Transfigured World

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Published by Cornell University Press

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Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism.

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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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of the human figure, a graphic reminder that his aesthetic is based on
the romantic correlation of personal memory and the cultural past. In
Pater's scheme of linked levels of generalization in the spiritual his­
tory of "the human mind," a personal style is the mirror of the "physi­
ognomy of its age," as surely as a person's face is the mirror of a soul
(R, 171). These personal figures, too, are the vehicles of Pater's poetics
of revival. As Leonardo paints Lisa, making an aesthetic figure of a
particular historical person, Pater performs the second transfiguration,
establishing a figure of aesthetic history which is based upon a prior
figure: Pater's Mona Lisa.

My double use of the word "figure" should be clear by now, in its
simultaneous reference to the aesthetic and historical dimensions of
Pater's criticism. The double meaning of "figure," both a poetic trope
and a representative person, is meant to highlight continually the
aesthetic act of figuration involved in retrospection. It is true that
the history of a life can be viewed "as a whole" and assigned a significance
only retrospectively, that a historical person can be interpreted as a
"figure" only after a retrospective act of unification. But how, in
Pater's aesthetics of retrospection, are the "figures" related to one
another over time? The answer to this question may be found in an
analysis of Pater's use of the "type."

In his early essays, Pater develops the type as a category to mediate
between absolute specificity and generality in both aspects of histori­
cist speculation. Synchronically, Pater's type is conceptually poised
between the unique personal vision and the general "spirit of the
age"; diachronically, the type is conceptually poised between absolute
historical difference and repetition. As we have seen, the notion of
"development" itself serves to mediate absolute difference and simi­
larity over time, utter chaos and immobilized unity, the atomism
of the Heraclitean flux, and the visionary but transhistorical order
represented by Pater's Mona Lisa, and the type is Pater's fundamental
developmental category. The fact that Pater uses it in both synchronic
and diachronic critical operations shows how powerful and flexible
the type can be as an instrument of historicist thinking. But it is also
an aesthetic category, synchronically fixing a figure against its ground,
diachronically ranging figures in a rationalized series.

In order to speak of a personal style, one of Pater's favorite strategies
is to point out that an artist reiteratively and obsessively wrote about
or painted one particular "type" of female beauty. Because this is
perhaps Pater's most easily accessible use of the type, it is a good place
to begin. Pater writes of Botticelli, for example, that he "has worked
out" in his Madonnas "a distinct and peculiar type, definite enough
in his own mind, for he has painted it over and over again, sometimes one might think almost mechanically" (R, 56). The originality of Botticelli’s vision is further confirmed by the fact that his Madonnas "conformed to no acknowledged . . . type" (R, 50). They reveal a new "type," unique to Botticelli’s vision and repeated "over and over again . . . almost mechanically." In this usage, the "type" expresses the artist’s obsessive repetition of a "fixed idea." It serves to establish a figural, unified sense of that artist’s identity by reducing a series of his images to their common denominator, by collapsing temporality and reading it as structure. The fundamental principle of Pater’s expressionist theory holds that the outward image conforms to an inward structure, that expression is the externalized pattern of impression. Thus the expression on the face of the "type" is taken literally to be an expression of the artist's inner configuration, especially if that expression is repeated over and over, no matter who or what the ostensible subject of the representation is.

Two ideas were especially "fixed" in Leonardo,—for example, "the smiling of women and the motion of great waters." Later in the passage, Pater reworks the same idea: the "interfusion of . . . beauty and terror" was "so fixed that for the rest of his life it never left him" (R, 104). Like Botticelli’s, Leonardo’s fixed "type of beauty" conforms fully to "no acknowledged type"; it is original, unique, so exotic that it must reflect a secret inner world. Pater offers his special "formula" for Leonardo’s genius by way of revealing the occult process that results in a typical product: when his curiosity works in union with his desire of beauty, these two "elementary forces" produce "a type of subtle and curious grace" (R, 99, 109).

Both the words—"fixed" as well as "type"—emphasize the essential unity of an artist’s temperament and style, with its various and disparate productions stabilized around a fixation, a concentric structure of definition—a fixed point within a more generalized field—enables Pater to insist on unity without literally reducing the variety of the artist’s life and work to one image. In other words, casting the generalized aura of the type around this fixed point, Pater emphasizes its representative value while maintaining its absolute specificity. He

1. See R, 54.
2. This use of the "type" is crucial for the theory and practice of literary realism, as Wellek points out in "Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship," esp. pp. 242–53. He associates the type with the establishment of "objectivity" and begins his discussion of this tradition in English with Coleridge. For a suggestive use of "aura" in the sense I am invoking here, see Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Illuminations (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), pp. 219–53.
even posits the general type as a foundation for the return to further emphasis upon specificity, for he “names” the type with its “formula,” that peculiarly Paterian strategy of describing “scientifically” the unique process of fusion which has resulted in this particular aesthetic object and no other.

All these categories—the fixed idea, the type, the formula—are figurative, of course, produced by the interpreter’s will to construct relation. The type, however, is not simply a figure of synchronic unity. It is also the main category in Pater’s construction of an aesthetic history. Starting with the notion of Leonardo’s fixed idea, for example, and following this “thread of suggestion,” Pater muses that “we might . . . construct a sort of series, illustrating . . . Leonardo’s type of womanly beauty” (R, 115). The “type” here is derived from (and in turn generates) a series, which reveals Leonardo’s essentially fixed identity beneath the surface changes of time. After all, the rhetorical crescendo leading up to the passage on the Mona Lisa depends on Lisa’s position as the last and consummate figure woven together from outward, historical reality and “the fabric of his dreams.” Pater constructs the series of Leonardo’s paintings of smiling women in order that the notion of historical time itself might finally be gathered up and transcended in his vision of the transhistorical ideal; “present from the first,” her image is also, figuratively speaking, “present at last” (R, 124). But in other instances as well, the serial expression of a fixed idea works in a similar way, beginning in historical specificity and pressing beyond it. In his essay on Botticelli, for example, Pater uses this strategy:

The same figure—tradition connects it with Simonetta, the mistress of Giuliano de’ Medici—appears again as Judith, returning home across the hill country, when the great deed is over, and the moment of revulsion come, when the olive branch in her hand is becoming a burthen; as Justice, sitting on a throne, but with a fixed look of self-hatred which makes the sword in her hand seem that of a suicide; and again as Veritas, in the allegorical picture of Calumnia, where one may note in passing the suggestiveness of an accident which identifies the image of Truth with the person of Venus. (R, 60)

It is quintessentially Paterian to construct the “identification” of Truth with “the person of Venus” and then to attribute that identification to historical “accident.” Her serial embodiments “as Judith . . . as Justice . . . as Veritas” reinforce the sense of an essential identity beneath (or above) the surface of visible form. When Pater describes
these images as a series of representations of the "same figure," he traces a development in time while he preserves the unity of a personal figure. But the series, Pater's poetic figure for the passage of historical time, collapses when each item in the series amounts to the "same" thing.

This is Pater's problem: how to maintain the historical specificity of items in the series while also asserting both their generalized value and their relations to one another over time. He develops his conception of the type as a strategy for doing both at once. On the synchronic level of Pater's aesthetic history, the artist always reflects the spirit of his age, but if an artist's general value outweighs the specific, then that artist survives with only historical, not aesthetic, value:

But if his work is to have the highest sort of interest, if it is to do something more than satisfy curiosity, if it is to have an aesthetic as distinct from an historical value, it is not enough for a poet to have been the true child of his age, to have conformed to its aesthetic conditions . . . ; it is necessary that there should be perceptible in his work something individual, inventive, unique, the impress there of the writer's own temper and personality. (R, 172, emphasis added)

To have both historical and aesthetic value, the artist must "conform" to the "aesthetic conditions" of his age and go beyond them with a new, "inventive . . . impress" of his own. We have seen how Pater unifies the notion of the artist's individual "impress" through the notion of the "type." Now let us look briefly at Pater's definition of the artist himself as type, absolutely unique yet also the representative of his age. In other words, before turning to similar problems Pater must face on the diachronic level, let us look more at the synchronic configuration of historical difference and similarity which Pater constructs by means of the type.

Though Pater's use of the "type" registers the unique "impress" of the artist's personality, it also refers to the general spirit of the age. For example, Pater calls attention to the "type of personal beauty" admired by the troubadours, a beloved image historically determined by their time, place, and social rank (R, 20). Or again, Ronsard "loves, or dreams that he loves, a rare and peculiar type of beauty, la petite pucelle Angevine." This is Pater's way of pointing to the absolute historical specificity of Ronsard's style, the work that "has been done as no other man or age could have done it" (R, 167). This use of the type links the artist's unique, personal vision with his historical moment in a way that is not at all surprising, given Pater's theory of style. Each absolutely unique style exists within an absolutely unique surrounding historical milieu,
both levels of this concentric, reflexive figure, in other words, resolutely refer to concrete historical specificity. The sort of general value the Paterian type aims to express is also fully historical; the type is representative in the parliamentary sense, synecdochic rather than metaphorical. But the concentric structure of the figure—spirit of the age surrounding but only visible in a central, representative image—invests its absolutely unique center with a generalized aura.

As idée fixe, the type primarily serves to represent and totalize the history of an artist’s career as one “impress” or repeated form, but Pater also often refers to the artist himself as a type. In this sense the type is an epitome of its surrounding culture, as in Pater’s statement that “Ronsard’s poems are a kind of epitome of his age” (R, 166). Here again the type mediates specific to general value in a particularly historical sense. Like Leonardo, who “fixed the outward type of Christ for succeeding centuries,” Pater “fixes” Dante as the “central expression and type” of ideal love in the late Middle Ages (R, 98, 23). Leonardo’s image of the “outward type of Christ” represents an unrecorded physiognomy from the past, but the unrecorded “physiognomy of an age” is also inaccessible except through representation. Thus a historically typical phenomenon may be represented by its most famous surviving example. Pater makes the historical force of this latter usage very clear. Dante is “but the expression and type of experiences known well enough to the initiated, in that passionate age” (R, 23; emphasis added). This figure of typicality takes Dante as the representative of a pervasive contemporary phenomenon, a structure of feeling purportedly shared by many unrecorded, now-invisible persons. The great figure of Dante stands out against this amorphous background, concentrating its significance in one brilliant point.

In “Sandro Botticelli,” Pater theorizes the “place” of minor artists in relation to these major types with a variation on the same figure: a few great figures have “absorbed into themselves” the work of “smaller men.” Secondary or minor artists like Botticelli are valuable, then, precisely for their “unabsorbed” quality, which helps to fill in the space around the great figures. They give us “a peculiar quality of pleasure which we cannot get elsewhere,” communicating a certain charm “just because there is not about them the stress of a great name and authority” (R, 51, 61). Their typicality comes as a result of the sincerity of their very specialness, “the integrity, the truth to its type.

3. The concept of “structures of feeling” has been developed by Raymond Williams. See his Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 128–35, for a compressed discussion.
of the given force” (R, 185). These types are true to themselves, not to an authoritative model.

Dante is “central,” on the other hand, because his figure is visible against a background of “absorbed” historical reality, invisible to us in the present. When Pater defines a figure as type, then, he implies the structure of central point heightened within and against a generalized, amorphous background. As “central expression and type,” Dante draws together in one place and concentrates in one name the general experience of a past age. Such a figure—a point at the center of a general field—highlights the particularity of the type and at the same time implies that it represents something “beyond” its “special manifestation” in a particular body. That “something beyond,” in the synchronic sense, is the “spirit of the age.” It is not too much to say that Pater solves one part of the historicist dilemma by this “faith” that the major figures that have survived from the past truly are representative, a faith he enacts by casting the figures of his own aesthetic history as types. The aura of typicality, of historical generality projected around a central figure, in other words, appears in this sense as the modern, secularized definition of “spirit.”

The synchronic value of Pater’s type shows up most clearly when we see it as part of his system of linked levels of specificity and generality in historical representation. We have had occasion to glance already at Pater’s frequent argument that the “spirit” of an artist may be read in his followers and copiers. Of Leonardo he writes:

There is a multitude of other men’s pictures through which we undoubtedly see him, and come very near to his genius. . . . At other times the original remains, but has been a mere theme or motive, a type of which the accessories might be modified or changed; and these variations have but brought out the more the purpose, or expression of the original. (R, 118)

This is a sort of “musical” theory of evolutionary art history as theme and variations, motive followed by elaborations. Pater famously develops this metaphor in his later essay “The School of Giorgione,” in which the type as “school” takes the role of theme played out in history’s variations. Pater’s notion of the “school” allows him to speak of a level of generalization that is beyond the individual but more concrete historically than the “spirit” of the age.4 Sometimes Pater

wants to speak of a pervasive period style; the Pléiade for example, though not precisely centralized, are constellated nevertheless, unified and grouped together under one name. But another sort of school, like the type, is structured as a concentric field of similarity, centralized in the works of one major artist.

For this sort of school Pater uses the suffix "-esque," as in "the Michelangelesque" or "the Giorgionesque." "The Poetry of Michelangelo," for example, begins with a Paterian formula for "the true type of the Michelangelesque," a formula that then turns out to be applicable to the Renaissance in general (R, 73). And in his essay "The School of Giorgione," Pater strenuously (and somewhat peevishly) argues that the "aesthetic philosopher" (as opposed to the "antiquarian" scholar) will know that

over and above the real Giorgione and his authentic extant works, there remains the Giorgionesque also—an influence, a spirit or type in art. . . . A veritable school, in fact grew together out of all those fascinating works rightly or wrongly attributed to him; out of many copies from, or variations on him, by unknown or uncertain workmen. . . , out of the immediate impression he made on his contemporaries, and with which he continued in men's minds; out of many traditions of subject and treatment, which really descend from him to our own time, and by retracing which we fill out the original image. (R, 148)

The spirit of Giorgione's art ranges "over and above the real Giorgione" both synchronically and diachronically. It extends beyond him during his own time through an "immediate impression" on his contemporaries, which Pater describes by joining an organic metaphor to the metaphor of the typed impression: the school of Giorgione concentrated itself as a general type when copies "grew together." And it extends through time into later ages through "many traditions" of theme and variation. In other words, what has frequently been taken as Pater's loose disregard for factual attribution he here defends as part of a theory of influence.

Several levels of typification, then, link the "special manifestation" to the general spirit of the age. As fixed idea, the type concentrates the history of an individual artist around a repeated image; then the artist as type concentrates the spirit of the age around a central figure. Then, too, the spirit of the age itself can be represented as a type, when Pater wants to assert the synchronic unity of a historical period, and in this sense again the period as type proposes one part as a representative of a larger whole. In his "Preface" to The Renaissance,
Pater argues that fifteenth-century Italy must be studied “not merely for ... its concrete works ... but for its general spirit and character, for the ethical qualities of which it is a consummate type” (R, xiii). He offers in that context a theory of historical periodization. The various forms of culture usually develop in isolation from one another, he argues, though they will “unconsciously” express a “common character.” However, in certain “happier” eras that common character is more self-conscious; “the thoughts of men draw nearer together than is their wont, and the many interests of the intellectual world combine in one complete type of general culture.” Pater gives the Age of Pericles and the Age of Lorenzo as examples (R, xiii-xiv).

In fact, from one perspective the metaphor of the historical “period” aptly names this concentric figure of invisible forces drawing together to form a central point, and from another perspective it names a well-proportioned rhetorical development of several shapely clauses making up a sentence, with turns of phrase leading to a pointed stop. Here again Pater’s expressions of the measurements of time link music and history in a rhetorical figure. Taking the Renaissance as his point of departure, Pater then generalizes from it the whole of modern history, the “particular” whole of which this period is epitome, the central and typical part. This conceptual scheme, involving linked levels of specificity and generality—graduated levels of typification from image to artist to school to historical period—portrays the historical body rising into spirituality. This is the only proper theoretical context for understanding Pater’s famous definition of the Renaissance as radically extensive, stretching from the Age of Pericles to the nineteenth century. Pater’s notorious liberty in conceiving historical periodicity is a direct function of his theory of historical representation, in which the workings of a “central expression and type” may be taken to stand for the whole.

Though this pressure toward the synchronic is always implicit, The Renaissance as a whole (and each essay separately, for that matter) is more explicitly grounded in Pater’s attempts to envision the diachronic and to see these unified, synchronic “moments” against the background of time’s passage. But on the diachronic level as well, the “type” is Pater’s fundamental category. In the above passage on “the Giorgionesque,” for example, he associates the type with “an influence.” Here again the type is anchored in the historically concrete, factual body of a “real” person, and then its spirit “descends” to connect Giorgione’s age with our own. Retrospectively “retracing” this line of descent, “we fill out the original image.” Though the language is spatially conceived (“retracing,” ”filling out”), the process
being described is a temporal one. Or rather, the temporal phenomenon of time's passage can be recaptured only in retrospect as a spatial figure. The difference between present and past is conceived as a space—that abyssal figurative distance that permits a provisional "objectivity," but only after threatening the very grounds of knowledge itself. To bridge this gap, Pater imagines a dialectical history of influence. He links the types diachronically—not as levels of rising generalization, but as stages on a continuum. And he understands that continuity as a process of reception and innovation, very much like the aesthetic dialectic of self-consciousness in which an act of division or discrimination follows an experience of absorbed, passionate "impression." This dialectic of reception and innovation over time counteracts the pressure toward synchronic unity inherent in Pater's aesthetic by concentrating on moments of change, division, and movement into the future.

In Pater's scheme, each artist receives as "given" the type of his "last," most immediate predecessor, as well as the other received or "acknowledged" types in his tradition, for the type functions diachronically to focus or "draw together" forces over time; each "type" represents not only the spirit of its age, but also the consummated achievement of a whole tradition, the summary moment and highest point of a genealogical process. Michelangelo, for example, appears in Pater's volume as the "last of the Florentines," whereas Botticelli's minor status leads Pater to judge his art as a representative only of the promise of the "earlier" Renaissance (R, 90, 61–62). Each later artist receives the type of his predecessors, his spirit is "literally" impressed, stamped, imprinted with the "types" most forceful at the time. But he must turn away from these received impressions in order to form a new type of his own. What comes later is always molded within and against an earlier pattern, and that earlier pattern, formerly foregrounded as "highest" and "last," is thus relegated in time to the status of background, against which a new type rises. Each type, therefore, is simultaneously both an end and a beginning, the consummate example of one tradition and the generative background against which another takes form.

Let me illustrate Pater's dialectic of the types with two brief examples: his treatments of Leonardo and Michelangelo. In both cases, the difference between earlier and later is marked by a break from the

5. This is my redefinition of Pater's famous doctrine of "receptivity." For the starting-point of all current discussion of this issue, see Gerald Monsman, "Pater's Aesthetic Hero," University of Texas Quarterly (Winter 1971), 136–51.
established “type.” Pater uses Leonardo as a figure of the two-stage process of true aesthetic creation. The particularly remote type of beauty he captured in his paintings, Pater argues, is apprehended only by those . . . who, starting with acknowledged types of beauty, have refined as far upon these, as these refine upon the world of common forms. (R, 105)

The structure of this formulation is strikingly like Pater’s description of “aesthetic poetry” in his essay on William Morris. He describes the unfolding of art history, in other words, as another form of “aesthetic poetry.”

Taking his cue from Vasari, Pater casts Verrocchio as “the earlier Florentine type” from which Leonardo departs. He reports “a legend true in sentiment only” of Leonardo’s father placing him as apprentice in the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio, where Leonardo was allowed to finish an angel in the left-hand corner of the Baptism of Christ. Pater focuses on Verrocchio’s reaction when he sees what Leonardo has done:

The pupil had surpassed the master; and Verrocchio turned away as one stunned, and as if his sweet earlier work must thereafter be distasteful to him, from the bright animated angel of Leonardo’s hand. (R, 102)

Pater implicitly allegorizes this narrative of Verrocchio turning away in the distaste bred of his thwarted ambition. The “spiritual” meaning of the allegory is of course a historically general point about the development, through Leonardo, of a fuller, “richer humanity.” The confrontation between Verrocchio and Leonardo’s angel is reread as “one of those moments in . . . the progress of a great thing—here, that of the art of Italy” (R, 101). With a negative announcement, this angel announces to Verrocchio that he must step aside. But Verrocchio was not the only one to turn away.

Pater reads Leonardo’s entire career as a deeply personal reaction against the “earlier Florentine type”:

And because it was the perfection of that style, it awoke in Leonardo some seed of discontent which lay in the secret places of his nature. For the way to perfection is through a series of disgusts. (R, 103)

The moments of “disgust” which define the turning points on the way to perfection are not only revulsions, dissatisfactions, distastes.
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Each moment of distaste is predicated on the perfection of the former type, as if the very surfeit of desire causes the discontent that leads then to further tasting. Pater’s attention to etymology here is not merely witty but very subtle, for the word “disgust” also recalls the French *déguster*, to savor, and in turn the Latin *degustare*, to make oneself acquainted with. Thus, the way to perfection is also through a series of tastings, trials, and internalizations, in which the whole successively becomes more and more complex as it includes lesser perfections in its more perfectly differentiated manifold.

The vignette of Leonardo’s confrontation with Verrocchio highlights the aspect of Pater’s art-historical dialectic which concentrates on moments of reversal, when an earlier perfection of taste is suddenly received with personal “distaste” or “disgust”; these particular turning-points of aesthetic history are reactive, antithetical, distropic. The “progress of a great thing” goes so far in one certain direction until the continuous development is broken. We can see Pater’s aesthetic gesture—his creation of historical figures—first in his isolation of such moments against the background of a general development and then in his interpretation of their “legends.” And again we should hear “trope” in both senses: the moment of distaste itself, when a historical figure outwardly expresses the tendency of his inward temperament and turns away from an earlier type; and the rhetorical figure that Pater chooses to embody the “spiritual” significance of that radically creative turning-point. (It is worth pointing out in passing that this is yet another of Pater’s reflexive, second-order figures, a rhetorical trope expressing a personal and historical tropism, a figure made of a former figure.) The story of Michelangelo, on the other hand, highlights the aspect of Pater’s art-historical dialectic which concentrates on the movements of synthesis and division, convergence and bifurcation within the genealogical whole.

Pater sees Michelangelo as a synthetic, consummate type, not as the one who breaks with previous tradition, as Leonardo did. Thus, “if one is to distinguish the peculiar savour of his work, he must be approached, not through his followers, but through his predecessors” ([R, 90]). By defining him as the culminating moment, Pater can concentrate, through the figure of Michelangelo, on the tradition as a whole, and Pater defines the tradition that Michelangelo consummates in two different ways: as a tradition of dealing with the passions and death of the physical body, and as a tradition of Florentine art. In the former sense, Pater places Michelangelo against the background of Dante and Plato.
In this effort to tranquillise and sweeten life by idealising its vehement sentiments, there were two great traditional types, either of which an Italian of the sixteenth century might have followed. There was Dante, whose little book of the Vita Nuova had early become a pattern of imaginative love...; and since Plato had become something more than a name in Italy by the publication of the Latin translation of his works by Marsilio Ficino, there was the Platonic tradition also. [R, 86]

He goes on to argue that Michelangelo synthesizes these two types by displaying elements of both. Thus, in Pater's scheme, Michelangelo becomes a type of the Renaissance itself in the combination of late medieval "strength" and classical "sweetness."

This synthetic tendency is something we did not see in the Leonardo essay, and its effect is to advance a different model of art-historical transmission. Michelangelo is able to reach back before (or, in spatial terms, behind) the most immediate predecessor type. His work is interpreted, then, not as "disgust" or detachment from an immediate background, but as the retrieval of something lost within that ground. His life story is used allegorically to express the historical process of medieval strength hiding within itself secretly, and finally "secreting" its hidden sweetness. Here again we see Pater telling the familiar three-part romantic history, with the Platonic tradition placed in the role of overarching whole, both earlier (in the absolute chronological sense) and later (in its translated form) than Dante, mediated to the modern world through Ficino's translation and Michelangelo's aesthetic embodiments. In this model, innovation occurs through the recovery of a loss, not the turn away from a present type of perfection, but of course the two models work together to construct the dialectic of historical transmission, from two different angles of vision.

"Sweetness and strength" is the formula Pater invents to describe the "true type of the Michelangelesque," but that code for the synthetic union of opposite qualities also has a temporal formulation, "ex forti dulcedo" or, as Pater translates, "out of the strong came forth sweetness" [R, 89, emphasis added]. As a dichotomous or oxymoronic motto, the formula alludes to Michelangelo's complex unity, but in its temporalized form it alludes to the historical process of "secre­tion." The formula describes the special instance as if, like an experiment in chemistry, it were repeatable, and indeed this formula is repeated in typical Paterian fashion through all the levels of signification. It is the formula first for Michelangelo, then for "the true type of the Michelangelesque," for the Renaissance as a specific historical
period, and finally for the Renaissance as the type of historical process itself. The source of the formula in Samson’s riddle to the Philistines (Judges 14:14) poses a riddle of its own. Pater’s secularization is forceful in its tacit (and typological) relation of Samson and Michelangelo, with the attendant implication that such secularization-effects are themselves a result of Renaissance humanism. I take this too as a sly allusion to Arnold’s discussion (also typological) of the modern Philistine. The force of such an allusion would be double: it would imply Pater’s revisionary “disgust” at Arnold’s “strength,” and at the same time it would self-reflexively promise that sweetness would be secreted later than Arnold, in Pater’s own work.

The figure of Michelangelo is “last” in a series that is itself a figure, Pater’s model for art-historical tradition. In this case the series traces the development of Florentine art. Michelangelo is “the last of the Florentines, of those on whom the peculiar sentiment of the Florence of Dante and Giotto descended” (R, 90). As he lives on into a great old age, the spirit of the age is diverted into another channel; rising Neo-Catholicism takes the place of the “true” Renaissance. The course of history goes on without him, but “he lingers on; a revenant, as the French say, a ghost out of another age, . . . dreaming, in a worn-out society . . . on the morning of the world’s history” (R, 90). The “break” in the line of continuous development occurs not through him but after him. The synthesis is shattered as false disciples follow only one “side” of the master’s complex unity:

Up to him the tradition of sentiment is unbroken, the progress towards surer and more mature methods of expressing that sentiment continuous. But his professed disciples did not share his temper; they are in love with his strength only, and seem not to feel his grave and temperate sweetness. (R, 91)

Pater rejects those who “claimed” to be his followers on the grounds that they did not repeat the formula: “that strange interfusion of sweetness and strength.” Their illegitimate claim is then cast in the terms of sexual generation, and Pater as aesthetic judge resolves the paternity suit. The line is broken after Michelangelo, but not forever. Pater finds his “true sons” in the nineteenth century.

William Blake, for instance, and Victor Hugo, who, though not of his school, and unaware, are his true sons, and help us to understand him, as he in turn interprets and justifies them. (R, 97)
Just as Michelangelo recovered the Platonic tradition after a radical break, these "true sons" in the nineteenth century recover the "true type of the Michelangelesque." The "last of the Florentines" is then recast as the first of a new lineage whose creation as an aesthetic figure is due entirely to Pater. The mythic anxiety of paternity ([*Pater semper incertus est*], in Freud's modern formulation) is here addressed on the level of aesthetic history. These nineteenth-century artists do not look back consciously to the progenitor of their tradition, for they are "not of his school, and unaware"; the retrospective, aesthetic gesture (in this case, the attribution of paternity) is entirely Pater's own. And of course the creation of a tradition like this is not innocent of self-reflection, for the "sentiment" or spirit of the father "descends," through Blake and Hugo, to Pater himself.

The examples of Leonardo and Michelangelo serve to illustrate two different "moments" in Pater's dialectic of innovation and repetition: the break from an earlier, limited perfection, and the consummate fulfillment of a series. Each of these interrelated moments is conveyed by means of the type, whose value as a diachronic figure can now be clearly seen. Like the privileged, epiphanic moments of experiential time, Pater's art-historical types define fixed points against the flux of past time; they mark, in retrospect, the high points of each progression, the representative points against their background, the points of branching on the genealogical tree.

Furthermore, each may afterward be consulted for the "laws" of aesthetic production:

The qualities of the great masters in art or literature, ... are not peculiar to them; but most often typical standards, revealing instances of the laws by which certain aesthetic effects are produced. ([R, 96])

This tendency toward the absolute and the normative reaches its apotheosis in the essay "The School of Giorgione," where music is defined as "the typical, or ideally consummate art ... the true type or measure of perfected art" ([R, 134-35, 139]). Giorgione, an initiator of


7. This essay was written last of all the Renaissance essays and included only in the third edition of 1888. For another interpretation of Pater's use of music in relation to its sources in Hegel, see Ruth C. Child, *The Aesthetic of Walter Pater* [New York: Macmillan, 1940], pp. 55-70.
such art, is "typical of that aspiration of all the arts toward music"; correlatively, then, Giorgione represents the aspiration of all art forms toward the condition of the type. We shall hear a new tone resonating in the Paterian dictum that "All art constantly aspires toward the condition of music" if we hear it as yet another description of the formation of "aesthetic poetry" within historical time, for in this essay, music only seems to be invoked as a transhistorical ideal, the total identification of form and matter only seems to be projected as a sort of apocalyptic end. A closer reading, however, reveals music to be a generic figure for pure temporality: fleeting moments of "play" and "free passage," "ideal instants . . . on that background of the silence of Venice" (R, 150–52). Ideal art once again is characterized by passages of time marked by epiphanic moments, and this essay, like the "Conclusion," evokes the experience of "moments as they pass" (R, 239). In the moments that the school of Giorgione chooses to depict, "musical intervals in our existence, life itself is conceived as a sort of listening—listening to music, . . . to the sound of water, to time as it flies" (R, 151).

As "standard" or "law," in other words, the Paterian type does not indicate synchronic pressure toward conformity, but rather a diachronic pressure toward the future, an "aspiration" toward the "condition of music," toward further passages of time marked by intervals and further pivotal moments that seem to absorb past and future in an intense consciousness of the present . . . exquisite pauses in time, in which, arrested thus, we seem to be spectators of all the fulness of existence, and which are like some consummate extract or quintessence of life. (R, 150)

Each "wholly concrete moment" condenses into itself "all the motives, all the interests and effects of a long history," and after the fixated pause, "appetite" renews itself and is expressed in further "intent" and "listening" faces.

In the diachronic sense, too, the Paterian type expresses concrete historical identity while also expressing something beyond itself. That "something beyond" is the shaping force toward further developments in the future, for though each type in retrospect does become a standard, it is a standard that is not "given" but historically derived. Only in retrospect, from the point of view at the end of the line, can the type be invested with traditional value, only at the point from which it can be seen to have repeated itself in various permutations of similarity and difference. But even though the retrospective vantage point
Types and Figures

makes it seem as if time stands still, the process after all is understood to be ongoing, as each type that survives into the present forms the template or "impress" of future development. The type possesses not only the power of impression in the present, but also a force toward the future, which is fulfilled alike by those who copy and by those who turn away.

Thus the type may be seen as the central category in Pater's evolutionary art history. In its synchronic dimension, it imitates the modern "species," the realistic, particular object that is invested with general value, an aesthetic and historical construct rather than a Platonic or "essentialist" category, and in its diachronic dimension it exerts a standardizing and productive force toward future types.8 Pater's use of "type," then, is often very close to "impression" in its plastic sense, or "style" as stilus, the mold or shape imposed on receptive matter, the inscriptive force that writes the characters of time. Pater describes the historical figures who leave such lasting impressions as "types," which continue to "impress" or "imprint" their images on the imaginations of later ages. The spirit of the individual artist is just such a malleable or receptive substance, a waxy slate or tabula rasa, impressed already with the "acknowledged" types, ready to impress the spirit of the ages with a new style.

In the late nineteenth century this range of connotation owes at least in part to the technologies of printing, in part to the figural tradition of Christian exegesis.9 Auerbach's magisterial essay on the etymology of "figura" begins by discussing the development of both rhetorical and historical senses of the word from its original meaning as "plastic form"—both the mold and the shape that issues from it. In this sense he compares "figura" to "typos," which not only implies


9. Kermode discusses these two traditions behind the "type" in Hawthorne's fiction. See Frank Kermode, The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change [1975; reprint, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983], pp. 90-114, where Kermode offers in elegant and compressed form a discussion of the interaction of several concepts of the type in the nineteenth century, the changes Darwin's theory enforced on the already-extant traditions of the type, and a detailed example of the literary assimilation of these traditions.
plastic form (specifically that of an impression) but also inclines toward the lawful and the exemplary.\(^{10}\) Auerbach's citation here of Dante, who uses "figura" to speak of the impression stamped in wax to form a seal (Purgatorio 10.45; Paradiso 27.52), leads to the Christian sense of the type, an exemplary and reiterative figure in history. Hints of an emergent Christian typology are everywhere apparent in Pater, even in The Renaissance, and I discuss his secularization of that powerful Christian historicism in Part Three. But Pater's secularized Christian types are formed against the background of his aesthetic and "scientific" awareness, which predominates in The Renaissance.

In all the early essays, Pater's use of the type is more firmly associated with the contemporary sciences of observation, classification, and evolution than with the technology of printing or the Christian types. Pater wrote in his essay on "Style" that one of the necessary tasks for the modern critic is the "naturalisation of the vocabulary of science" \(^{11}\) (A, 16). His development of the type demonstrates this stylistic aim in several ways. Like the chemical analogies of the "Preface," Pater's use of the type is one of his early strategies for representing aesthetic judgments as answerable to modern science. By using chemistry as his model for the "fusion" that yields a unique aesthetic object, Pater also (and paradoxically) implies the repeatability afforded by a scientifically controlled experiment. Significantly, the aesthetic critic enacts the process of aesthetic creation in reverse, undoing the "fusion" with an aesthetic "analysis" of the compound, and producing a "formula" that describes the identity of the aesthetic object "scientifically."\(^{11}\) Paterian formulas describe specifics, in other words, but they paradoxically do so in terms that imply generality and repeatability.

Pater's type is answerable not to chemistry but to the nineteenth-century science of evolutionary biology. In "Coleridge," for example, he associates the word with the modern "sciences of observation," which have revealed "types of life evanescing into each other by inexpressible refinements of change" \(^{11}\) (A, 66). If "types of life" are continuously "evanescing into each other by inexpressible refinements of change," then the representative of the type stands for, and

\(^{10}\) Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in Scenes from the Drama of European Literature (New York: Meridian, 1959), pp. 11, 15.

thus conceptually stabilizes, a form that is simultaneously understood to be unstable, still in the process of formation, possibly soon to turn into another type altogether. Behind the appearances of present form are inexpressible secret relations stretching toward both past and future. If change is constant, and so gradual as to be almost invisible, then clearly general categories do not mean what they would mean if they were absolute, unchanging, and “given.” General categories must be reformulated according to new principles. Pater’s vigorous use of the type in the early essays is directly linked to this keen sense of a modern crisis in procedures of classification, brought on in part by, and in part expressing, a contemporary revision of the concept of species.¹²

That a general shift was taking place in the meaning of “type” seems to be indicated by a formalist sense of the word entering the vocabulary at around this time. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the first usage of “type” in this modern, formalist sense (the “general form, structure, or character distinguishing a particular kind, group or class”) as 1843, from a part of Mill’s *Logic* (4.2) that takes up the procedures of classification. Furthermore, the first usage of “type” to mean “kind, class, or order as distinguished by a particular individual” is given as 1854, and the usage of “type” to mean “representative specimen” as 1842.¹³ Pater’s early usage reflects this tendency to illustrate the class by means of the individual or, conversely, to generalize from the particular instance, as we have seen. With this dialectic he manages to reassert a sense of structure against the atomism of flux, change, and individual difference and at the same time to remain committed to the individual instance. The type helps Pater bridge between two equally extreme reactions to the crisis in classification: the attempt to retain idealist or essentialist modes of categorization, which Pater recognizes in Coleridge as “ancient thought,” and the resignation to a form of nominalist skepticism which doubts that general categories express anything but arbitrary and man-made boundaries.¹⁴ Between these two reactions Pater develops a historical and evolutionary concept of the type, and the type enables evolutionary discourse, as the individual instance does not.

¹² For a detailed history of the developing concept of species, see “Microtaxonomy, the Science of Species,” in Mayr, *Growth of Biological Thought*, pp. 251–97.
¹³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers further examples from natural history dating from the 1840s, and similar technical usages from chemistry dating from 1852.
¹⁴ On nominalist thinking about species, see Mayr, *Growth of Biological Thought*, pp. 263–65. Opposition to essentialism began long before Darwin on two fronts: among naturalists and among philosophers. In the latter connection, Mayr quotes Locke.
Pater (in the company of George Eliot, George Meredith, and Thomas Hardy) turns the English critical tradition toward modernism by confronting and assimilating Darwin’s epochal vision. There is a strong tradition of evolutionary ideas in English literature before Pater, including Coleridge, Carlyle, Tennyson, Arnold, and Ruskin. Like these writers, Pater is concerned with the spiritual evolution toward “higher things” (*In Memoriam* 1.4), but far deeper than anyone before him, Pater registers both the material forces threatening this vision of spiritual evolution and the conceptual difficulties presented by this new mode of thought. Pater went up to Oxford in 1859, the year *On the Origin of Species* was published, and we know that he read Darwin and discussed the new work with great animation. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Pater accepted the Darwinian challenge, even though he seems to have understood its most difficult implications accurately and profoundly.

There is general critical agreement at this time that the “Darwinian” element in Pater’s criticism is strong.” Harold Bloom easily states, “*The Renaissance* was already a Darwinian book,” but we still do not know as much as we could about what a “Darwinian book” might look like specifically in its literary form, as opposed to the history of ideas registered in its content. Important contributions to the literary inquiry have been made by Philip Appleman, Dwight Culler, Gillian Beer, and George Levine. In an essay that bears an important relation to the argument of this book, Appleman argues that Pater’s “impressionism” and “historicism” mark the two horns

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17. Perhaps we should say the “Darwinistic” element. Peckham has argued that it is not strictly accurate to call a writer “Darwinian” who does not specify the mechanism of evolution to be natural selection, as Pater certainly does not. Several writers have insisted on this distinction, but it does not seem to have caught on. See Morse Peckham, “Darwinism and Darwinisticism,” *Victorian Studies* 3 (September 1959), 19–40. I have retained “Darwinian” for ease of reference, but place it in quotation marks to register the metaphorical nature of my claim.

18. Bloom, introduction to Pater’s *Selected Writings*, p. xvii.

of his critical dilemma, that those impulses are “antithetical,” and that they are both influenced by his awareness of Darwin’s work.²⁰ An understanding of Pater’s use of the type is a fundamental step in describing his particular “Darwinism,” and in the sections that follow I show how that basic evolutionary category serves to mark the movement of aesthetic time.

6 · Low and High Relief: “Luca Della Robbia”

Toward the end of the essay on Winckelmann, Pater shifts his focus to Goethe, moving Goethe’s influential predecessor into the background. The “aim of a right criticism,” Pater concludes, is “to place Winckelmann in an intellectual perspective of which Goethe is the foreground” (R, 226). Pater’s rhetorical strategy accentuates Goethe’s relative importance, his “broad” culture as opposed to Winckelmann’s intense but narrow gift, and especially his position later in art-historical time, and it echoes Winckelmann’s own principles of evolutionary art history. Positioning Goethe in the foreground at the end of The Renaissance has the striking effect of pointing self-reflexively toward the further developments of romanticism represented by Pater himself. In these last two sections of Part Two, I want to analyze the particular forms of “intellectual perspective” that are represented by manipulating background and foreground, but before turning to Pater’s figures of relief, I shall consider his careful arrangement of the volume as a whole.

In the “Preface,” Pater stresses both the chronological form and the spatial form of his volume. He most strenuously emphasizes the chronological, linear, and developmental plot of his story, tracing the

²⁰ Though I disagree with Appleman’s most basic premise that Pater’s historicism and his impressionism are “antithetical” (I am engaged in arguing the case that they are homologously structured and mutually inextricable), I have found the speculative range of this essay most illuminating.

¹ In its own day the volume was not credited with careful, or a particularly “historical,” arrangement. In a characteristic misunderstanding, Morley claimed that the essays are “grouped in an unsystematic way around a . . . theory of life and its purport” (quoted in Hill’s notes, p. 444). DeLaura (Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England, p. 231) correctly refers to the “accretive and random development of The Renaissance volume” but does not focus on Pater’s aggressive reordering of that randomness.