Transfigured World

Williams, Carolyn

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Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism.

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“Properly told,” Pater writes, the story of an “earlier Medusa” has more of the “air of truth” than anything else in the entire legend. This story tells of the young Leonardo painting a wooden shield with a grotesque amalgamation of lizards, snakes, bats, and glowworms, all rendered so true to life that they frightened his father. In calling this the story of the “earlier Medusa,” Pater draws a connection between this legendary childhood prank and the adult Leonardo’s “fascination with corruption,” which Pater finds embodied in the corposelike Medusa of the Uffizi.¹ And within the structure of Pater’s essay, both early and later Medusas prefigure Leonardo’s portrait of La Gioconda (the Mona Lisa).

When Pater draws this relation between earlier and later versions of the supposedly “same” image, he tacitly attributes to Leonardo a certain psychological coherence, and that internal coherence is understood to be reflected in his works over time, as long as they too are read in developmental terms. The arc of continuity projected beyond or above the local invention of each different “phase” is the contribution of the interpreter, who unifies all phases by “ranging them in a series.” The embedded, implicit narrative in Pater’s essay on Leonardo creates this sense of an essential coherence that develops over time, the retrospective, aesthetic sense of a story “properly told,” a story that breathes the “air of truth” because the revelation of a last Medusa fulfills the developmental promise of the earlier ones in the series. So too Pater’s interpretation of her image lends the “air of truth” to his previously expressed “formula” for Leonardo’s genius. Like the presence that rose so strangely beside the waters, Pater’s passage on the Mona Lisa rises against the elaborate groundwork of the essay as a whole to show that Leonardo’s inherent fascination with “the smiling of women and the motion of great waters” emerges at last in that portrait. In other words, both Leonardo’s masterpiece and Pater’s famous modern poem appear more visibly “heightened” when seen against their backgrounds, for they gather and sum up Leonardo’s artistic development, the processes of history, and the movements of Pater’s essay in one emblematic recollection.

¹. In his edition of The Renaissance, Kenneth Clark notes that the Medusa of the Uffizi is a seventeenth-century painting after Caravaggio but that it may be based on a lost original by Leonardo (quoted in Hill’s notes, p. 366). See also Monsman, Pater’s Art of Autobiography, who reads the Medusa as an allegory of the relation of the author to his text (pp. 59–62).
The essay begins its approach toward the Mona Lisa through a thicket of brief glances at other works by Leonardo (at first chiefly drawings) and these pages are characterized by nervous energy, wandering attention, and erratic passion (R, 114–18). The theme of sexual indeterminacy weaves into Pater's consideration of the mysteries of influence just at the point in the essay when the short passage on Leonardo's "clairvoyants" begins moving explicitly toward the Mona Lisa. A brief consideration of Leonardo's "feeling for maternity" leads Pater to his passionate remarks about the drawing (after Leonardo) of a "face of doubtful sex." Pater loved this drawing and used it in an engraved vignette on the title page of his Renaissance volume. This face leads him to consider another, "which might pass for the same face in childhood, with parched and feverish lips." And the "thread of suggestion" generated by these two versions, early and late, of the supposedly "same" beautiful face "of doubtful sex" leads Pater, by means of a significant displacement, to a brief consideration of "Leonardo's type of womanly beauty."

Pater's tone shifts to the vatic and sinister when he considers the clairvoyants, but the notion of their "chain of secret influences" soon returns him to a consideration of Leonardo's favorite young men, and there the tone shifts again. At this point in the essay, the "chain of secret influences" shimmers in a multivalent haze of signification, linking female figures of both benign maternity and sinister clairvoyance, fantasies and biographical legends of male homosexuality, and the dissemination of Leonardo's painterly style through copies. His "lost originals" have been historically transmitted through copies made by devoted pupils and servants, who were "ready to efface their own individuality" in return for initiation into Leonardo's occult knowledge. The "chain of secret influences" refers explicitly, then, to the historical transmission of Leonardo's images, which has been implicitly linked here to the erotics of heterosexual generation, on the one hand, and to homosexual, aesthetic transmission, on the other. After another glance at mother and child, Pater turns to the naked and womanly picture of John the Baptist with his "treacherous smile." He considers both its likeness to the Bacchus hanging nearby in the Louvre and the gradual disappearance (over the history of its transmission in copies) of the cross from the Baptist's hand. Through this image, in other words, Pater associates a theory of secularization with his sexualized theory of historical transmission.

Much commentary precedes Pater's on this famous androgyne Baptist, and he bows in passing to Gautier and Heine. These influences (especially Gautier and the unacknowledged but essential Swinburne)
are behind Pater's text both at this point and later, in his discussion of the Mona Lisa. The complex and shifting relations here—between homosexuality, maternal sexuality, sexual indeterminacy, intertextuality, and the notion of aesthetic "generation," dissemination, and influence—need and deserve much more critical attention. But my immediate purpose in sketching these movements so briefly is to establish the sexually charged atmosphere gathered around Pater's consideration of the *Last Supper* and the Mona Lisa. These nervous, electric pages appear to sublimate their energy in and through Pater's symbolic treatment of the Mona Lisa. Certainly the energy of these pages must be remembered when Pater admits that the "given person or subject . . . is often merely the pretext for a kind of work which carries one quite out of the range of its conventional associations" [R, 119].

Leonardo's problem, according to Pater, was the "transmutation of ideas into images," and that is Pater's problem as well. He describes the painting's effect of "subdued and graceful mystery," in the very same phrase he used to describe the moment of *bien-être*, when the alchemy is complete and an idea is successfully "stricken into colour and imagery" [R, 114, 123]. He stresses again the legendary controversy about Leonardo's method: Was the painting done in a fevered burst of inspiration, "as by a stroke of magic," or was it done over years and years of painstaking labor, never really to be finished at all? He calls Leonardo's painting the "revealing instance of his mode of thought and work," but he leaves the exact nature of the revelation uncertain, double, mysterious. Pater, like Leonardo, uses *La Gioconda* as a "vent for his thoughts." He seizes on Leonardo's images of the Last Supper and of Lisa in the same way that Leonardo finds his pretexts as easily in the "incidents of the sacred legend" as in the faces of the "living women of Florence." Pater takes Lisa's image "as a symbolical language for fancies all his own . . . and rais[es] her, as Leda or Pomona, Modesty or Vanity, to the seventh heaven of symbolical expression" [R, 123].

As in his treatment of the *Last Supper*, Pater approaches the Mona Lisa more closely through the legends of its execution. Unlike Leonardo's paintings of the "sacred legend," this portrait was done from life. Pater stresses that fact, although he wonders at the relation between the "real" source and its "ideal" resonances, between the element of "mere portraiture" and what Pater soon will call "imaginary portraiture."

2. Pater's remark about the *Last Supper* applies with even greater justice to the Mona Lisa: "a whole literature has risen up" around it [R, 119]. Others include Clément and Taine. For remarks of Gautier and Heine, see Hill's notes, pp. 374–75.

3. The 1893 edition of *The Renaissance* reads "cryptic language for fancies all his own"; all other editions read "symbolical language" [Hill's notes, p. 234].
Were it not for “express historical testimony,” Pater argues, we might believe that this lady was Leonardo’s “ideal,” realized at last in an image. But it is important to Pater’s argument that her physiognomy was a recorded, historical fact. He uses the “express historical testimony” dialectically, proposing it and immediately turning it against itself, bringing it forward only to protest its inadequacy as an explanation of the image. He goes on to propose a range of alternative “sources” for the image, generating a rich sense of the “secret influences” behind the “express historical testimony.” But then, in the midst of this meditation on the mysteries of influence, Pater brusquely returns to anchor his argument in the fact that the picture was copied from nature: “Besides, the picture is a portrait” (R, 124).

Pater’s argument here has to do with the mysterious concatenation of outer and inner forces that link an individual artist’s soul with the spirit of his age. The highest concentration of pure invention seems often to go hand in hand, Pater argues, with an element “given to, not invented by, the master” (R, 123). Pater’s concept of this “given” element joins historical “data,” the world of nature, a secularized notion of grace in the moment of bien-être, and the mysteries of aesthetic “influence” in a complex interplay of forces from outside, a modern and revised notion of inspiration. “Express historical testimony” first anchors the source of the image in the world outside the self. And yet Lisa’s smile reminds Pater of Leonardo’s earlier drawings, indicating a coherent development, over time, of an essentially inward fixation. That development, in turn, might indicate an even “earlier” source in obsessional fantasy, a dream persisting unaccountably from childhood, or it might indicate Leonardo’s deepest psychic structure, an entelechy, an ontogenetic coding that Pater usually calls “temperament,” the irreducible element of individuality neither “influenced” nor even “accidental,” but simply “given.” On the other hand, the smile seems to predate Leonardo himself, for it reminds Pater also of Verrocchio’s personal style. Perhaps the smile was internalized and transfigured through Leonardo’s own devoted apprenticeship, his self-effaced copying of his earlier master’s work. In this aspect as “given,” as “present from the first,” the Mona Lisa becomes a symbol to Pater of all the “lost originals” gathered up and finally recovered in one image.

The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all “the ends of the world are come,” and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and
exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed! All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea. (R, 124–26)

Pater reads the famously enigmatic expression as the sign of a deep, modern interiority. In this he follows a tradition that begins with Renaissance humanism, for Dante and Castiglione named the smile as the distinguishing human feature. This “presence” rises as the present, the culminating moment of all past history, and her monumental figure is represented at a great distance from the natural world exterior to the self. “Older than the rocks among which she sits,” she transcends nature in priority, as if the human figure were represented against a natural landscape only hypothetically or by convention. Pater’s reading highlights the notion that consciousness is represented allegorically “against nature,” in the purely oppositional sense as well as in the dialectical and pictorial senses. Her image has been so vertiginously foregrounded as to render the natural background inaccessibly remote and mysterious. This is Pater’s image of modern “consciousness brooding with delight over itself,” a characterization of interiority very different from Arnold’s “dialogue of the mind with itself” (R, 231). Here there is no dialogue, for the lips are shut in a mystic smile; and “the eyelids are

4. Both Bloom and Monsman reflexively link Pater’s vision of the Mona Lisa to his own critical method. Bloom discusses this passage in connection with Pater’s “de-idealizing” of the epiphany and his embodiment of Renaissance and romantic historicisms; see Bloom’s introduction to Pater’s Selected Writings, pp. xv–xxi. Monsman (Pater’s Art of Autobiography, pp. 24–25) makes the point that Lisa represents the aesthetic, present “moment,” which contains both past and future.
a little weary,” not only because they are closing on the memory of all past history but also because they are expressive of a gaze turned inward, a mystic half-shutting of the eyes.5

Even more than the Mona Lisa’s visible signs of interiority, her summation of all history makes her “modern” in a particularly Paterian sense. Of course, interiority and recollection are inextricably linked through Pater’s theory of historical expression. If the idea of “expressive” form depends on a relation between an inside and an outside, then Pater’s vision of the portrait derives its extraordinary power from his strategic conflations and recursive inversions of outer and inner worlds. Lisa’s beauty is “wrought out from within upon the flesh,” at the same time that she represents “humanity as wrought upon by . . . all modes of thought and life.” Her form, in other words, is “wrought” both from within and from without. Pater’s plastic and inscriptive sense of form is evident here. The *stilus* of the world spirit has “etched and moulded” the “changing lineaments” of her outward form, making it purely “expressive” of all she has experienced and internalized. At the same time, her outward form embodies that internalized spirit, making it visible and holding it within, as content.

This view of “expression” is the precise counterpart of the Paterian “impression.” It justifies a reading of outward form as signifying an inward, spiritual reality, through the assumption that the interior has first been impressed with the character of the outward world, then turned inside out to display on the surface what has been “etched and moulded” within. Pater’s systematically linked levels of historical representation are at work here too in all their wit and economy: the expression on Lisa’s individual face stands for the development of an expressively “humanistic” period style and for the dynamics of historical expression in general. The “life of humanity” is given a body and soul, an outside and an inside, by being “embodied” in her image. Pater’s Mona Lisa represents a profound historical paradox, a specifically embodied “figure” of the transhistorical *Geist*, the overarching unity-of-development beyond figuration, the point of view from which all specific figures are merely “phases” of the “same” expression. The *Geist* is here figured as a person, and correlative to the modern person encompasses the present state of consummate development in the *Geist*.

The modernity of this “expression”—both Lisa’s facial expression

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5. I am here playing on Pater’s etymological discussion of the word “mystic” in “Pico Della Mirandola,” in which he locates its source in the Greek “to shut” and then meditates on whether the lips or the eyes were to be shut (R, 37).
and Pater’s interpretation of her face as an expression of the “modern spirit”—must be carefully understood on all its levels of specificity and generalization. In the first place, Pater distinguishes modern from ancient, but he does so in a surprising way, by posing a small hypothetical exercise: “Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed!” Given his description of allegory in the essay on Pico, Pater’s directive here—to “set it beside” an oppositional figure—has vaguely allegorical overtones, in a passage devoted (as this one is) to historical “reconciliation.” But Pater also distinguishes modern from medieval, focusing on the “rise” of the modern spirit in the Renaissance. Much of the introductory groundwork of “Leonardo Da Vinci” is devoted to the premise that Leonardo’s work represents Italian art becoming definitively “humanistic.” In other words, the “presence that rose . . . so strangely” is a specifically human figure, as “rising” against a background is a specifically historical metaphor. At the other end of the particular line originating in Leonardo, Pater’s acute consciousness of the human figure as “figure” might well be described as “aesthetic humanism.”

For Pater, Leonardo’s work embodies the return to nature as human nature, but this supposed return is fraught with the signs of departure. Leonardo’s love of depth and remoteness marks the distance between nature and the human spirit, whether the human spirit is foregrounded against a natural landscape or hidden within an exotic, recherché landscape \( \text{[R, 110].}^6 \) Leonardo must represent both the return to nature and the turn “against nature” in order to be dialectically significant in Pater’s aesthetics of history.

Pater’s view of the Renaissance in general (for which Leonardo and his masterpiece are both made to stand) is similarly doubled and dialectical. In one sense, Pater locates the development of romantic inwardness in the Renaissance. However, the word he uses to characterize the formation of the Mona Lisa’s deep interiority is “soul,” and in this sense the modern spirit stems not from the Renaissance but from the Christian Middle Ages. As we know from his “Aesthetic Poetry” and “Conclusion,” Pater associates the “maladies” of the medieval “soul” with his own late romantic consciousness. But again, Lisa is also pagan and pre-Christian, for “the return of the Pagan

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world" within the Christian setting is a necessary part of the modern spirit. There is no conflict or contradiction here; Pater's modern spirit is most profoundly characterized as "development," always rising within and against its background, produced recollectively out of everything that came before, oppositionally against what came most immediately before.

In Pater's myth of modernity, the historical and dialectical succession of the Renaissance upon the Christian age is best described as a process through which the "soul" is first generated and then "embodied." Those Greek goddesses have no "soul" to trouble them; their beauty is of the body alone, unselfconscious, innocent, "white" and not yet "wrought upon" by the characters of history. In the Christian age, the "soul" is formed, but the medieval soul has no body; it is unhoused, faded, vagrant. According to this myth, the "spirit of humanity" returns to its senses in the Renaissance, and the soul is clothed in a body again. This "embodiment" creates a space of enclosure within and differentiates inner from outer in a figure.

That these are the familiar terms of literary figuration since Augustine, as well as the terms of Pater's aesthetic historicism in particular, should not be surprising, for Pater's myth of history involves a dialectic of generation through which body and soul come together in the Renaissance and are expressed in certain types of aesthetic objects. Within this system, a literary figure, an aesthetic "embodiment" or work of art, a human life, and the "life of humanity" all display the same basic structure, and they depend on each other for representation. The same relative series describes the moment of fusion in which a work of art is formed, the moment in which a figure is aesthetically revived against a new background, the moment when modern humanism is generated, or the moment when a dialectical view of spiritual history becomes the "given" mode of representation. In other words (to return to the more concrete level of this argument), Pater figures the dialectical synthesis of classical and Christian as human embodiment, emblematically presented here and literalized in the image of a human figure.

This modernist dialectic can be seen only in retrospect, from a post-Renaissance point of view. The strategies of Pater's historical retrospection determine that modernity is defined by lateness and inclusiveness in point of view. His interpretation of the Mona Lisa has Lisa representing this viewpoint, the moment in present consciousness which enfolds all the disparate moments of the past. When this retrospective, ecstatic position is taken, Pater's other figure of historical representation, the series, collapses into one point. As all time is conflated in the aesthetic, epiphanic moment, all narrative,
all history, is enfolded in this aesthetic object. A temporal series of successive stages is recast as an image or spatial figure.

Pater's myth of modernism holds that body and soul are completely united, that Mona Lisa lives in the "seventh heaven of symbolical expression"; and in the sense that she unifies all time in one point, the sheer density of conflation represented in her figure must indeed be called symbolic. But on the other hand, the figure suggests the distance between levels of signification more typical of allegory, in the sense that every different past has been placed side by side and united beneath the bodily surface in her deep interiority. Perhaps the "strange webs" she has "trafficked in" are the "strange webs" of fifteenth-century allegory which Pater described in the essay on Pico; those "webs" too revealed "unexpected combinations and subtle moralising" below the surface (R, 35).

Pater's interpretation of La Gioconda suggests a modernist revision of allegory, an allegory precisely of History, of one way the passage of time may be imagined in a figure. The metaphor of the person—the figure of the human figure—engineers this conflation of the historical, the allegorical, and the symbolic. Change over time is impersonated in a placed, stable body; the outer form both contains and displays the evidence of a soul. Perhaps of all the secularizations involved in Pater's notion of the rise of modernism in the Renaissance, this is the most fundamental: that the "medieval," Christian soul is reinterpreted as personal memory joined with a sense of history. This fundamental secularization has enormous repercussions as the basis of Pater's physiognomic metaphors and biographical fantasies.8

Pater's Mona Lisa is figured both as origin and as end point of a temporality that has collapsed into interior space. Like Pater's retrospective point of view from the present, she represents the end of the line. The biblical allusion ("hers is the head upon which 'the ends of the world are come' ") recalls the Pauline sense of prophetic fulfillment in the present moment, for which the past was understood typologically as an admonitory, prefigurative example (1 Corinthians 10:11). But here the Christian sense of prophetic fulfillment has been

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7. Monsman points out that the difference between Lisa and the goddesses of antiquity is her knowledge of history [Pater's Art of Autobiography, p. 45].

8. And it may be usefully seen as a feature of the period as well. On the tenacious hold of physiognomy on the nineteenth-century imagination, see Neil Hertz, "Medusa's Head: Male Hysteria under Political Pressure," Representations 4 (Fall, 1983), 27–54. Among other things, Hertz discusses the belief in seeing history as the features of a face, "lineaments" and "features" of physiognomy as the chief metaphors for historical interpretation in Hugo and Tocqueville, and Hegel's critique of Lavater on this point in the Phenomenology. For Pater's interest in Lavater, see R, 185–86.
secularized as a historical vision of development in which the entire past contributes to the definitive fullness of the present moment. “As Leda” and “as Saint Anne” she originates both classical and Christian traditions, in a figure that again makes sexual generation a metaphor for historical dialectic. Pater reaches back behind the history of each tradition to find a mythic, personal figure for the generative source within which it was still enfolded. Again, Pater allegorically sets two female figures “side by side” in order to make a point about historical “reconciliation.” Leda and Saint Anne figuratively represent the two historical traditions that together make up the modern spirit. In Pater’s understanding, the modern spirit is generated from these two traditions dialectically and over historical time, but here both traditions are de-temporalized, collapsed into their origins and enfolded within figuratively originary names, as if within the body of the mother.

Because Mona Lisa represents both the modern spirit and the primal mothers of the modern spirit, she could only have given birth to herself, in a figurative equation of parthenogenesis and palingenesis. As both origin and end, she rises from her own conception, consciousness giving birth to itself. Pater’s visionary figure, in other words, both strains to represent and at the same time negates his theory of history, for Mona Lisa expresses dialectical generation in time even as she collapses all time into one interiorized point. In this sense she embodies the pull of Hegelian historicism away from the body and toward the spirit, but these allegorical, maternal figures for tradition and dialectic may suggest as well that Pater’s image of the “consciousness brooding with delight over itself” has nurturant, incubational, and generative connotations, as well as the moodily solipsistic connotations so frightening to Arnold.

This vision of what Yeats would later call Unity of Being is seductive for many obvious reasons. Mona Lisa is “expressive of what in the

9. This line of argument is indebted to Monsman’s discussion of the Magna Mater in Pater’s Portraits, pp. xiv, 19–20, 27, 106–7, 115, 126, 137–8, 167–9, 183.
11. See the valences of “brooding” which Hopkins evokes in “God’s Grandeur”:

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

ways of a thousand years men had come to desire.” What they had come to desire (at the moment in historical time during which Pater wrote of *La Gioconda*) was the belief that they could recapture, restore, and incorporate the past. If each person can spiritually contain all of history, and if History can be embodied in a personal form, then nothing must ever be estranged, lost, or uncomprehended. Whatever has been locked away may be reopened with the right mediating key or “legend.” Pater’s historical retrospection, grounded in Christian historicism and aesthetics, as well as in the romantic aesthetics of interiority and personal memory, could recover the lost world, could stabilize, recontain, and unify past time. This is Pater’s vision, a vision of the immense powers of interpretation.

But this vision has its dark side as well. Lisa’s portrayal as a fatal female with connections both to Muse and to Medusa indicates her danger and power simultaneously, for if she contains the entire past in a present moment of silent, expressive fulfillment, she also embodies a vision of its inaccessible, absolute anteriority. One cannot look at her face through the lens of Pater’s prose without becoming, like her, immobilized in the collapse of temporality. Her enigmatic expression is full of significance precisely because its meaning is remote and uncertain; like any divinity, her expression demands interpretation, but the more it is interpreted the more remote it seems. “Sweeping together ten thousand experiences,” she produces a vertigo of retrospection in which all historical distinctions spin together. There is no difference, no “relief,” within the metafigural figure of transfiguration itself. Like Tennyson’s Tithonus, one learns through Pater’s vision of Lisa the horror of immortality without eternal youth. To have a sense of rebirth or revival as “relief,” a sense of death must first make the critical separation. “Like the vampire, she has been dead many times,” but her face betrays the frightening paradox of death-in-life as well as the hope of renewed life after death.

Pater extricates himself from this terrible vision by taking a retrospective position toward it in the passages of his own prose. The last two sentences turn away from her “presence” to comment on its significance. “The fancy of a perpetual life . . . is an old one,” he placidly states, pulling out of an identification that would threaten to destroy the subtle balancing act that makes his aesthetic historicism possible. He assumes a stance toward his vision of Mona Lisa which imitates the stance he has imagined her taking toward everything

13 Bloom, introduction to Pater’s *Selected Writings*, pp. xix–xx: “Lady Lisa perpetually carries the seal of a terrible priority.”
prior to herself. He subsumes her, relativizing, historicizing, and re­
containing her as an “earlier” phase of his own “modern philosophy.”
The disengagement here shows Pater’s aesthetic historicism at its
strongest and most ambivalent point. He implicitly historicizes his
own vision of *La Gioconda* as a past mythology with its own style of
expression, like a work of art. And, characteristically, he detaches
himself from his impression with an allusion to scientific discourse,
the realm within which what will later be seen as “myth” may for
the moment, and for that moment only, be read as fact.

From our point of view, then, it is possible to historicize Pater’s
stunning use of the “modern philosophy” of evolution. Nowhere is it
more clear that Pater both deeply understood and deeply feared Dar­
win’s theory than here, when he tries to neutralize its difference by
figuring it merely as a modern version of an ancient belief in the
transmigration of souls. This is the same strategy he used in the
“Conclusion,” finding comfort in an ancient version of “modern
thought” from the *Cratylus*. Pater may also be seen to mark a particu­
lar moment in the late-nineteenth-century development of a popular­
ized Social Darwinism. His critical fallacy here lies in the tacit equa­
tion of cultural “humanity” with a biological species, as if historical
development and biological evolution were easily assimilable. In one
sense, Pater bases his faith that the past may be recaptured in the
notion that each individual’s cultural growth recapitulates and there­
fore contains in personal memory the development of the culture at
large, a belief that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny in the realm of
cultural history. Mona Lisa is Pater’s most famous experiment in
recapitulationism, but he conducts the same experiment with Marius
and with Plato, as we shall see.

Pater’s reading of the Mona Lisa is a second-order myth, a myth of
myths, and in this it displays its own particular historicity. Within
this passage we can see the Platonic myth of recollection transposed
into a specifically historical and biological matrix, as earlier in this
study we saw Pater grounding his enabling belief that “the composite
experience of all the ages is a part of each one of us” in the immediately
available contexts of historical and biological science. From our later
vantage point, we can historicize Pater’s aesthetic, mythic use of the
concept of development itself, with its overarching assumption of
unity and subsumption of difference, its tendency to see the difference
of specific figures as transfigurations of the “same” ongoing spirit.14

14. This move to historicize certain forms of history-writing is today most associated
with the work of Foucault, who exposes many of the perspectives from which “develop
But we can also historicize Pater's interest in the spirit of the Mona Lisa as a composite form, the quintessential form of historicist aesthetic composition. Gathering former myths into a visionary recollection, Mona Lisa marks the historical moment of early anthropological myth collection, before structuralists systematize the study of myth in general and before literary high modernists make of mythic recollection the dominant literary method. Like the water she rises against, "a network of divided streams," Pater's passage is composite of many pasts, recorded in the words of others, and it generates a divided genealogy of its own \([R, 111]\). At least the reflections of resemblance may be felt in many modernist mythopoeic works: Yeats's *Vision*, Eliot's *Waste Land*, Pound's *Cantos*, the transmigrating soul and shifting sexuality of Woolf's *Orlando*, and Molly Bloom's sleepy question about metempsychosis, not to mention the monumentally recollective modernist structure of Joyce's *Ulysses* itself.

Pater's interpretation of the Mona Lisa forms the climax of "Leonardo Da Vinci." Indeed, coming after it, his closing discussion of *The Battle of the Standard* is in the truest sense anticlimactic, even though there is much to be said for the beauties of anticlimax in this case. The wistful, fading closure of the essay—not in the moment of ecstasy but in the stunned and deliquescent aftermath—provides a point of quiet retrospection from which to feel the reverberating effects of visionary experience. The gradual, closing deflation only serves to emphasize how much weight the vision of the Mona Lisa was meant to bear. As the essay closes, Leonardo looks toward death, the "last curiosity," as if there were nothing left after such vision but to approach that "vague land" \([R, 129]\).\(^{15}\)

5 · Types and Figures

In Pater's reading, then, the Mona Lisa embodies the impossible possibility of gathering all the transformations of historical time together in one place. Pater's vehicle for this poetic figure is an image

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\(^{15}\) On the beautiful closure of this essay, and on Pater's "closure sentences" in general, see David DeLaura, "Some Victorian Experiments in Closure," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 8 (Fall 1975), 31.

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