned somehow inheres in the object itself. In the sense that Leonardo's image of Christ "symbolises" the historical existence of a human Christ because it is painted in a more realistic,
less stylized manner than previous images of Christ, the term is accu­rate, but in the sense that the faded image is made to stand for the modern process of secularization, “allegory” would be a more accurate term. In other words, Pater's interpretation of the painting is both symbolic and allegorical. In fact, in the course of the passage, Pater shifts the rhetorical register from symbol toward allegory. This is an extremely important point, for the conjunction of symbol and allegory indicates Pater's subjective identification with the object of his regard and at the same time indicates his disengagement. He circumvents the problems of solipsism through the assertion of symbolism, the assertion that the meaning actually inheres in the object. Then, refreshed by this belief in the objectivity of the symbol, he goes on to develop allegorical narratives of historical process, in which the “spiritual” significance is “more remote” from its vehicle, that vehicle is no longer an object but the history of an object, and the interpreter has clearly intervened to institute this allegorical remoteness between object and meaning.⁵

But Pater's is a peculiar form of allegory in which the spiritual meaning is a generalized and temporalized extension of signs that may be perceived in the object itself. The allegorical significance takes us far beyond the object to the workings of historical time, but that level of spirituality as well as narrative extension has been unfolded from an objective point, through a symbolic interpretation of the object’s unique historicity. And to the extent that the interaction of symbol and allegory generates an interpretation of History in general, Pater has also produced a myth. Here again it is a peculiar form of myth, not only because it is a myth of History (a common form in the nineteenth century), but also because the narrative or temporal form of the myth is unfolded through the symbolic interpretation of an object. These interpretive practices reach their apotheosis in Pater's reading of the Mona Lisa, but before we turn to that passage, it would be helpful to have in mind Pater's understanding of history, allegory, and myth.