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

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could commit his own most fortunate moments, . . . one strong enough to retain them even though he forgot, in whose more vigorous consciousness they might subsist for ever, beyond that mere quickening of capacity which was all that remained of them in himself! . . . To-day at least, in the peculiar clearness of one privileged hour, he seemed to have apprehended that in which the experiences he valued most might find, one by one, an abiding-place. (ME II, 69–71)

The projection of a transcendent power of memory stabilizes the self, but it in turn has been generated “exponentially” on the model of that very self. Of course, we have again the “abiding-place” that Pater often calls the House Beautiful. In this ideal vision the material world does fade and “dissolv[e] away all around him,” but Marius experiences that dissolution as hope and joy, not as solipsistic panic. His joy is expressed in a (muted) figure of the Apocalypse; as the “prison-wall” of the material world falls away, “he felt a quiet hope, a quiet joy dawning faintly . . . like the break of day over some vast prospect with the ‘new city’ . . . in the midst of it” (ME II, 70).

The specular structure of Marius the Epicurean cannot be fully appreciated unless we also see that Pater has thematized its construction as part of Marius’s story. Not only does the narrator look back toward Marius as if toward an earlier phase of his own identity, but Marius also projects from himself as his “divine companion” the vision of an ideal and transcendent retrospective capacity, which is figured in this novel by its narrator. In this case, the narrator concludes by calmly stating that this moment of vision passed, that Marius never again felt this degree of concentrated focus, and that he was not essentially changed by this experience. Marius passes on, to experience a realization of his vision in “actual things,” and from the point of view of the next chapter, this moment seems chiefly preparatory. But the moment is preserved, even as it is annulled, by a narrator within whose capacious memory all of Marius’s moments find rest and continuity, a figure of the “more vigorous consciousness” within which they “subsist for ever.”

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At the moment of his death, the central character of Pater’s novel remains only passively committed to Christianity, but the novel as a whole is more actively, though ambivalently, engaged. That complex
relation, as we have seen in Pater's earlier work, is in no sense a direct embrace of Christianity; but neither is it a full disengagement, for Pater preserves on the level of aesthetic form what he rejects on the level of positive belief. He turns the figures of Christianity toward his own end, using them to structure his representation of historical and aesthetic development as narrative form.

Pater had a clearly developed sense of the "aesthetic" residue left behind when a creed becomes outworn as positive belief and can be regarded in its historical value alone. He explained this in the earliest published version of his essay on Coleridge, an essay that deeply laments Coleridge's inability to change with the times:

Religious belief, the craving for objects of belief, may be refined out of our hearts, but they must leave their sacred perfume, their spiritual sweetness behind.¹

In Pater's novel, as in his Renaissance essays, the nostalgia for "objects" is renounced in favor of representations. Pater finds in typological strategies of narration a systematic technique for preserving not the "objects" themselves but the memory of those objects. His narrative could be described in this sense as the ritual repetition of inherited forms whose value is thereby shifted from the "objective" or positive realm of belief to the secondary, "transfigured" realm of the aesthetic. These forms or patterns are one sort of "sacred perfume" that remains as a refined testament to the continuing presence of an attenuated, nostalgic, secularized, and aesthetic form of belief; Pater has an abiding "faith" in the shape of historical time itself and in the aesthetic types that embody its spirit. Typological methods of interpreting history, of interpreting individual experience, and of interpreting texts were prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century, and those methods inform Pater's novel in each of its several dimensions: in its reading of historical development, in Marius's reading of his own experience, and in our reading of Marius the Epicurean.

In fact, the general issue of interpretation unites these several levels of the novel's form, and its various narrative strategies as well.² As we

¹. Westminster Review, n.s. 29 (January 1866), 126–27. See my discussion of "the historicity of myth," above, Part Two, sec. 3.

². Crane first advanced this argument when he chose Marius to represent one of his three categories of plot formation, the "plot of thought," whose structure is governed by the synthesizing principle of thought, idea, or theme, rather than by action or character. See R. S. Crane, "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of 'Tom Jones,'" in Critics and Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 66–67. By using the term "interpretation" for this synthesizing principle, I emphasize the fact that the "thought" which synthesizes any particular "plot of thought" will have its own particular ideological coherence.
have seen, the narrative pointedly establishes the familiar analogy between individual and cultural development. The narrator establishes, and keeps alive in readers’ minds through continual reiteration, a pervasive historical analogy between the culture of Victorian England in the 1880s and second-century Rome in the Age of the Antonines. But that is only its most obvious point, for the narrative commentary is obsessed with the principle of historical analogy in general, with relations of similarity and difference among all ages of cultural history. Together, Marius and the nineteenth-century commentary engage in exercises of memory and analogy from their vastly different points of time; together they contribute to a dense layering of temporalities in the narrative.

An important narrative strategy emphasizes these analogies and the resulting shifts between various layers of time: between prospection beyond the tenuous present tense of the represented action, and retrospection, backward in time, sometimes from Marius’s point of view and sometimes from the narrator’s. Many readers have complained that very little dramatization occurs in present narrative time: very few words are directly spoken; nothing “happens.” Each event is first mediated by the consciousness of Marius and then again by the narrating voice; no event appears sui generis, isolated in its own present. But perhaps as much is gained by this strategy as is lost. “Foreshadowing” is a suggestive term for what goes on in the opening chapters, where the triumph of Christianity is premised outright in the opening phrase:

As, in the triumph of Christianity, the old religion lingered latest in the country, and died out at last as but paganism—the religion of the villagers, before the advance of the Christian Church; so, in an earlier century, it was in places remote from town-life that the older and purer forms of paganism itself had survived the longest. [ME I, 3]

Paganism too, it seems, had its own “pastoral” past—before the advent of Christianity—to which we readers of the novel now nostalgically look back. The cultural development of paganism can be seen, in “historic retrospect,” to foreshadow the later cultural development of Christianity. Paganism was “secularized,” incorporated, and transcended historically to become Christianity. In other words, the very term “foreshadowing” should remind us that even our simplest critical vocabulary acknowledges the debt of secular narrative to typological conventions, but the simpler modern term merely represents a residue of the complex system to which it alludes.
As the first sentence of chapter 1 predicts the outcome of the novel's major cultural development, chapter 2 anticipates the outcome of Marius's personal development and the end of the novel's plot. Marius's temperament kept him serious and dignified amid the Epicurean speculations which in after years much engrossed him... and made him anticipate all his life long as a thing toward which he must carefully train himself, some great occasion of self-devotion, such as really came, that should consecrate his life, and, it might be, its memory with others, as the early Christian looked forward to martyrdom at the end of his course, as a seal of worth upon it. (ME I, 18)

"Suspense" has no place in a novel whose most general and fundamental, as well as local and intimate, narrative strategies are so deeply prefigurative. Overt narrative clues make it clear that these early experiences prepare both Marius and the reader for later experiences. Their very value lies largely in their anticipatory function; we begin to look for later, analogous experiences to unfold. What happens is always less important than how it happens and what it will come to mean later in the narrative, when it is echoed in a later stage of a developmental "series." Events come to the reader already interpreted, in other words, presented as they will later be seen—both by Marius and by the nineteenth-century narrator—to be significant.

The density of this interpretive mediation and of the temporal layering related to it must be called to account, and as the term "foreshadowing" suggests, my account will be typological. Pater's literary use of typology is neither orthodox nor consistent throughout the text, but its logic is pervasive, and indications in the text argue that its logic is applicable to a reading of the novel. Most important, some thorny problems and apparent contradictions, which have plagued readers of this great novel, resolve themselves under its light: the division of narrative attention between Marius's development and that of his culture, for example, or the troublesome coexistence of cyclical and conservative with linear and progressive schemes of historical development, both seemingly endorsed by the novel. Finally, understanding Pater's use of typology will help us propose a new solution to the perennial problems raised by the novel's ambiguous, deeply ambivalent, and yet profoundly coherent closure.

On all these levels, then, *Marius* bears the "sacred perfume" of Christian narrative, one instance of the way forms of thought may be said to go "underground," where they lead a "buried life," to use Matthew Arnold's phrase, and Pater's: "The spiritual forces of the past, which have prompted and informed the culture of a succeeding age, live, indeed, within that culture, but with an absorbed, underground life" (R, 198). While not assenting to Christianity on the level of doctrine or belief, Pater may be seen still to appropriate and to preserve its principles of organizing human time, on the level of narrative form.

Typology above all asserts a certain interpretation of the shape of time and its ways of unfolding in history, a vision in which earlier events are seen in retrospect to have prefigured later, structurally analogous ones. Similarly, present events, persons, institutions, and texts may be seen prophetically, as prefigurations of greater fulfillments in the future, higher developments of the "type." Most important, the type is realistic, absolutely concrete in the historical sense, and this fundamental feature serves to distinguish typological relations from symbolic or allegorical ones. But before considering the profound appeal of the typological vision of history for the late nineteenth century, perhaps the case for Pater's familiarity with typological methods should be made, and it can be made very briefly.

From the earliest centuries of the Christian era, typology has developed as a "rhetoric of high spiritual authority," a venerable array of techniques designed simultaneously to represent the phenomenal world and to gesture toward the transcendent, designed to mediate the claims of positive, historical knowledge and the belief in a force that is beyond history and capable of ordering or directing it. Auerbach's seminal 1944 essay "Figura" noted that figural interpretations of Scripture were prevalent in most European countries until the eighteenth century, when they markedly faded from view. But a major retrieval of the method took place in the nineteenth century as one expression of the age's widespread interest in various historical methods of exegesis, a retrieval whose full dimensions have been coming

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to light in Victorian studies of the past fifteen years or so. Not only renewed attention but also a more fully self-conscious attention seems to have been devoted to the method in the Victorian era: the language of types and figures had been common in English ever since the late medieval period, but it is astonishing that the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives 1845 as the first date for "typology"—that is, the self-consciously systematic "study of symbolic representation," the "-ology," the logos of the types.

Whether Pater knew it as a systematic method or not, as the modern comprehensive term "typology" suggests, he was surely acquainted with its procedures, as well as its spiritual (and aesthetic, or literary) rationale. Christian typological thinking was practiced at least as early as the Pauline epistles and certainly by the earliest church fathers (Tertullian, Origen, Augustine), all of whom Pater knew well and all of whom he mentions in *Marius the Epicurean*. His deep interest in high church ritual, his readings of ecclesiastical history, and his role in religious and intellectual controversy at Oxford are well-known and well-documented. But he could easily have assimilated the method through his native literary tradition, whose typologically inspired writers include Milton, Herbert, and Bunyan, among many others.

Pater's immediate literary environment, too, provided authoritative models, for figural methods of representation in literature and painting were fashionable as early as the 1840s and 1850s. Several recent studies have demonstrated the role of typology in the works of major figures of the period: the "artistical-scientific-historical" vision of Carlyle, especially in *Past and Present*; the Tractarian doctrines of Analogy and Reserve represented in the poetry of Keble, Williams, and Newman, as well as their concern with the historical development of Christian practice; the moral aesthetic of Ruskin, especially in volume 2 of *Modern Painters*; the figural realism of Pre-Raphaelite painting during the years of the first Brotherhood (1846–53); the temporal shifts of Rossetti's sonnets; the evolutionary vision of transcendence in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*; and the secularized hagiographies of George Eliot's fiction. Such pervasive use of figural techniques by writers and artists who anticipated a large audience argues the currency of the

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7. The initial study was George P. Landow's *Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971], followed by Herbert L. Sussman's *Fact into Figure: Typology in Carlyle, Ruskin, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* [Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979], and George P. Landow's *William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979].

"language of types" in mid-nineteenth-century discourse. Pater might well have expected his figures to be recognized.

In the earlier part of the nineteenth century, before this documented revival in the mid-Victorian period, the literary history of typology is somewhat obscure. But typological thought seems to reemerge first as symbolic, static, and ahistorical—that is, not strictly typological in the Christian sense at all, but in the Neoplatonic sense, as, for example, in Wordsworth’s "Types and Symbols of Eternity" from the Simplon Pass episode of *The Prelude*, or Carlyle's *Zeitbild*, or "time-figure," from *Sartor Resartus*. In two senses, the Victorians historicized these universal types: they reclaimed the historically based Christian reference of the types and figures and used them to interpret secular history.

Illuminating as it is, much of the recent study of Victorian typology is needlessly limited. Its focus has remained primarily on the strengths of the method as a poetic or pictorial mode of symbolic figuration and not as a narrative or explicitly temporal representation. Possibly because attention to Victorian typology began with a study of Ruskin (who himself set a strong precedent for using his method as a key to symbolic significance), typological criticism of the period still largely concentrates on the interpretation of visual art or on the type as figurative image, not on the type figurally unfolding in time.

When a Victorian artist uses certain charged images, such as strayed sheep or a young boy in a carpenter's shop, that artist expects the biblical allusion to place his work in a context of scriptural analogues. He may allude to a story or cycle of stories, but his representation translates narrative into image. On the one hand, typological interpretations of images often reduce the complexities of the method to a dictionary of types that can be read by substituting one term for another; this sort of simplification can lead to an allegorization of history in which its linear dimension disappears in easy conflations of one age with another and its concreteness evaporates too, as a result. On the other hand, types seen simply as images can suggest, through their allusion to a biblical story, the basis for interpreting a scene morally or tropologically, but this sort of typological reading also easily succumbs to the pressure of allegory (as in Ruskin's famous interpretations of Tintoretto, for example). Either sort of interpretation tends to be by virtue of the substitution of one term for another.

“symbolic” but not fully typological. A fully typological interpretation must be grounded in historical actuality, must preserve the integrity of separate historical events, and must not allow the linear, “horizontal” dimension of history to disappear in allegorical, “vertical,” spiritualizing or symbolic substitutions.

Any use of typology, however “symbolic” or cursory, implies analogies backward and forward in time. But in one sense at least, the typological organization of narrative time can transcend its uses as a mode of visual symbolism. Typology has the further power to represent movement or change in time, to embody the dialectic of anticipation and retrospection, prefiguration and fulfillment. In narrative, the typological progression can be enacted in narrative sequence; analogical relations across time can unfold in time, as a series of progressive fulfillments. As narrative form, typology can become not only a lexicon of types and symbols but also a grammar; not only symbolic but also fully historical; not only a rhetoric but also a logic of temporality.

Can it be argued that the text of Marius presents us with a legitimate occasion to read typologically? Then, where can we see typological modes of organization in its narrative form? The two questions must be taken up together, beginning with basic guidelines limiting the cases for which a typological reading would be necessary, illuminating, or at least justified. The literary use of typology, writes A. C. Charity, simply expresses a particular view of history and its workings in literature. It need not signal an exclusively Christian orientation, but may form “a basis for conversation between the Christian and the ‘humanist’ writer or scholar.” A legitimate discussion of typology in a work of literature depends simply on “the actual presentation of the idea of prefigurations in biblical and non-biblical literature, rather than the discursive theoretical study of this idea . . . wherever . . . a writer has attributed significance to an apprehended analogy between different events,” but “only in so far as the texts themselves can be reasonably viewed as expressing, or involving, or presenting . . . a concept of prefiguration and fulfillment.”10 In other words, we must find relatively explicit signs in the text that such a reading is called for—what Charity calls the “actual presentation” of prefiguration and fulfillment—if we are not to be like overzealous exegetes who

allegorically read preconceived patterns "into" the text, which they then take to refer to a reality "outside" the representations of the text. And that "actual presentation" must take place within an explicitly Christian context of discourse—not necessarily a context of avowed belief or uncomplicated doctrinal orthodoxy, but a Christian context nonetheless—in order for an author's use of typological structures to be distinguished both from the analogical structures of many (if not most) secular histories and also from similar proleptic structures in more strictly secular literature.¹¹

The cultural context of Marius is certainly Christian: for all Marius's ambivalence about embracing Christianity as belief, the thematic content of the novel is largely devoted to the rise of Christianity as a historical force. Pater's use of a specifically typological form is another of his characteristically ambivalent and ironic secularizations. Marius was planned as the first of a trilogy of novels; each novel of the trilogy would be set in a different historical period, but each would deal with "the same problems, under altered historical conditions."¹² We have already seen that Marius posited the "same problems" in nineteenth-century England and second-century Rome. The second novel, the unfinished Gaston de Latour, began to examine the "same problems" during the religious wars of the late sixteenth century in France, and the third was to have dealt with England in the late eighteenth century. In a letter to Violet Paget ("Vernon Lee"), Pater explained that his trilogy would deal with the development of a "sort of religious phase possible for the modern mind... the condition of which phase it is the main object of my design to convey."¹³ Thus Marius was ultimately to have been merely the first part of a much larger project, which in its entirety would more clearly have illustrated stages in the development of this modern "religious phase."

That trilogy, had it been completed, would have demonstrated (in the familiar three stages) that the church as a historical institution had already changed a great deal over the course of centuries; it would have implied that both the church and the individual consciousness had always faced the "same problems, under altered historical condi-

¹¹. Robert Hollander's morphology of secular medieval literary adaptations of typology is helpful here, though Pater's use spans several of his categories. See his "Typology and Secular Literature: Some Medieval Problems and Examples," in Miner, Literary Uses of Typology, pp. 3–19. I have derived the criteria invoked here both from Charity and to some extent from the implications of Hollander's categorization. His discussion of "Christian typology" proper takes a modern novel (Dostoevsky's The Idiot) as its chief example.


¹³. Ibid., letter 78, p. 52; see also Evans's note 2. Pater is responding to the argument of her essay "The Responsibilities of Unbelief."
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...; and it would have directly illustrated, in the last novel of the trilogy, the exact nature of a new "religious phase" possible for the modern mind. But Marius, even though it is but one term of that projected three-part analogy, offers the same comforts to the reader who, following its internal order, learns to read analogically. Reassurance of this sort was in high demand in the novel's contemporary climate of reception. Pater's contemporary W. H. Mallock, for example, explained the tremendous popularity of Mrs. Ward's Robert Elsmere (1888), the story of a doubting Anglican clergyman plagued by conclusions drawn from his reading of Darwin and Renan, as an "expression of the devout idea that the essence of Christianity will somehow survive its doctrines." That remark could apply with equal justice to Marius, which proposes a secularized faith in historical process itself.

Pater's projection of this novel as the first of a series not only identifies its thematic interest in Christianity as historical, not doctrinal, but also suggests why a typological form would be particularly significant. The typological analogies established by the trilogy would imply not only that "the modern phase" retained essential features of Christianity, but also that it retained those features as parts of a more highly developed form. Pater's formal motives, in other words, seem ambivalent: both conservative (to represent modern, relativizing thought as incorporate within the larger Christian pattern) and progressive (to show outmoded forms as accommodating to the modern system by which they were superseded). The spiritualizing, conservative element of typological thought attends to analogies between historically disparate events, thereby preserving their "sameness," the steadfastness in their deep structure over time; and on the other hand, the historicizing, progressive element attends to their difference, to their change or growth over time.

The chief use of this exegetical system has always been to preserve whole dispensations and whole literatures from receding into the past as outworn and useless when a new order supersedes them, and at the same time to preserve (unlike allegory) the specific historicity of each one. Thus, early Christian typology, developed over centuries of prac-

tice, preserved the "Old" Testament by redefining its pivotal events and figures as prefigurative of the "New." The bondage in Egypt and the events of the Exodus, for example, were reinterpreted as prefigurations of the Passion and the Resurrection. Late medieval and Renaissance typologists, then, admitted pagan and classical figures to the Christian literary community "retroactively," seeing them as predictive of Christian virtues and as striving unconsciously toward the Christian dispensation. Thus Dante admits Statius to Purgatory, imagining that he had been converted to Christianity by Virgil's Fourth Eclogue (Purgatorio 21–22). And seventeenth-century Puritan typologists, saving not only the past but also their own present, read contemporary political heroes as fulfilling both biblical and classical types, as in Marvell's treatment of Cromwell, for example.

These generalizations are meant only to suggest the gradual secularization of typology itself; once secular history becomes the province of typologists, any historical analogy between an earlier event and a later event has the potential to be interpreted typologically. These stages of literary secularization were fulfilled, so to speak, in the nineteenth century, when typology was used simultaneously to preserve Christian modes of thought and signification and at the same time to figure forth modes more "developed" or "evolved" than the Christian modes. In this ambience of comforting ambivalence, Christian forms of figuration were used nostalgically to express the faith that even though Christianity was being superseded through historical process, the essence of Christianity might survive the passage of its doctrines, might be preserved in the shape and structure of historical time. Of course, the system depends on time being seen as shape or structure, and that is a function of retrospection.

In determining the legitimacy of a typological reading, then, context is all-important, a construal of "context" that goes beyond the explicitly Christian content of the plot of Pater's novel. But the Christian content of the novel alone would legitimate a typological reading, if one should be suggested by "the actual presentation of the idea of prefiguration and fulfillment" in the text itself. And here we may turn to Pater's explicit uses of both typological concepts and typological techniques, at the level of form where concept and technique inextricably blend and reinforce each other.