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

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projects Marius’s internal “dialogue” outward, externalizes and fict­ionally imagines it as interchange between characters (though actual dialogue is notoriously absent). In this novel the central character may be known—and learns to know himself—through the “company” he keeps.

6 · Christian Historicism

All Marius’s “sensations and ideas” are arranged in these narrative sequences, which I have called typological ladders. Marius climbs, step by step, through earthly embodiments ever closer to spiritual fulfillment. Pater emphasizes this serial structure by multiplying it on every level of the plot. Critics have sometimes missed its organization entirely because of the deeply textured surface of the narrative, the associative procedures of Marius’s consciousness, and the nineteenth-century narrative commentary. But these mediating layers of texture, though much less schematic than the typological ladders, nevertheless keep the typological dialectic active in other ways.

The nineteenth-century commentary reinforces the novel’s serial organization by repeatedly calling attention to the structure of historical analogy. But at the same time the narrator emphasizes the secularized transformations that characterize typology in a specifically nineteenth-century vision. And finally, this narrative commentary complicates the forward motion of the typological ladders through its retrospective stance, shifting rapidly back and forth between memory and prefiguration, nostalgia and anticipation, making the dialectical movement of typological historiography and narration an activity of the text on a more intimate level.

Thus, in Part the Fourth, interpreting the mature ritual of the early church, Pater directly articulates the "law of development" under which earlier, historically specific forms are seen in retrospect as prefiguring later and more highly developed but structurally analogous forms. He figures the Christian church as both the embodiment and the executor of that law:

The faithful were bent less on the destruction of the old pagan temples than on their conversion to a new and higher use . . . Already, in accordance with . . . maturer wisdom, the church of the "Minor Peace" had adopted many of the graces of pagan feeling and pagan custom; as being indeed a living creature, taking up, transforming, accommodating still more closely to the human heart what of right belonged to it. In this way an obscure synagogue was expanded into the catholic church . . . Ritual, in fact, like all other elements of religion, must grow and cannot be made—grow by the same law of development which prevails everywhere else, in the moral as in the physical world. . . . In a generous eclecticism . . . and as by some providential power within her, she gathers and serviceably adopts, as in other matters so in ritual, one thing here, another there, from various sources—Gnostic, Jewish, Pagan—to adorn and beautify the greatest act of worship the world has seen. (ME II, 124–27)

This "law of development" fosters larger, more complex, "eclectic," and humanistic institutions. Indeed, the young church represents an "expanded" order as well as a more human one, "accommodating still more closely to the human heart what of right belonged to it." These are secularizing principles, approving human rather than divine right, conflating the moral and the physical worlds, regarding a cultural institution as a natural, "living creature." And the notion here that religion "must grow and cannot be made" emphatically challenges the orthodox conception of divinity, opposing historical evolution to immediate creation *ex nihilo.*

Pater here attempts nothing less than the synthesis of a providential understanding with an evolutionary understanding of historical change. This powerful and paradoxical attempt is profoundly indicative of the imaginative trials of the late nineteenth century. In Pater's synthesis, cultural forms are simultaneously seen to be the expression of a providential order—to be shaped from without—and to grow organically from within. Pater rejects organicism as a theory of aesthetic creation, as we have seen, because it does not do justice to the supreme self-consciousness of the creative artist. But he finds it more congenial as a theory of historical change, through which even aesthetic objects are continually recreated. Even so, Pater's theory of
historical development is not purely organicist, but a complex synthesis that allows him to preserve the divine order without personalizing its "artist"; to reconceive the notion of a transcendent creator who is immanent in history at times of periodic intervention, as a creative power internalized within a shapely, periodic process; and therefore to conceive divinity neither as an external presence nor as an absence, but as an internal force, a spirit no longer beyond but within creation. Thus, in the passage above, the divine function has been internalized by the evolving historical institution of the church, and its paradoxical status is registered in the tension of a metaphor: "as by some providential power within her."

That metaphor testifies to the creative power of the narrative artist, who may at first be suspected of usurping the place of the divine "artist." The divinely creative or "aesthetic" function does not necessarily disappear when God "disappears," but its continued visibility depends, in other novels, on the novelist overtly assuming the role of "providence" in his fictional world or, in this novel, on the novelist assuming the role of one who sees divine order still evident in the "actual" world. The voiced commentary of this novel does not represent the "maker" of this fictional "world," only its historian and interpreter. What historical process has internalized, this novelist externalizes again, bringing out of the vast historical continuum one representative age, typical of the times when culture renews itself. The narrator does not presume to replace the divine artist, but to perform an exegetical function. Culture, not Nature, is the great Book of inscribed revelation to be interpreted; or rather, Pater's synthesis of organic and providential models has the added effect or reinterpreting the cultural as the "natural" growth.

The narrative ostensibly presumes to represent history, mimetically to reproduce the shape of something already shaped. Though this presumption is disingenuous (as we shall see), it helps us specify the particular role the nineteenth-century narrative commentator takes toward developments in the second-century world Marius inhabits. Those developments take place in stages describing the progress from a state of nature, through a "worldly" state of culture, to a higher state of communal self-consciousness in which culture becomes "natural" once more. While the narrative structure represents the shape of historical time, the nineteenth-century narrator represents the higher

state of awareness in which historical process becomes conscious of itself. In other words, the narrator of this novel does not adopt the role of providence, external and prior to creation, but again represents the creative function absorbed within history itself.

Accordingly, the narrative commentary reinforces the novel's typological structure with local, more intimate narrative devices that operate on the level of the sentence. The formal dynamic of prefiguration and fulfillment is profoundly a part of this narrative vision. Let us look in detail at one example from the passage we have already been examining. Again, Pater figures the early Christian church as an embodiment of historical process:

Gathering, from a richer and more varied field of sound than had remained for him, those old Roman harmonies, some notes of which Gregory the Great, centuries later, and after generations of interrupted development, formed into the Gregorian music, she was already . . . the house of song—of a wonderful new music and poesy. As if in anticipation of the sixteenth century, the church was becoming "humanistic," in an earlier, and unimpeachable Renaissance. Singing . . . burst forth . . . the Jewish psalter, inherited from the synagogue, turning now, gradually, from Greek into Latin—broken Latin, into Italian, as the ritual use of the rich, fresh, expressive vernacular superseded the earlier authorised language of the Church. (ME II, 125)

Pater has placed the outer limits of his narrating perspective far beyond the temporal domain of the novel. This vertiginously "long view" retrospectively encompasses not just the second century A.D., but also the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries—indeed, all ages of history up until the present time of Pater's writing.

Within this spacious order, the narrative distinguishes between separate ages, stressing differences in their degrees of development while at the same time emphasizing the structural analogies between them. Thus, from the vantage of present fulfillment in the second century ("gathering . . . "), this passage remembers the prefiguring synagogue (as well as pre-Gregorian music) and anticipates ("centuries later . . . ") further fulfillments of a developed, "humanistic" sort. The very structure of these sentences enacts the typological dialectic of prefiguration and fulfillment. Their temporal layers shift against one another, switching back and forth between prediction and retrospection, preserving several levels of past time at once, reviving them in juxtaposition with the second-century present and with various levels of the historical future beyond that present.
The "future" envisioned here in retrospect will be conscious of the secularizing tendency inherent in history's "law of development," for the humanizing principle of that law, when raised to the level of cultural self-consciousness, will be recognized as "humanistic." The quotation marks emphasize that the principle will know itself as such in the period later to be known as "the" Renaissance, though the sixteenth century is only one renaissance in Pater's historical (and typological) series. Already, in fact, the church is becoming "humanistic," though Pater's quotation marks also ironically call attention to his anachronistic use of that term here. The Christian church itself, then, is a type, prefiguring a later "unimpeachable" Renaissance, Pater's own favorite metaphor for historical palingenesis, a process that always blends the absolutely permanent and the absolutely new. The Christian church embodies the very principles that will eventually lead culture beyond Christianity. That shift will occur not through periodic intervention of the divine in history, but through historically periodic renewal on these Christian principles, renewal that is always a survival or a revival of earlier forms.

Typologists read history as the great Book in which divinity reveals itself, and they read with a certain interpretive will. The search for analogous, progressive stages of development is motivated by the desire to adduce evidence of a divine presence in history, and finding such patterns yields a reassured faith in that presence. Typology, like every other hermeneutic method, participates in this peculiar paradox of interpretation—and gains thereby a "creative" power—that what is sought determines what will be discovered. To establish faith in the divinity within history, in other words, is both the motive for and the inevitable result of this particular method's version of the hermeneutic circle. For this reason, both change and stasis reinforce the typologist's predetermined faith—because divine power may be felt both in the gradualized progress marked by successive fulfillments and also in its apparent opposite, the steadfast, unchanging analogous structure replicated by each stage. There is, then, within the method, an incentive to multiply both difference and similarity, thereby creating a pattern whose greater complexity testifies to the greater presence of divinity within history. A typological novelist who presumes only to be interpreting may in all good faith at the same time be exercising a creative function. In typology, historical interpretation, exegesis of texts, analysis, and aesthetic creation of structure and texture intersect, perpetuating a love of design for its own sake, because signs of power reside in the complications of the design itself.

Typology in this sense always potentially verges on a kind of aestheticism at the same time that it ostensibly remains a purely histori-
cal method. If this line of argument should suggest that in the nine­
teenth century the method could be used self-consciously to unite
historicism and aestheticism—generating at once a historicist aes­
thetic and an aesthetic historicism—it will only emphasize the appeal
of the method for Pater. The spiritual and the aesthetic dimensions of
typology, indeed, are very close. In fact, its self-conscious recognition
of an aesthetic dimension is a part of its versatility. The method
aspires to be an art, not a science of interpretation, a sophisticated
exegetical system in which history may be read aesthetically, as if it
were a text; the typological text may be read as a representation of
history; and all texts may be read historically, like any other cultural
artifacts, in analogical and developmental relation to one another.

7 · Literary History as “Appreciation”

Pater’s novel explores these textual implications of typology and at
the same time calls attention to its own status as literary text. Formal
manifestations of typological thought become more frequent, more
explicit, and more varied in technique as the novel progresses to its
typological denouement, the Christian service in Cecilia’s house. That
crucial chapter, for example, as well as the one before it, is introduced
with biblical epigraphs that themselves interact typologically.

The first, from the Old Testament Book of Joel (2:28), prefigures the
“your old men shall dream dreams” is fulfilled, both literally com­
pleted and transcended, by the structurally analogous addition, creat­
ing an expanded, later textual order that comprehends both: “your old
men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions.”

Epigraphs like these, prompting a typological reading, were common
in the period, especially in the visual arts. But a larger point is at

1. In their biblical form, both verses contain both clauses; the Old Testament verse,
then, is fulfilled by simple repetition within the new context (though the order of
clauses is reversed in Acts 2:17). Pater’s choice to split the verse and divide it between
his two chapters calls attention to its halves as stages in a developmental progression.

2. See Sussman, Fact into Figure, pp. 49, 56. A good example is Millais’s Christ in
the House of His Parents (“The Carpenter’s Shop”), which shows the boy Jesus with a
wound in his hand, prefiguring the stigmata. The painting was originally exhibited with
no title but with the words of Zechariah 13:6: “And one shall say unto him, what are
these wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded
in the house of my friends.”