Transfigured World

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“spirits” of two different ages side by side, but in the end these turn out to be merely different phases of the same, overarching spirit. The novel begins with the strict premise of historical difference, but in the end pre-Christian, Christian, and even post-Christian seem not so different. In order to focus the ironies of a dialectical reversal whereby Christian principles of historiography are used to explain the process of secularization, I have interpreted the narrative structure of Marius the Epicurean on the model of typological exegesis, highlighting Pater’s debt to traditional Christian historicism while at the same time showing how that system of interpretation has been transvalued and secularized in its late nineteenth-century form.

In another sense Pater has written the romance of aesthetic historicism. Marius’s life story is the story of openness, sensitivity, affinity for “all that is really lifegiving in the established order of things” (MS, 251). Thus Marius’s “aesthetic” process of absorption and detachment makes history in several ways. As an exemplary or typical figure, Marius shows how the “time-spirit” comes to life in its concrete representatives—in Marius’s transition from paganism to Christianity, for example. But Marius is particularly concerned not only with religious ritual but also with the literature of his day. His reception of that literature forms a major part of the plot, and the form of the novel consequently becomes anthological, composite, and modern. As the fragments of second-century literature are gathered up into a new, comprehensive form—the narrative form of Marius the Epicurean—they “appreciate,” or gain in aesthetic value, through the staging of their renewed reception later in historical time. Marius the Epicurean represents the composite voice of Pater’s essays, writ large, as narrative form. Its depiction of historical change and re-collection is his greatest essay in the poetics of revival.

I · The Transparent Hero

In July 1864, Pater read to the Old Mortality the earliest of his essays that now remains to us, the beautiful “Diaphaneità.” He had recently become a Fellow of Brasenose College, and in the next year he would write of the differences between ancient and modern thought in his essay on Coleridge. Three years remained before he published his discussion of the differences between ancient and modern art in
"Winckelmann," and four years before the "Conclusion" first appeared as the last paragraphs of "Poems by William Morris." Yet we can see in "Diaphaneité" the preoccupations of these more familiar essays taking shape. For the present study, "Diaphaneité" serves as the "key-signature" of Pater's work, especially because the ideas worked out in that essay are figuratively embodied as a person, as a character, and as a character type.

Pater refers in the essay to this character's "clear crystal nature," and following Pater's lead Harold Bloom translates "Diaphaneité" as "the Crystal Man" (MS, 253). This translation places the emphasis on the several qualities of crystal that metaphorically allude to aesthetic form: its clarity and complex symmetries, the process of pressure and ascesis through which such form is realized (R, xi), and the resulting ethereal suggestion of spirit in material form. Pater twice wrote of Dante (once comparing him to Plato) that in his work "the spiritual attains the definite visibility of a crystal" (A, 212; PP, 135), and it is especially in this latter sense that the "crystal man" functions as a historical representation, embodying Pater's belief that the spirit of time attains visibility in the historical person. This translation highlights the way a life can be lived in the spirit of art. But to translate "Diaphaneité" as "crystal man" emphasizes the character's solidity of form, his relative visibility rather than his diaphanous or translucent nature, with all its Coleridgean associations. The paradoxical and intermediate state of diaphaneity sets up a complex play of visibility with invisibility, partial permeability with full transparency; and I have chosen loosely to translate "diaphaneité" as "the transparent hero" in order to throw the emphasis on the character's relative invisibility and permeability and his attainment of a wistful, graceful effacement in the service of historical change.

2. Bloom, on the other hand, chooses "The Child in the House" as his "key-signature, the largest clue to his work" [introduction to Selected Writings of Walter Pater, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 15, n. 1]. His choice emphasizes the "aesthetic" aspect of Pater's dialectic, while mine emphasizes his historicism.
4. Monsman ("Pater's Aesthetic Hero," p. 143) points out that Pater uses the same sentence in these two locations.
5. Ibid. I am indebted to this essay in several ways. Monsman mentions Coleridge's metaphorical use of the crystal. He points out that Pater's "aesthetic hero" is a personification of the forces of history, a dramatic embodiment of "the Coleridgean (or German Idealistic) theory of art, in which the perfect aesthetic object is defined as a balance
In this essay Pater describes a type of figure, a projection of certain personal traits on the general level of historical culture. The aura of generalization projected about this figure is in fact, responsible in part for its formal "transparency," for this type of figure embodies Pater's ideal relations between an individual and his culture at any given time and over time. Pater imagines that it could serve as the "basement" or fundamental type in effecting historical "regeneration" (MS, 254). Thus it is no surprise that it would serve (and this has been noted by other critics of Pater) as the fundamental type in Pater's representations of history. Recognizing in it the kernel of all Pater's "imaginary portraits," Gerald Monsman has called it "a sort of Ur-portrait," and in another context he associates the diaphane with Pater's "aesthetic hero," a character type that Pater will employ again and again in his fiction. In discussing this figure, I want to treat not only its content (that is, the traits that are characteristic of the type) but also its form (its projection as a type, the dynamics of its transparency). For "Diaphaneité" not only portrays Pater's ideal "aesthetic" character type but also promulgates a theory of characterization for his historical fiction.

As he will later do more fully in the Renaissance volume, Pater works here to articulate a new, "modern" form of generality or typicality. The essay opens with a meditation on the reception or recognition of types. Some "types of character," though they are "unworldly," are nevertheless traditionally recognized by "the world." Pater names the saint, the artist, and the speculative thinker in this regard. The world is predisposed to recognize them; it has "a place made ready for them in its affections." Thus, this sort of type is "given"—individual instances "fill up" the "place" given by preexistent "outlines"—but it is "given" not absolutely but historically, "given" because it has existed many times before. Furthermore, "to constitute one of these categories, or types, a breadth and generality of character is required" (MS, 247). In other words, Pater describes this type of character in terms exactly like those he will use to describe "ancient thought" in the essay on Coleridge and those he will use to describe classical sculpture in the essay on Winckelmann. But "diaphaneité" is "another type of character" (MS, 247).

between noumenal and phenomenal" (pp. 143-44). And throughout the essay he stresses the typicality of Pater's hero.

6. Monsman, Pater's Portraits, p. xiv. In that argument, Monsman's search for "mythic pattern" leads him to identify Diaphaneité with the Apollonian hero (see ibid., pp. xiv, 22, 203, 205, 207). However, in "Pater's Aesthetic Hero," pp. 136-51, Monsman associates Diaphaneité with the "religious hopefulness," which indicated Pater's "concession to Christianity" in Marius the Epicurean. In both cases, Diaphaneité is taken to be the prefiguration of later figures.
In “Winckelmann,” Pater distinguishes between ancient and modern art using the examples of Greek sculpture and the poetry of Robert Browning. Greek sculpture represents “broad” and “general” types in their “broad, central, incisive lines” (R, 213, 216). For this art form, “not the special situation, but the type, the general character of the subject to be delineated, is all-important” (R, 215). Furthermore, these types are “given”; Greek sculpture “has to choose between a select number of types intrinsically interesting—interesting, that is, independently of any special situation into which they may be thrown” (R, 215). “It renounces the power of expression by lower or heightened tones. . . . It has no backgrounds . . . to suggest and interpret a train of feeling. . . . It unveils man in the repose of his unchanging characteristics” (R, 212–13), and it does so through a process of abstraction or purgation, ridding the aesthetic object of all particularity or detail (R, 216). Modern art, on the other hand, is the art of accumulating particularity and specific detail, the art of shading, of “lower or heightened tones,” the art of “foregrounds and backgrounds,” which represent the relativity of the object within special situations (R, 214–16). Yet like the object of Greek sculpture, the object of Browning’s “poetry of situations” also gains general value, but by another route.

The characters of Browning’s poetry are not “given” types, for they are themselves unremarkable, of little intrinsic interest. According to Pater, Browning “accepts such a character, throws it into some situation . . . in which for a moment it becomes ideal. In the poem entitled Le Byron de nos Jours, in his Dramatis Personae, we have a single moment of passion thrown into relief after this exquisite fashion” (R, 214). In other words, Pater uses the figure of relief to describe the means by which the modern object is represented in its unique context, or “relatively, and under conditions.” The aura of general value is projected around such a character through the modern technique of “throwing” it “into relief.” The process can work in reverse as well, beginning with the general field and concentrating within it; in either case, the result is the complex, modern figure composed of a figure within its contextual ground. The modern poet, according to Pater, attempts “to realise this situation, to define, in a chill and empty atmosphere, the focus where rays, in themselves pale and impotent, unite and begin to burn” (R, 214). This, of course, is the familiar language of the “hard, gemlike flame” from the “Conclusion.”

It is the language Pater uses to describe Diaphaneitè as well. The type under discussion in that essay is “fine,” not broad. It relates obliquely to the “established order of things,” and thus it is unrecognizable by “the world.” Its transparency, in other words, is partly
expressive of the fact that it is invisible within the world's lexicon of types. In the spatial terms of Pater's figure, it fills up the "blanks" between categories, rather than taking "places" the world has already "made ready" in its affections, and thus it invisibly works to "transmit" its influence to "every part" of the moral order:

It does not take the eye by breadth of colour; rather it is that fine edge of light, where the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point. It crosses rather than follows the main current of the world's life. The world has no sense fine enough for those evanescent shades, which fill up the blanks between contrasted types of character—delicate provision in the organisation of the moral world for the transmission to every part of it of the life quickened at single points! For this nature there is no place ready in its affections. This colourless, unclassified purity of life it can neither use for its service, nor contemplate as an ideal. (MS, 248)

The fact that it remains "unclassified" testifies to its aesthetic value, for the world cannot "use" it, even for contemplation. The metaphors of focus and refinement make it clear that the diaphane is a "modern" type, formed within but against the background of the world's recognized "organisation." Its spiritual force is registered in its difference from "the world," for it "crosses" the main current, rather than following it, "cutting obliquely" the established "order of things" (MS, 249).

This type is refined and oblique, represented by an "edge" or a "single point," but by virtue of the paradoxes of Pater's characterization it partakes of generality as well. Its "colourless, unclassified"

7. Monsman ("Pater's Aesthetic Hero," p. 142) points out that this characteristic serves to associate Pater's typical hero with the artists of the Renaissance, who "live in a land where controversy has no breathing-place" and "refuse to be classified" (R, 27). I am pursuing the point that all Pater's types of "modernity" are set off against the "given" types.

8. Possibly Pater remembers here Browning's portrait of Lazarus in "An Epistle... of Karshish," who is "at cross purposes" with the world after his return from the realm of pure spirit (l. 158):

He holds on firmly to some thread of life—
[It is the life to lead perforcedly]
Which runs across some vast distracting orb
Of glory on either side that meagre thread,
Which, conscious of, he must not enter yet—
The spiritual life around the earthly life:
The law of that is known to him as this,
His heart and brain move there, his feet stay here.
So is the man perplexed with impulses
Sudden to start off crosswise, not straight on,
Proclaiming what is right and wrong across,
And not along, this black thread through the blaze—(ll. 178–89)
purity of life" is the colorlessness of white light, "blank" to "the world" but in reality composed of all colors. As Pater explains, there are two very different ways of being "colourless," which "the world" easily confounds. Most of us are reduced to a "colourless uninteresting existence" by "the play of circumstances," by the "pressing" of "our collective life" upon us. But Diaphaneitè is "neutralised, not by suppression of gifts, but by just equipoise among them" (MS, 252). His "colourlessness" is a sign of inclusiveness and balance: "here there is a moral sexlessness, a kind of impotence, an ineffectual wholeness of nature, yet with a divine beauty and significance of its own" (MS, 253). These very phrases are reproduced in "Winckelmann" to describe the beauty of Greek sculpture, "the colourless unclassified purity of life" to describe its Allgemeinheit or generality (R, 221, 218).9 The transparent hero partakes of the "characterlessness" of Greek sculpture as well as the very particularized character of Browning's modern "poetry of situations."

Pater's modern type, in other words, is synthetic, dialectically constituted, displaying transvalued versions of the very qualities associated with its opposite, the ancient or classical types. This is especially clear from the hindsight of "Coleridge" or "Winckelmann," but it is thematically quite explicit in "Diaphaneitè" as well: "Such a character is like a relic from the classical age, laid open by accident to our alien modern atmosphere. It has something of the clear ring, the eternal outline of the antique" (MS, 251). This "outline," usually Pater's shorthand signal of the ancient, "given" type, is here used to praise the transparent expressiveness of the diaphanous one, whose "simplicity in purpose and act is a kind of determinate expression in dextrous outline of one's personality. Such a simplicity is characteristic of the repose of perfect intellectual culture" (MS, 249). In this way, Pater signals that Diaphaneitè is the successor to the value of Hellenic Heiterkeit as well as Allgemeinheit, both in their synthetic, modernized, transvalued forms.

The "transparency" or near-transparency of this character works in several ways. In the first place, Diaphaneitè is transparent to his own interiority. In this sense, transparency functions as the metaphorical foundation of Pater's romantic theory of individual expression. The "life" of this character is like art in this particular sense: it is a clear translation of what is inward.

9. On Pater's repetition of passages from "Diaphaneitè" in the later essay, see Francis X. Roellinger, "Intimations of Winckelmann in Pater's Diaphaneitè," English Language Notes 2 [June 1965], 277–82.
The artist and he who has treated life in the spirit of art desires only to be shown to the world as he really is; as he comes nearer and nearer to perfection the veil of an outer life not simply expressive of the inward becomes thinner and thinner. (MS, 249)

Arnold’s exhortation to objectivity here again has been reassimilated to the very romantic project he was attempting to combat. Pater envisions the conventional, inexpressive “outer life” as occluding matter which prevents pure expression; in his ideal type, this material “veil” is becoming “thinner and thinner.” “There is an intellectual triumph implied” in this defeat of the “adulterated atmosphere of the world” (MS 249, 253). For “the world” does not manage to impose its conventional categories on this character, and as the “veil” becomes thinner and thinner, this rare type comes closer to being recognized, “shown to the world as he really is.”

But what is inward has quite clearly been internalized from what is without. In this sense, transparency functions as the metaphorical foundation of Pater’s theory of historical expression. Pater is working here on the dynamics of the reciprocal and analogous relation between the individual and his historical “environment.” The diaphane draws together Pater’s aestheticism and his historicism in one unified theory of expression. On the one hand, the “order of things” in any given age determines the content of this transparent character; but on the other hand, certain “elements” in his nature magnetically attract certain elements in the age—and not others. His “diaphanous” exterior metaphorically signals a state of almost total permeability to the order of things. But an active force of attraction allows for the character to have an extremely subtle shaping role in what it receives. For this reason, diaphaneity (and not full transparency) is the apt metaphor. In this context Pater spells out what might be called an ethics of internalization:

Its ethical result is an intellectual guilelessness, or integrity, that instinctively prefers what is direct and clear, lest one’s own confusion and intransparency should hinder the transmission from without of light that is not yet inward. . . . It is just this sort of entire transparency of nature that lets through unconsciously all that is really lifegiving in the established order of things; it detects without difficulty all sorts of affinities between its own elements, and the nobler elements in that order. (MS, 251)

Thus the diaphanous character is formed through an unconsciously regulated receptivity, regulated by his “affinities” with the best that

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has been thought and said in a certain “established order of things.” His character is at once an accurate microcosm of the spirit of the age, and yet it has been formed selectively. He has been totally passive to the forces of his environment, and yet he has been “unconsciously” active.

This paradoxical union of sheer passivity with “unconscious” activity is at the heart of this character’s role in Pater’s scheme of historical representation. For he exerts an aesthetic, shaping force on the “established order of things,” transmitting synchronically and diachronically—to his own age, and to future ages—only what is “really lifegiving.” And yet he performs this aesthetic function unconsciously, “in the order of grace” (MS, 249). Thus Pater manages simultaneously to imagine an individual power to shape the course of history, while at the same time granting to the movements of the Zeitgeist an independent and primary force. Pater’s notion of diaphaneity defines the role of a cultured but otherwise unremarkable individual might play in the vast movements of historical change. His activity is invisible, for it consists in the internalization (and thus the transmission) of cultural forces surrounding him. Like the “receptacles” of Pater’s “Preface” to The Renaissance, the transparent hero is the site of forces passing through him, and thus this character type participates in Pater’s revision of the notion of “content.”

He does not “make history” as the types recognized by “the world”—kings, saints, artists—are conventionally understood to do, but he does “make” history, for he selectively internalizes and transmits what is “really lifegiving” in the “established order of things.” Pater is involved in a paradoxical project: bringing into visibility the important shaping function of a character who is by definition—by the world’s definition—invisible. His fundamental assumption is that historical change has not taken place exactly in the way “the world” would say. Thus we can see that the play of visibility and invisibility set in motion by the figure of diaphaneity suggests a critique of conventional historical retrospection. Through the character of Diaphaneité, Pater considers not only the aesthetic shaping of history-in-the-making, but also the retrospectively aesthetic procedures of history-writing. In other words, through the character under discussion, Pater works out a theory of historical fiction.

When he comes to embody Diaphaneité as Marius the Epicurean, Pater manages to lend that character the full paradoxical blend of visibility and invisibility to the retrospective eye. Pater’s Marius is not remembered in received historical records, yet he is personally involved with the figures who are memorialized from his age. To this
extent he is the typical protagonist of historical fiction, one of whose generic premises is that it makes visible a portion of the past which has become invisible within the scope of present memory. This sort of fiction purports to go "behind the scenes" of received history to show the lives of unremembered characters who nevertheless had an effect on the events of monumental history. But Pater's characterization is particularly interesting in that the very sort of historical efficacy imagined for Marius depends upon his near-invisibility from the point of view of traditional history. Transmission of "what is really lifegiving" in the "established order of things" is an activity that by definition (here again, by the world's conventional definition) takes place behind the scenes.

Marius becomes amanuensis to Marcus Aurelius, so he is fictively responsible for the literal transmission of the emperor's words (as he is in a less direct sense responsible for the transmission of the anonymous *Pervigilium Veneris*, fictively attributed to Flavian in the novel). But his more important act of transmission is a more figurative one. In a tour-de-force of passive activity, Marius becomes a Christian at the end of the novel. That closing action is famously more done to him than done by him. Marius's only real "activity" is to make himself perfectly receptive to the forces of his age. He feels "all sorts of affinities" for the new religion: he is attracted to Cornelius, the Christian knight; and he has chosen to go to the church in Cecilia's house. But at his death, "in the moments of his extreme helplessness," he receives the Host and is made a Christian, not exactly against his will, but crucially without his will having been consulted [ME II, 224]. After his death the early Christians count him as a Christian martyr. Let us say, then, that he is swept up in the most important historical change taking place at the time. Thus, at his death Marius represents the vast number of unremembered converts who made up a historical "movement," but more important, he represents the force of the time-spirit moving through him into the Christian era. In both senses his invisibility to traditional historical retrospection indicates the "spiritual" nature of fundamental historical change.

In this regard, it is important to Pater's theory that the figure of Marius represents a type, for this is one way of suggesting the representative spirit of an age, embodied in concrete but generalized form.

Marius is imagined to be like many others of his age who are no longer remembered, and thus he represents the vast number of cultured individuals who invisibly accomplish the work of historical transmission. Pater’s unspoken Hegelian assertion is that the real forces of historical change are not the kings and warriors, or even the artists and writers, but an invisible, spiritual force of which those persons are merely the concrete representatives. In the transparency of this character, and his resultant invisibility to “the world,” lies his historical efficacy. His effectuality, in other words, depends precisely upon his ineffectuality in the conventional sense.

The premise that a novel is recording the history of an unremarkable character (or a remarkable character who is nevertheless not recognized by the world for being remarkable) is a familiar technique of literary realism. What is invisible to traditional history is made visible in the novel’s ordinary characters and actions. Pater takes this premise of realism to its extreme (as George Eliot does in certain cases) by delineating characters whose rarefied sensitivity indicates that great forces are passing through them but whose very sensitivity at the same time renders them passive. Instead of pretending to actual historicity, realism is based on the principle of analogy or typicality. The realistic novel presents characters who are like many others, and so it presumes to give detailed, individualized portraits of general phenomena. Pater alludes in “Diaphaneité” to the author of Romola (MS, 249), and we might usefully compare Pater’s representational strategy here with George Eliot’s paradoxical claim to write the history of the very sort of character whose history, according to the usual definition of “historical,” would always remain unwritten.

The “Finale” to Middlemarch tells us that the influence of Dorothea Brooke was “incalculably diffusive” and that “the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts, and... half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited

tombs.” Dorothea, too, is elaborately constructed as a type in the “Prelude” to that novel. Diachronically she is compared to Saint Theresa, and synchronically to all the other “later-born Theresas” of her own age who were “helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul.” Like Pater, Eliot is concerned with the modern absence of a “given” order, of received knowledge, of recognized types, and with their replacement by relative ones. As it does in Pater, Eliot’s move out of a religious context and into a secular, historical context highlights the aesthetic value of her character’s typicality, and in both cases the secularization-effect is in part dependent on the fiction that an invisible, spiritual phenomenon has been made visible. The character of Pater’s transparent hero, “like the religious life, . . . is a paradox in the world,” for it is precisely in the world, but not of it (MS, 249).

The paradoxical and fictive presumption to represent what “in fact” is invisible has particular implications for these writers’ views of historical change. It signals their commitment to a gradualism so extreme that at any present moment change cannot even be perceived. Thus both Eliot and Pater are able to embrace change as a positive value while at the same time maintaining a fundamental conservatism. In “Diaphaneitê,” for example, Pater conveys a complex attitude toward historical change. On the one hand, he is wistfully conservative, remarking that “after all progress is a kind of violence” (MS, 252). The type in question may contribute to the regeneration of the world in part because it is “not disquieted by the desire for change” (248). But on the other hand, “its wistfulness and a confidence in perfection . . . makes it love the lords of change” (MS, 251). “Also the type must be one discontented with society as it is” (MS, 254).

The contradiction in these attitudes is resolved in a strategic and paradoxical conception of historical change, made possible by the passive activity of the transparent hero, for “in this nature revolutionism” is transvalued, “softened, harmonised, subdued as by distance” (MS, 252). In Pater’s view, change can be regenerative only if it is “softened,” if it takes place “without any struggle at all” (MS, 249). When viewed through the present actions of this character, it is evanescent, “inexpressible,” at any moment practically invisible. Taken as a matter of faith, historical change does not impose its confusing sense of difference in the present, it is always taking place so gradually that it cannot be seen clearly and graphically except in retrospect. And of course in retrospect it is effectively “subdued as by distance.”

The conclusion of Pater’s essay looks forward to the future efficacy
of this character type, who represents a "natural prophecy of what the next generation will appear": "A majority of such would be the regeneration of the world" (MS, 254). This idea of the future, envisioned precisely as regeneration, is another sign of the value of conservation in Pater's view of historical change. It is a prophetic conservatism like Carlyle's, which opens toward the future by passionately transmitting the past. Here again, the notion that the Diaphaneité is a character type becomes important, for its paradoxical blend of unconscious self-consciousness reminds Pater at once of historical revival and Platonic reminiscence:

It is like the reminiscence of a forgotten culture that once adorned the mind; as if the mind of one Φιλοσόφος πότε μετέπωκε fallen into a new cycle, were beginning its spiritual progress over again, but with a certain power of anticipating its stages. (MS, 250)

In other words, it is the type, of Pater's poetics of revival. His clear statement of metaphorical distinction keeps this character from evanescing into the realm of mythic recurrence: it is merely "like" reminiscence, "as if" fallen into an new cycle. But at the same time, this passage reminds us that typicality can become a mode of mythic characterization, within certain conditions. Later in Part Three I argue that Pater manages in his historical fiction to balance historical specificity with spiritual or mythic recurrence. That balance is registered in the dominance of a Christian, historical sense of the type over a Platonic, allegorical sense. For now, however, it is important to see this mythic tendency in the characterization of the hero. In Pater's historical fiction, the central character is more prone to lose the distinction of historical "novelty" than is the background within which he is represented.

"Diaphaneité" articulates the theory of characterization which Pater practices in Marius the Epicurean. The hero of that novel is transparent to his culture, the "medium" through which pass the voices of his age. Invisible though Marius is to conventional history, Pater envisions his central figure as most truly "nodus et vinculum mundi,

16. Monsman's first study of Pater's fiction, Pater's Portraits, emphasizes this important element of "mythic pattern." Because he ties his notion of "pattern" to the specific myths of Apollo and Dionysus, Monsman misses the full abstraction of Pater's tendency in this direction. But my main difference from Monsman in this case is in seeing Pater's attraction to mythic pattern as merely one pole of a dialectic, the other pole of which is historical specificity—what I am calling in this chapter "historical novelty."
the bond or copula of the world” (R, 40). In Marius, Pater works out a fictional form in which the central character becomes the pivot-point of an elaborately recursive play with backgrounds and foregrounds. Thus the fictional form of Marius the Epicurean is another example of Pater’s figure of relief. For in one sense the transparent hero is represented in the foreground, and the reader sees through him into the colorful multiplicity of the second century, but in another sense the consciousness of Marius is the background against which the panorama of the past is displayed. On the one hand, historical specificity is defined in this novel as a matter of background, against which Marius’s consciousness is thrown into relief. But on the other hand, Marius’s consciousness is the background within which alone the past can be transmitted and thus in retrospect revived or thrown into relief. The elaborate working of this figure of relief on the level of the novel’s total form is only one of the important ways in which Marius the Epicurean is a magisterial example of Pater’s modern art of aesthetic historicism.

2 · Autobiography of the Zeitgeist

The point has been made many times that the character of Marius the Epicurean is a recognizable mask for Pater’s own “epicurean” sensibility. This particular connection of the character of Marius to Pater himself is usually made in order to suggest a palinodic motive for the composition of the novel. In 1877 Pater dropped the “Conclusion” from his second edition of The Renaissance, and when he restored it to the third edition in 1888, three years after the publication of Marius the Epicurean, he added the following note of explanation:

This brief “Conclusion” was omitted in the second edition of this book, as I conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall. On the whole, I have thought it best to reprint it here, with some slight changes which bring it closer to my original

17. Monsman makes a similar point and extends it generally to several of Pater’s “visionary texts” in his Walter Pater’s Art of Autobiography (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980). He calls attention to Pater’s “multireflexive interplay between inner and outer textual levels” and associates Pater’s textual strategy with techniques of postmodernism (pp. 48, 5).