Transfigured World

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Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism.

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of his critical dilemma, that those impulses are "antithetical," and
that they are both influenced by his awareness of Darwin's work.\textsuperscript{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 move­
ment 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 princi­
ples 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 repre­
sented 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 arrange­
ment 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

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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 (\textit{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 ran­
domness.
Renaissance from early to late, beginning with the tentative emergence of humanism within the Middle Ages, and ending with the romantic, revitalized humanism of Goethe. But a spatial form of organization is also readily apparent in his concentric arrangement of essays by nationality: essays on fifteenth-century Italian art are framed by essays on French literature, then half-framed again by German philology and historical aesthetics, then, on the outermost edge, by the English tradition of criticism represented by Pater's voice in propria persona.

Pater acknowledges the aesthetic choice involved in this concentric arrangement when he notes in the "Preface" that "Two Early French Stories," which he has positioned as the first essay, does not necessarily provide the best example of the early Renaissance but does complete the French level of his frame. He includes the essay because, as he puts it, "it help[s] the unity of my series" (R, xv). His attempt to correlate this concentric arrangement of national aesthetics with his chronological plan is forced, but significant nonetheless. Pater argues that the "Two Early French Stories" demonstrate the freshness of the early period, "the charm of ascesis, of the austere and serious girding of the loins in youth," and that the writings of Joachim du Bellay represent the "subtle and delicate sweetness which belongs to a refined and comely decadence" (R, xii–xiii). Though his rationalization does seem remarkably adventitious in this prefatory context, a related geographical argument for unity makes more sense at the end of the essay on Leonardo, when Pater claims that Leonardo's last days in France open a "prospect" through which art history can view "Italian art [dying] away as a French exotic" (R, 128).\(^2\) Still fanciful in the highest degree as a historical observation, this argument tends to make geographical dislocation a metaphor for the aesthetic itself; everything with aesthetic value is "exotic," for it has been dislocated, exiled, and translated from one context to another.

The form of the volume may be called "spatial," then, not because of its thematic and metaphorical use of geographical location, but because of the concentric arrangement of the essays, which rigidly enforces the "centrality" of the Italian Renaissance at the same time that it calls attention to the present-day, "eccentric" or "exotic" English perspective that ultimately frames the entire vision. Thus the Winckelmann essay plays an oblique and crucial role in mediating the

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2. Other geographical and mapping devices include the pervasive north-south opposition [e.g., R, 174, 179], the theme of exile and return, especially in relation to Rome [e.g., R, 6–7, 165, 174–75], and the cross-cultural extravaganza staged at the end of "Winckelmann."
central Italian and peripheral French examples to the English reader through a German who grappled with the problem of recovering his senses "in a metaphysical age" and finally "solves the problem in the concrete" by a "happy, unperplexed dexterity, . . . what Goethe called his Gewahrwerden der greichischen Kunst, his finding of Greek art" ([R, 183–84]). According to Pater's theory, Winckelmann establishes a "true" classicism against the background of a "false" and "unhistorical" neoclassicism, and this classical revival enables the full culture of Goethe's romanticism to "blossom." Pater, in other words, also solved the problem Winckelmann solved "in the concrete," though Pater solved it at a second remove, through his "finding" of the Renaissance "finding" of Greek art, his revival of a revival.

The temporal form of the volume is in the end supplanted by the structural force of its spatial form. The concentric layers of enclosure, with Pater's framing perspective overtly positioned on its outer edge, work to imply that an English consciousness in the late nineteenth century is like a spatial location that "contains" the cultures of the past. On the level of the volume's form, Pater's efforts to envision the diachronic seem to fall back into a vision of spatial containment which is the sign of retrospection, the "House Beautiful" where temporality, growth, and development may be peacefully ensconced in memory, rather than experienced as flux. Joseph Frank, in his seminal essay on spatial form, argues that this is the sign of literary modernism: "modern literature has been engaged in transmuting the time world of history into the timeless world of myth." To the extent that Pater's resolutely historicized treatment of the Renaissance is finally gathered

3. See the long passage excised after the Westminster Review publication of "Winckelmann," in Hill's notes, pp. 268–69: "The first condition of an historical revival is an appreciation of the differences between one age and another. The service of Winckelmann to modern culture lay in the appeal he made from the substituted text to the original. He produces the actual relics of the antique against the false tradition of the era of Louis XIV. A style or manner in art or literature can only be explained or reproduced through those special conditions of society and culture out of which it arose, and with which it forms one group of phenomena. A false classicism, in the unhistorical spirit of the age, had tried to isolate the classical manner from the group of phenomena of which it was a part." He goes on to characterize Winckelmann's historical scholarship as an attempt to reach the "root" of those special conditions in order to understand the "blossom" of the Hellenic manner.

up into this spatial form, the volume is mythic in this specifically modern sense. In the final analysis, but only in the final analysis, the attempt to represent diachrony falls back into a synchronic, visionary unity. Gerald Monsman is quite right to call it a “visionary text.”

Critics have traditionally noted that the figures treated in the volume are strangely assimilable to one another and that together they form an overarching, developing “spirit,” and it is true that the transcendent perspective at the end of time must be assigned to the aesthetic critic himself, as the highest point of development, the most complex position so far evolved. But it is not therefore necessary to equate the trajectory of this overarching spirit with the spirit of Pater himself. It is the formal dynamic of Pater’s aesthetic historicism which creates this effect—not his “subjectivism” (as I have shown), nor an autobiographical intention of any conventional kind (as I show in Part Three, section 2).

Implicitly identifying with Goethe at the end of the essay on Winckelmann, Pater begins to seem more palpably foregrounded. Within the terms of his developmental aesthetic, however, identifying with Goethe has the paradoxical effect of simultaneously distinguishing Pater from him, pushing Goethe further into the past, where he is decidedly less modern than his later romantic epigone, who stealthily triumphs. The poetics of revival mark out a territory where identification and detachment are not mutually exclusive; retrospection always has the double effect of “fixing” the past more securely in the past, at the very moment of enlivening it with present attention. As I have shown in Part One, Pater quietly completes his move into the foreground at the end of the volume in the “Conclusion,” where he gradually emerges in his own voice.

But to feel his emergence at the “Conclusion” only reminds the reader that he has remained, until then, more or less resolutely in the background. That may seem an odd point to stress, especially about a critic reputed to be decidedly “subjective,” until we realize that his mind in the present forms the background against which the Renaissance has been “thrown” in “relief.” This model will help us understand why his prose seems at once so personal and so oddly impersonal. The “personality” of the aesthetic critic seems to hover everywhere, and yet it is effaced, recessive. Pater’s impressionism does not amount to an ungoverned effusion of purple prose or extravagant

6. For a recent example of this argument, see Paul Barolsky, “Walter Pater’s Renaissance,” Virginia Quarterly Review 58 (Spring 1982), 208–20.
feeling; it is a theoretically coherent imitation of this shifting "intellectual perspective," in which the "imaginative intellect" in the present and the projected historical past are alternately merged and thrown into mutual relief.

This form of attention is (literally) complex. Pater's impressionist trick—to recede into the background and to emerge in the end as the foreground—disturbed his Victorian audience, who distinguished between the historical essay and the personal essay according to a strict generic contract that they expected to be straightforwardly fulfilled, not subverted in this complex and subtle way. Thus they misread the "Conclusion" as personal advocacy alone, and of course missed the relevance of Pater's final position to the "intellectual perspective" of the volume as a whole. Readers today may be more appreciative of the aesthetic effects generated by the play of genres. This sort of spatial recursivity—center emerging to frame and contain the outer edges, background becoming foreground, figure and ground changing places—is endlessly challenging, and it is reemerging today in the critical literature as a feature of "postmodernism." But here again it should be more interesting to us as a part of the formal techniques of perspectivism than as a way of bypassing formal analysis by referring everything to a central, personal ground that we call Pater's "sensibility." The truly radical and interesting formal trick here is that the sense of an overarching "person" (or, to change the metaphor, a person "behind the scenes") has been generated by Pater's dynamic of figural evolution.

In addition to collecting essays already published elsewhere, Pater wrote a few pieces especially for the volume of Renaissance studies. These are of particular interest when we consider the form of the published volume as a whole. For example, Pater newly wrote both of the essays that comprise the French level of the frame, and by doing so he more carefully articulated what I have been calling the concentric arrangement of the volume. He wrote the "Preface," which introduces his relativist, historicist definition of beauty against the tacit projection of Ruskinian absolutism. And he wrote "Luca Della Robbia," which in one light seems merely to summarize the argument about classical Allgemeinheit and Heiterkeit from "Winckelmann." But on the other hand, Pater advances it in a new context, the germ of which may be found in the essay on Michelangelo, published the year before:

7. Monsman sees Pater as "impressively bridging the gap between romanticism and postmodernism." He ultimately interprets the recursivity of Pater's texts psychoanalytically, as the "turning of the child back upon the parent" (Pater's Art of Autobiography, pp. 4–5 and passim).
He secures that ideality of expression, which in Greek sculpture depends on a delicate system of abstraction, and in early Italian sculpture on lowness of relief, by an incompleteness, which is surely not always undesigned, and . . . trusts to the spectator to complete the half-emergent form. (R, 76)

In the third edition he adds "As I have already pointed out" before this statement, in order to remind his reader of "Luca Della Robbia." This very repetitiveness should alert us to the importance of the essay, where Pater takes up once again the modern form of representation against a background. It bears, in other words, a great deal of theoretical weight, since it was clearly written to lend greater cohesion to the argument of the volume as a whole. 8

The essay "Luca Della Robbia" must be read in the context of aesthetic "relief," for in that context it has an enormous importance that has never been granted. The volume is studded with references to relief sculpture: Leonardo from his earliest years "constructed models in relief, of which Vasari mentions some of women smiling"; and as Verrocchio seems now to anticipate Leonardo, so Leonardo always seems to recall the studio of Verrocchio "in the love of beautiful toys . . . and of reliefs, like those cameos which in the Virgin of the Balances hang all round the girdle of Saint Michael" (R, 100, 102). The relief work of the early Tuscan sculptors "suggested much of [Michelangelo's] grandest work" and "impressed it with so deep a sweetness" (R, 78–79). Several times Pater mentions the Elgin marbles, and at one point he names the Panathenaic frieze as what he would "perhaps" choose if he could save but one work of Hellenic art "in the wreck of all beside" (R, 218). And of course, in the essay on Luca he takes up the early Tuscan sculpture in low relief, comparing it to freestanding Greek sculpture, on the one hand, and on the other hand to Michelangelo's "half-emergent" figures, left in a suggestive incompleteness by the artist, partially submerged and yet "in strong contrast with the rough-hewn mass" of stone.

The essay graphically displays many typical features of Pater's aesthetic historicism. We should by now be well accustomed to expecting Pater's focus on an art object to have both formal, realistic, and historically concrete value as well as several levels of historically general or

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“spiritual” value simultaneously. In the essay on Luca, Pater characteristically embodies his general point with recourse to a concrete historical example. And again characteristically, he interprets Luca’s work as the visible, surviving representative of an aesthetic practice “common to all the Tuscan sculptors of the fifteenth century,” who “worked for the most part in low relief” (R, 64). He chooses Luca quite candidly because enough information has survived to construct a “history of outward changes . . . through his work” (R, 63). And having made Luca’s career representative of the general practice of a particular art form, Pater then sees that practice, in turn, as representative of the early Italian Renaissance in general, with its fresh but narrow perfection. Finally, in the most general sense, the art of Luca della Robbia represents the historical emergence of a new form through the familiar dynamic of impression and expression. His work displays “that profound expressiveness, that intimate impress of an indwelling soul,” Pater writes, in a phrase that concentrates his aesthetic dynamic of internalization and externalization in its very barrage of intensive and extensive prefixes (R, 63).

Pater’s discussion of the sculpture in low relief gathers an ekphrastic value within the volume as a whole, every bit as much as the classical descriptions of the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18, the wall murals on the temple of Juno at Carthage in *Aeneid* 1, or the figured pavement on the terrace of pride in *Purgatorio* 12. In fact, Pater is engaged here in a romantic revision of classical ekphrasis. It would certainly be characteristic for him to construct his own modern “equivalent for” the classical qualities of generality, blitheness, and repose as a way to place himself within a “conscious,” modern tradition of classical revivalism. If he is engaged in an effort of modern ekphrasis, it would be important that he describe not a particular object but a generic art form. In the first place, the concrete but generic status of “sculpture in low relief” makes it an apt vehicle for representing the spirit of an entire age rather than one artist only. Choosing a generic art form rather than one particular object also ties the Luca essay to Pater’s Hegelian theory of an evolution of art forms which represents the gradual emergence of “the human mind” into modern self-consciousness.

But above all, it is important to Pater’s argument that he has chosen a plastic form. He quite straightforwardly uses Luca’s reliefs to represent the tentative emergence of modern art in the early fifteenth century. But of course he also implies the more general case: the sculpture in low relief ekphrastically represents historical emergence in general, the dialectical process whereby new forms rise and define
themselves against a context of precedent and conventionalized types, which then recede into the background. The ekphrastic value of low relief finally refers to the emergence of modern art in history and to the form of modern art as historical emergence. In the most important sense, these two levels of representation are really one. For Pater’s greatest importance as a critic and as a precursor of early-twentieth-century modernism lies in his repeated demonstration that it is the conjunction of an aesthetic representation of history and the historical treatment of aesthetics which generates the sense of “modernity.”

Despite its relatively thin and graceless composition, the essay “Luca Della Robbia,” like “Winckelmann,” is devoted to reviewing the fundamentally Hegelian argument that

as the mind itself has had an historical development, one form of art, by the very limitations of its material, may be more adequate than another for the expression of any one phase of that development. Different attitudes of the imagination have a native affinity with different types of sensuous form. . . . The arts may thus be ranged in a series, which corresponds to a series of developments in the human mind itself. [R, 210]

This time Pater approaches the familiar argument using Renaissance sculpture as his concrete example of modern art, not the modern arts of poetry and painting, as he had done in “Winckelmann.” Repeating the same argument about the modern arts of background and foreground, now using a plastic, sculptural form as his exemplary model, seems to be a sign of Pater’s more conscious attraction to the aesthetic relief, his attentiveness to it as a historical figure, and his commitment to further interpretation of its aesthetic significance.

All sculpture, Pater argues, attempts to solve the same problem: to get beyond the limitations of its physical medium, its “tendency . . . to a hard realism, a one-sided presentment of mere form” [R, 65]. Its hardness is “too fixed” and too unexpressively uniform. Only motion and color could “relieve” it, but because those direct solutions are for all practical purposes impossible, Pater addresses the characteristically revised aesthetic problem of how “to get not colour but the equivalent of colour.” Both motion and color are frequently used elsewhere as the index of spirituality, but Pater has also made the typical aesthetic plea—not for the thing itself but for the recreated equivalent, or “sense” of the thing. The “precise value” of sculpture in low relief resides in its exact manner of overcoming the limitations of solid form, “etherealizing, spiritualizing, relieving its stiffness, its heaviness, and death” [R, 65]. Like Hegel, Pater places relief sculpture
between the classical form of freestanding sculpture and painting, the quintessential modern art form.9

After introducing this formal problem, Pater casts the solution to it in evolutionary terms. He sketches a three-term dialectical argument, taking Greek sculpture first, then Michelangelo's sculpture, and then situating Luca's low reliefs as the missing link, "midway between the two systems." Following Winckelmann, Goethe, and "many other German critics," Pater argues that the Greek system seeks "the type in the individual" and by a process of abstraction purges all individuality and accident from the form, leaving only "what is structural, and permanent" (R, 66). This system of course sacrifices personal expression completely. Michelangelo, on the other hand, represents the expressive artist, whose subject matter is the "special history of the special soul" and whose sculptural manner, too, is the result of a fortuitous, personal, and "special" solution to the formal problem. An expressive style "often is, and always seems, the effect of accident" (R, 67), but though it is personal, expressive, and "accidental," Michelangelo's sculpture is also historically representative.

Michelangelo's personal solution is enabled by the spirit of the times, the result of "a genius spiritualized by the reverie of the Middle Ages." Pater's familiar historical dialectic of body and spirit—Greek form without content, medieval Christian soul without bodily form—is at work here, as it was in his fantasy of the Mona Lisa; the Greek body is "penetrated" and filled as a result of medieval Christianity, yielding the Renaissance synthesis of body with soul "indwelling," in the language of Pater's incarnational poetics of historical form and content. The antithetical moment of disgust is present also: because Michelangelo's "genius had been spiritualized by the reverie of the middle age. . . . a system which sacrificed so much of what was inward and unseen could not satisfy him" (R, 67). What the ravages of time and burial have done to the Venus of Melos, "fraying its surface and softening its lines, so that some spirit in the thing seems always on the point of breaking out of it," Michelangelo contrives to do consciously, aesthetically, leaving his sculpture in a suggestive and puzzling incompleteness that "trusts to the spectator to complete the half-emergent form" (R, 76). Thus we can see that the art of relief implies an aesthetics of reception. Though it seemed incomplete, it presented "in reality perfect finish," and many have felt that they "would lose something if that half-realized form ever quite emerged from the stone" (R, 68). The result is a freestanding sculpture whose

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lines suggest the effect of relief. In this sense, the spirit of humanism, individualism, and expressionism is aptly represented by a freestanding figure, but the figure also refers in a "studied" manner to its difficult birth, its merely partial emergence from its ground.

After producing low reliefs in the high style (using marble) for the *Duomo* and the *Campanile* of Florence, Luca became desirous to realize the spirit and manner of that sculpture, in a humbler material, to unite its science, its exquisite and expressive system of low relief, to the homely art of pottery, to introduce those high qualities into common things, to adorn and cultivate daily household life. In this he is profoundly characteristic of the Florence of that century. . . . People had not yet begun to think that what was good art for churches was not so good, or less fitted, for their own houses. (R, 70)

This is a mythic vision of domestic daily life before the separation of sacred and secular generates the modern aesthetic and historical senses, and we return to this sacramental vision in Part Three. In the present context, it is important to point out that the terra-cotta reliefs are plain white at first, but—unlike Michelangelo, who achieved through "studied incompleteness" the "equivalent for colour in sculpture"—Luca eventually uses actual color: blending the exotic, oriental pottery that haunted his imagination with the indigenous Roman pottery of his Tuscan neighborhood. Color provides background, accentuating the relief and creating an “atmosphere,” like the sky, the sense of “coolness and repose” in the summertime. The noblest of these reliefs, according to Pater at another point, were the ones colored in blue and white, the colors of the Virgin Mary. “By repressing all such curves as indicate solid form, and throwing the whole into low relief,” Luca relieves the hardness of “mere form” and suggests spirituality through the aura of atmosphere or background (R, 69).10

Michelangelo’s sculpture and Luca’s low reliefs share an important formal feature: their incomplete or “repressed” sense of outline. Both sculptural forms incorporate within themselves an expression of figural relativity, for the figures rise out of their ground but remain caught within it. But Pater also distinguishes them as early and later forms of the same development. Thus Michelangelo’s value appreciates because his work fulfilled the potential of a precedent form; its aesthetic value is generated in historical time. A formal solution that

10. The same terms are used in Pater’s discussion of Browning’s poetry. See below, Part Three, sec. 1.
in Michelangelo’s sculptures is “studied” seems naive or “natural” in these humble Tuscan objects that have hardly separated themselves from the contexts of domestic use or religious ritual to become purely beautiful, “aesthetic” objects. They are not self-conscious yet, but merely emergent in both the aesthetic and the historical senses. Pater’s figure of low relief represents a primitive, emergent form of the modern representation of emergence. In “Winckelmann,” Pater identified the complex figure composed both of background and of foreground as the quintessential figure of modern art, and here he makes the low reliefs of Luca Della Robbia historically prefigurative of these later, more highly evolved backgrounding and foregrounding strategies, fundamental both to realism and to modernism. His ekphrastic use of this historically concrete genre shows yet another sense in which art history itself can become a form of Pater’s aesthetic poetry.

7 · The Senses of Relief

If the early Renaissance low relief is used in “Luca Della Robbia” primarily as a figure for the historical emergence of a modern aesthetic, other versions of the figure proliferate throughout the volume as well. The Luca essay serves to concentrate several valences of the figure in one place and to alert us to its profound importance in the overall argument of Pater’s Renaissance. But in order to understand that importance, we must appreciate its wide range of uses in the volume. The figure works within both dimensions of his aesthetic historicism, for he uses it to imagine both the activity of consciousness in the present and the shape of past time. In fact, the extensive use of this figure is one powerful sign of the coherent relation between Pater’s aestheticism and his historicism.

When Pater writes of “throwing” something into “relief,” he alludes to the aesthetic construction of an image, a moment, or an object. The figure of relief depicts the result of that aesthetic construction: a “fixed” object displayed within and against its ground. As a figure for modern relativity, the relief portrays the conditional or contextual grounds of knowledge within which any “object” must be recon-