Transfigured World

Williams, Carolyn

Published by Cornell University Press

Williams, Carolyn.
Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47553

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1844486
be identified simply with the historical Pater. It would be better to insist on the effacement of that individuality, for the lecturer on Plato stages a transparency like that of “Diaphaneità,” transmitting received views with a coherence that gives them aesthetic form.³ It is always worth insisting on the status of Pater’s persona as an aesthetic creation, a figure, for again Pater stages the modern voice as the medium of historical recollection.

1 · Histories of Myth: The Greek Studies

Pater’s analyses of Greek myths are grounded in the historical sense, though they tend finally toward a myth of history. He begins by emphasizing the absolute historicity of myth, interpreting it as the expression of specific, material practices, which he calls “modes of existence” (GS, 10):

Myth is begotten among a primitive people, as they wondered over the life of the thing their hands helped forward, till it became for them a kind of spirit, and their culture of it a kind of worship. (GS, 29)

In this view, religion reflects the material culture of a people; it is expressed in a story, a “projected expression” composite of themselves and their crop in mutual dependency.

Therefore, Pater argues, we should speak not of the religion but of the religions of ancient Greece, each one expressed by its own “sacred representation or interpretation of the whole human experience” (GS, 10).

As the religion of Demeter carries us back to the cornfields and farmsteads of Greece, and places us, in fancy, among a primitive race, in the furrow and beside the granary; so the religion of Dionysus carries us back to its vineyards, and is a monument of the ways and thoughts of people whose days go by beside the winepress, and under the green and purple shadows, and whose material happiness depends on the crop of grapes. . . . That garland of ivy, the aesthetic value of which is so great in the later imagery of Dionysus and his descendents, the leaves of which,

³. Shuter calls for an end to treating Plato and Platonism simply as a stage in the evolution of Pater’s thought, and for an end to treating Pater’s view of Plato as a mask for his own ideas [William F. Shuter, “Pater on Plato: ‘Subjective’ or ‘Sound’?” Prose Studies 5 (1982), p. 215].
floating from his hair, become so noble in the hands of Titian and Tintoret, was actually worn on the head for coolness. (GS, 9–10, 21)

Each “mode of existence” is “peculiar” to a certain race, class, and geographical location, and each myth changes in time as the people’s mode of existence changes. “The wilder people have wilder gods, . . . changing ever with the worshippers in whom they live and move and have their being” (R, 203). Of course, this stress on the absolute historicity of cultural products is the familiar starting-place of Pater’s “historic method.”

In this volume Pater relies on the other principal argument of the “historic method” as well, when he insists that the theory of development is as much the key to “the comparative science of religions” as to any other of the human sciences (GS, 11):

Here again, . . . the idea of development, of degrees, of a slow and natural growth, impeded here, diverted there, is the illuminating thought which earlier critics lacked. (GS, 121–22)

In the Greek Studies, Pater works back through the history of a myth’s development toward the original “mode of existence” that the myth expressed. “We feel our way backwards,” he explains, and we “must be content to follow faint traces” (GS, 111–12). These “traces” lead the “student of origins” toward an original mythic unity that can never be directly grasped or known. Later literary expressions of the original material lend only mediate access to the time when “use and beauty are still undivided” (GS, 197):

Their story went back . . . with unbroken continuity . . . to a past, stretching beyond, yet continuous with, actual memory, in which heaven and earth mingled. (GS, 33)

In other words, Pater conceives prehistoric culture as an originary manifold from which mythic “conceptions” (and later, literature) are articulated by degrees. Even though he places quite a pointed emphasis on the material ground from which myth grows, Pater portrays this

1. Iser points to Pater’s participation here in an anthropological model current in the nineteenth century, which explained myth as a consecration of basic human needs and practices and “reduced all phenomena that claimed to be supernatural or religious to their human origins, as exemplified by Feuerbach’s anthropological reduction of Christianity” (Wolfgang Iser, Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987], p. 107).
ground as forever inaccessible and inarticulate. History is the record of differences and divisions, of growth away from an original mythic unity.

In the *Greek Studies*, Pater develops a theory of literary history which describes the emergence of literature against this prehistoric background. All Greek myths, he claims, develop through the same three phases: an oral, “half-conscious, instinctive” phase, “living from mouth to mouth,” in which concrete features of nature are first seen as symbolic; a written, “conscious, poetical or literary, phase,” in which natural symbols are interpreted as the characters and incidents of narrative; and a self-conscious or “ethical” phase, in which character and plot are reinterpreted as “abstract symbols, because intensely characteristic examples, of moral or spiritual conditions” (*GS*, 91–93). In each phase, then, acts of interpretation generate greater levels of generalization and spirituality than in the former phase. These phases of myth provide yet another formulation of the three-stage romantic dialectic of development. As usual, Pater’s analysis equates the “higher” development with the later, more abstract phase.

How then do mythic stories form and transform themselves? As in *Marius*, Pater offers in the *Greek Studies* both evolutionary and aesthetic explanations of the process. On the one hand, he describes the evolution of myth as “a struggle for life,” in which some myths “never emerged from that first stage of popular conception, or were absorbed by stronger competitors” (*GS*, 113). Stories begin “like other things . . . for which no one in particular is responsible.” In this stage of archaic collectivity, the division between “nature” and “culture” has not yet taken place.

But on the other hand, the mechanism to which Pater ascribes this “natural selection” is clearly not natural at all. Myths that die do so because “they lacked the sacred poet or prophet, and were never remodelled by literature.” In other words, someone in particular is responsible for the survival of a story. To become “fit” enough to “survive,” popular conception must be seized by a poet, a prophet, or a priest-exegete and “remodelled by literature.” This moment of aesthetic responsibility marks the division between nature and culture and the emergence of distinctly divided roles or functions (“poets,” “prophets,” “interpreters”) against the archaic background of communal wholeness. In the *Greek Studies*, Pater manages to balance the claims of both evolutionary and aesthetic explanations by focusing

2. Pater plays here both with Social-Darwinian and Hegelian connotations of “survival.”
toward the mythic moment when “natural” and “cultural” explanations have not fully distinguished themselves from one another. As in Marius, Pater wants to have it both ways: literature grows organically, and it is aesthetically made.

Yet myth must evolve into literature or it dies, never to emerge from prehistoric obscurity. Thus, according to this view, the very category “literature” is defined by its consciousness of having revised earlier mythic material. The literary process of “remodelling” myth fundamentally depends upon the development of character, which “fixes” and at the same time “humanises” man’s conception of the unseen. A primitive people first “project” away from (and therefore reflect back to) themselves a recognizable image of their total culture. In this stage, to “humanise” means to “condense” the flux of natural conditions into one familiar form.

The office of the imagination . . . is thus to condense the impressions of natural things into human form; to retain that early mystical sense of water, or wind, or light, in the moulding of eye and brow; to arrest it, or rather, perhaps, to set it free, there, as human expression. The body of man, indeed, was for the Greeks still the genuine work of Prometheus; its connexion with earth and air . . . [was] direct and immediate. (GS, 32–33)

That the human body can serve as such a complex and totalizing image indicates at once the closeness to nature of the mythic imagination and at the same time the beginning of its separation from nature, because the “refining” of nature in man’s own image has already begun. The history of myth describes further developments in this process of “humanising” nature.

The full process of character formation involves a dialectic of condensation and generalization through which a character is gradually “arrested” and at the same time “set free,” both embodied and spiritualized. Beginning in the care of an individual vine, for example, as the vine-grower “stoops over it, coaxing and nursing it, like a pet animal or a little child,” the mythic consciousness attributes a spirit first to one vine and then to the whole species (GS, 13). But after being generalized, this spirit must again be “condensed”—fixated and totalized—as a personal spirit. As they dream and brood over the life of their crops, an ancient people “harmonise” those dreams into a human character. Mythic imagination is “a unifying or identifying power, bringing together things naturally asunder . . . welding into something like the identity of a human personality the whole range of man’s experiences” (GS, 29). But after disparate material conditions are iden-
tified as a person, the process of spiritualization—and even of further embodiment—goes on. The establishment of character enables incident or plot, and the further elaboration of plot brings mythic character closer and closer to human moods, sympathies, and conduct. Both “A Study of Dionysus” and “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone” are essays in the articulation of this process.

For example, early in her development, Demeter represents the chthonic forces of the earth in general. Demeter and Persephone are not at this point clearly differentiated from one another. Later, two personae express the division of earth’s cycle into seasons of hot and cold, fertile and barren, summer and winter. With the “invention” of Persephone (GS, 122)—that is, her separation from the manifold concept of Demeter—the earth’s seasonal changes are definitively interpreted as a mother’s grief at separation from her daughter. (The earliest division of self-consciousness, the initial separation of nature and culture, is thus expressed through the separation of two characters from the primeval manifold, which is in turn expressed by their personal separation from one another.) This characterization provides the framework for appropriate incident; Demeter searches for Persephone across the vast earth and over the course of the seasonal year, and “she becomes in her long wanderings, almost wholly humanised” (GS, 118).

Demeter and Persephone, then, embody the contradictions of time and nature in a familial or genealogical relation between two persons. Dionysus, on the other hand, incorporates natural oppositions under the auspices of one persona. Thus he becomes, as Pater entitles his study, the “spiritual form of fire and dew.” The alternating harshness and solace of early spring, its erratic chill and warmth (both dangers to the growing vine), are personified in the complex life history of Dionysus, who was “born” twice, first in the fire of Zeus’s lightning approach to Semele, and then, after a protective gestation in the cloudy thigh of Zeus, through Hye, the dew (GS, 26–7). These incidents of a life story “explain” the origins of his contradictory and erratic character, and his character, conversely, resolves the contradictions of nature by unifying them as aspects of one person’s life history.

Both “literary” and “ethical” phases of myth register an increase in spirit, which is produced through this dialectical process of generalization and “condensation.” First the single vine is granted a spirit, then that spirit is generalized to cover all vines. Finally, the general characteristics of all vines are transfigured as one human form, unified

and "projected" as the character Dionysus. Narrative incidents collect around this center of attention and are then more generally interpreted themselves, so that finally, in the "ethical" phase, the spirit of Dionysus comes to represent the force of life itself.

He is the soul of the individual vine, first; . . . afterwards, the soul of the whole species, the spirit of fire and dew, alive and leaping in a thousand vines, as the higher intelligence, brooding more deeply over things, pursues, in thought, the generation of sweetness and strength in the veins of the tree, the transformation of water into wine . . . ; and shadowing forth, in each pause of the process, an intervening person. . . . So they passed on to think of Dionysus . . . not merely as the soul of the vine, but of all that life in flowing things of which the vine is the symbol, because its most emphatic example. [GS, 13]

It is interesting to follow Pater's figural maneuvers in this passage. He uses an ostensibly material transformation (of water into wine) to represent a "spiritual" transformation (of a natural symbol into a "higher" potency). The "generation of sweetness and strength in the veins of the tree"—in other words, the transformative power of nature—has been metaphorically equated with the conversion of water into wine, or the transformation of nature into culture. (This figure is also resonant, for anyone reading in Pater's tradition, with the Christian association to the miracle at Cana; thus the "higher intelligence" seems also to hint at the secularization-effect produced by the transformation of Greek myth into Christian story.) In this "higher" phase, the rarefied, cultured product of the vine, the wine, symbolizes the original, natural power hidden within the growing plant. What is "expressed" or squeezed out of the original vine is made to symbolize what was occult, interior, and hidden. Finally the vine, which in the first stage was represented by "Dionysus," becomes itself the representative symbol of "all life." We begin with the vine and we end with the vine, but in the end the exemplary organism has become a symbol of the "spirit" in nature. This circuit of figuration uses personification as an intermediate stage, between nature and pure

4. See also the process of figuration in the following passage: "The history of Greek art, then, begins, as some have fancied general history to begin, in a golden age, but in an age, so to speak, of real gold, the period of those first twisters and hammerers of the precious metals. . . . The heroic age of Greek art is the age of the hero as smith" [GS, 192–93]. Here again a spiritual or mythic meaning (a "golden age") is grounded in a realistic, historical phenomenon (surviving objects crafted in gold).
spirit. Thus the figure of personification is itself the symbol of a certain figurative agenda here: to grant “spirit” to organic matter.  

Representing “spirit” is most commonly a matter of figuratively dividing an interior from an exterior. In this connection, Pater offers a wonderful little myth of aesthetic history to explain the invention of modeling in sculpture. This art form has particular significance in the Greek Studies because of its human subject of representation, and here Pater interprets its formal invention as the establishment of insides and outsides:

The love-sick daughter of the artist . . . outlines on the wall the profile of her lover as he sleeps in the lamplight, to keep by her in absence— . . . The father fills up the outline . . . and hence the art of modelling from the life in clay. (GS, 231)

This tiny “butterfly wing” of incident (as Pater calls it) gathers complicated resonances in its context. As he did explicitly in “Winckelmann,” Pater draws on the Hegelian description of art history, in which different art forms successively represent stages in the growth of world-historical self-consciousness. Here the human form is granted interiority as the father “fills up” the empty outline with solid matter. (And incidentally, the paternal figure in this little story is a recognizable secularization of God as artist, endowing the human form with “life.”) Thus even Greek sculpture, which in “Winckelmann” stood for the earliest and most purely physical or “objective” stage of aesthetic form, is seen to have resulted from the division of exterior form and interior content. Even within the “repose” of classical origins, the romantic spirit has already begun to brood.

In his essay “Romanticism,” written in 1876 between his studies of Demeter and of Dionysus, Pater uses similar terms to describe the two “tendencies” in aesthetic history. Classical art begins by


7. For relative dating of the “Romanticism” essay and the early “Greek Studies,” see Samuel Wright, A Bibliography of the Writings of Walter H. Pater [New York: Garland, 1975], p. xv. The essay was retitled in Appreciations (1889) as “Postscript,” which, as Bloom points out, suggests that it is being presented as a critical credo. Bloom goes on to argue that the essay is meant as a reply to Arnold’s “Study of Poetry,” in which Pater opposes his own standard of “energy” to Arnold’s moral standard. See Harold Bloom, introduction to Selected Writings of Walter Pater, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Columbia University Press, 1982], p. 220, n. 1.
choosing an outward form and then fills it up with matter. The classicist has been impressed with “the comeliness of the old, immemorial, well-recognised types in art and literature” and “will entertain no matter which will not go easily and flexibly into them” (A, 257). Romantic art, on the other hand, begins with “untried matter, still in fusion.” Romantic artists must

by the very vividness and heat of their conception, purge away . . . all that is not organically appropriate to it, till the whole effect adjusts itself in clear, orderly, proportionate form, which form, after a very little time, becomes classical in its turn. (A, 258)

These two “tendencies” describe movement in opposite directions, romantics burning away excess matter to create form, and classicists filling up an empty (though prior) form with appropriate matter. Each movement figuratively “begins” with a different pole of the formal dialectic: romantic art with matter, classical art with form. Pater himself “begins” with the classical moment of the dialectic, but even so, a prior phase is implied, for how otherwise could the classical form have become so “well-recognised”? One effect of Pater’s chiasmic formulation here is to associate both “form” and “matter” with the novelty of emergent “spirit,” the vector force toward future transformation which Pater associates with romantic “energy”:

romantic: matter > form (spirit, energy)
classical: form > matter (spirit, energy)

The temporal dimension of this dialectic is signified by the dialectical reversal of the term “form”: the significance of romantic “form” is itself transformed through time into its very opposite, the “well-recognised type,” the classical form. “Matter” and “form” in this essay are every bit as relative and dialectically dependent terms as are “classical” and “romantic.” By emphasizing the dialectical relation, through his repeated definition of these movements as “tendencies,” Pater manages to argue both for permanently coexisting ideal structures and for alternating periods of art-historical difference; thus he manages to balance material and formal principles in his own theory.

That in itself is his most brilliant accomplishment in this essay, which works throughout to relativize all such critical distinctions.

But for our immediate purposes the importance both of Pater's myth of the sculptor's lovesick daughter and of his essay on romanticism is that they show the language of insides and outsides operating not only to describe the coherence of any particular art form, but also to describe principles of art-historical development. History begins when inarticulate matter is given "spiritual form," and ever afterward the gradual expression (externalization, objectification, "projection") of interiority describes the course of that history. Both literature and history are simultaneously established in this initial division of mythic unity, and this moment is expressed by means of personal figures. Mythic characters incorporate, by representing in one place, the vicissitudes and contradictions of nature, material practice, and temporal process. Divisions in time, which Pater also seeks to convey through dialectical forms of argumentation, are in this mode spatialized as a body. Pater's historicism relies on this form of mythic personification as the paradigm for aesthetic-historical objectification of "spirit."

In the Greek Studies, for example, Pater totalizes primitive culture in such a personal figure: a primitive people "can but work outward what is within them," Pater explains simply (GS, 212). Or elsewhere, he explicitly figures the moment of emergence into art and history as the moment an "informing" soul is breathed into matter to create a body:

A world of material splendour, moulded clay, beaten gold, polished stone;—the informing, reasonable soul entering into that, reclaiming the metal and stone and clay, till they are as full of living breath as the real warm body itself; the presence of those two elements is continuous throughout the fortunes of Greek art after the heroic age, and the constant right estimate of their action and reaction, from period to period, its true philosophy. (GS, 223)

In other words, Pater operates these personal figures on the usual graduating levels of generalization: the level of the artist, expressing individual interiority; the level of the Zeitgeist in its particular stage of development; and the level of the transhistorical Geist, expressed through periodic "phases" of developing self-consciousness. It is clear

that a version of mythic personification is fundamental to Pater's Hegelian scheme of spiritual growth in history, but what is most interesting about his transposition of Hegelian development is precisely the degree to which he unintentionally exposes Hegelian historicism as itself a modern mythology, rationalized through personal figures.

2 · The House Beautiful and Its Interpreter

Who or what is responsible for the unfolding expressiveness of aesthetic history? One important line of argument in the Greek Studies is devoted to answering this question. In another attempt to formulate the inarticulate, prehistoric ground of development, Pater emphasizes the temporal priority of ritual, or religious "usages," over "conceptions" or stories. Myth emerges from its prehistory to enter its "literary" phase at the moment it can be seen as "divided" between "outward imagery" and "inner sense." The various versions of a "literary" myth progressively interpret the religious ritual, which becomes more impressive to worshipers as its "outward imagery" more precisely expresses its "inner sense" (GS, 121). In this reflexive relation between unconceptualized ritual and interpretation or narrative, Pater finds the mechanism through which practice is gradually coaxed into self-consciousness. And the agency of this process is a personal figure.

Before there were storytellers, Pater explains, exegetae conveyed the significance of ritual practices to the people (GS, 227). In mythic culture, the office of dividing "outward imagery" from "inner sense" and relating them to each other falls to the priest-exegete, or "interpreter."

There were religious usages before there were distinct religious conceptions, and these antecedent religious usages shape and determine, at many points, the ultimate religious conception, as the details of the myth interpret or explain the religious custom. The hymn relates the legend of certain holy places, to which various impressive religious rites had attached themselves—the holy well, the old fountain, the stone of sorrow, which it was the office of the "interpreter" of the holy places to show to the people. (GS, 120)