Transfigured World

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Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism.

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That "House Beautiful," like a body with an indwelling spirit, houses all the spirits of all the ages. The model of a mythic body, federating disparate natural impressions in one spirit, has here been generalized and transposed, now a "House" federates many spirits of culture under one roof. Pater's modern, mythic conception re-collects all the differences of time in one place. The secularization of Bunyan's House Beautiful is telling, for this is a dwelling for the figures of aesthetic and historical culture, not the place of sacred reward. 2

This passage makes it clear that dialectical "divisions" alone testify to the specificity of life and development in historical time, but from the perspective of the House Beautiful, those divisions are preserved, annulled, and transcended in a unity that is beyond time. The Interpreter plays a major role in each phase. At the origins of history, as we have seen, he presides over the necessary divisions that create literary myth, and here at the other end of the line, "the true aesthetic critic" imagines the reunion of those divisions that, from this point of view, can now be seen to have been merely provisional.

The very evolution of art and literature are made to seem the results of these fundamental acts of personal intervention. Here again we see Pater's initially firm commitment to particularity: the aesthetic critic "uses these divisions" in order to penetrate the "peculiarities" of each different object. But this "first step," the commitment to historicity, occurs in a context that subverts it with a strong image of transhistorical totality. Assigning such a vast role to the creative powers of interpretation is a powerful gesture of self-aggrandizement, for Pater himself is engaged in externalizing myth's "inwardness." His Greek Studies are themselves a contribution to the latest phase of "ethical" mythology.

3 · The Philosophy of Mythic Form

In Pater's Greek Studies we can clearly see the conceptual struggle within historicism—between historical differentiation and transhistorical unity, stability, and iteration. On the one hand, Pater claims that myth rises out of specific historical conditions, and yet on the

other hand, he claims that it "arose naturally out of the spirit of man." He emphasizes the permanence of mythic conceptions, their presence still within us. They are powerful

because they arose naturally out of the spirit of man, and embodied, in adequate symbols, his deepest thoughts concerning the conditions of his physical and spiritual life, maintained their hold through many changes, and are still not without a solemnising power even for the modern mind, which has once admitted them as recognised and habitual inhabitants. (GS, 151)

Pater's characteristic generalization of "the spirit of man" represents a transhistorical, essentialist, aesthetic figure, as we have repeatedly seen in this study, and it reflects the tendency toward synthesis and totality which forms one pole of his aesthetic historicism. If Pater's assertion of the absolute historicity of each phase of myth—its difference from others, its grounding in the peculiarities of a specific culture—were to be carried through, the resulting emphasis would be on temporal and geographical change. But this is not the case. In the Greek Studies, by far the greater emphasis is placed on stability, continuity, and repetition.

The volume emphasizes the similarities between mythic and modern consciousness. Pater approaches Greek mythology through the lens of his own present culture, asking, "What is there in this phase of ancient religion for us, at the present day?" (GS, 151). This approach, on the general cultural level, is analogous to the individual approach announced in the "Preface" to The Renaissance: "What is this song or picture . . . to me?" But that search for continuity and similarity crucially begins in a profound recognition of difference. Pater's appreciation of the distance between past and present leads to an attempt to bridge that distance with analogy. This quintessentially Paterian strategy at once tacitly acknowledges the difficulty of penetrating historical otherness and at the same time assumes that "the composite experience of all the ages is a part of each one of us," that awareness "at the present day" can adequately reach across the abyss of historical difference. And this binocular strategy, asserting difference while bringing it into analogy with the familiar, will as usual tend both to modernize the past and to traditionalize the present.

Pater's "modern mind" has admitted mythic conceptions as "recognised and habitual inhabitants": "there are traces of the old temper in the man of today," he asserts (GS, 100). The "phases of Greek culture" are "not without their likenesses in the modern mind" (GS, 81). For Pater, nineteenth-century English romanticism is a modern,
self-conscious version of an ancient mythic consciousness. In the essay on Demeter he sees the romanticism of Wordsworth and Shelley as a modern revival of the animistic sense in which nature and “personal intelligence” inform and express one another. At the same time, conversely, he is eager to discover the romanticism in Greek myth. As in The Renaissance, he is at pains to throw into high relief the “worship of sorrow” (as Goethe called it) within classical Greek culture and religion (GS, 110). This move toward analogy accomplishes more than a reinterpretation of classical Greece, though that in itself remains a formidable mark of Pater’s originality in these essays. To discover the “worship of sorrow” within classical culture also implies its analogy with Christianity, and that further analogy in turn implies that both mythic and Christian culture prefigure their secularized, modern form in the romanticism of the nineteenth century. As in Marius, Christianity is secularized from both sides when it is seen as the middle term of this three-stage development.

Pater—like Sainte-Beuve, of whom he writes—delighted in

tracing traditions in [literature], and the way in which various phases of thought and sentiment maintain themselves, through successive modifications, from epoch to epoch. [A, 244]

Pater calls this practice the “philosophy of literature.” His strong emphasis on continuity in a myth’s history is displayed so frequently that he often seems more interested in how “phases of thought and sentiment maintain themselves” than in their “successive modifications.” Distinctions between “phases” as usual depend on the initial assumption of a continuous field, or of an overarching whole; all analogies in the “comparative science of religions” or the “theory of ‘comparative mythology’” are made against this background (GS, 111, 112).

As long as Pater concentrates on Greek myth, he can base his assumption of continuity on the common language of the versions. Character names accompanied by epithets indicate fundamental unity behind or beneath apparent diversity. Demeter Courrotrophos, Demeter Erinnys, Demeter Thesmophoros—all are “aspects” of the same mythic “person,” gathered together and federated by

the name, the instrument of the identification, of the given matter,—of its unity in variety, its outline or definition in mystery, its spiritual form. [GS, 37]

1. Pater “ranks among the true discoverers of Greek Romanticism” [Iser, Walter Pater, p. 114].
This argument should remind us of Pater's use of the "type" in *The Renaissance*, as well as of his understanding of the unifying function of mythic characterization here in the *Greek Studies*. The name is a "centripetal" force, and Pater is clearly sensitive to the aesthetic dimension of this nominalism, in which the name brings about the impression of unity among otherwise disparate features. Epithets can also indicate specific "phases" in the historical unfolding of a manifold conception.

Pater has explored this idea before in his mythic reading of the Mona Lisa, to whom he gave, as if they were her epithets, the aspects of both classical and Christian figures:

as Leda, [she] was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the Mother of Mary. (R, 125)

Pater's method of interpretation in the *Greek Studies* sheds a retrospective light on his treatment of the Mona Lisa, still his most famous re-creation of mythic character. She represents the "spiritual form" of history grown conscious of itself, the disparate forms unfolding in time here gathered under the auspices of one person, one character, one name. So too the stability of character in the conceptions of Demeter, Persephone, Dionysus, and Apollo is represented by their names, and a residual recognition of the differences and contradictions that have been provisionally or nominally unified is represented by their various epithets.

As long as Pater concentrates on Greek mythology, he can base his assumption of continuity on the name, but when Pater's analogies are no longer underwritten by a common language and cultural tradition, they become at once more striking and at the same time more far-fetched. In an essay strictly on Greek subjects, Pater's analogies seem at first designed to illustrate the unavailable past by means of the present, to familiarize his readers with ancient conceptions that might otherwise remain occult, foreign, and inaccessibly different. But that rationale begins to strain when the analogies attempt to bridge great gulfs of historical difference. The relation between Dionysus *Eleutherios* and Dionysus *Zagreus* is asserted in the name, but how can the same "person" be the mother of Helen of Troy and the mother of Mary?

Pater's strategy of familiarization may be seen to operate with striking effect in the violence with which different traditions are yoked:
The libations, at once a watering of the vines and a drink-offering to the dead—\ldots must, to almost all minds, have had a certain natural impressiveness; and a parallel has sometimes been drawn between this festival and All Souls Day. [GS, 123]

Or, for example, while Pater is considering the Eleusinian mysteries, arguing that ritual enactment formed the dramatic basis of literary myth, he reminds us of the Christian "mysteri es" of the Middle Ages. Both Greek and Christian "mysteries" present an artistic spectacle, \ldots a dramatic representation of the sacred story \ldots and what we really do see \ldots are things which have their parallels in a later age, the whole being not altogether unlike a modern pilgrimage. The exposition of the sacred places \ldots is not so strange, as it would seem, had it no modern illustration. [GS, 122–23]

Pater's "modern illustrations" are taken from the realm where religious and aesthetic value interpenetrate. When he calls the first historical period of Greek art "the age of graven images," his unmistakable biblical allusion recalls the language of prohibition from the Exodus narrative [GS, 224]. He ends his essay "The Bacchanals of Euripides" by alluding to the medieval Christian transformations of Euripides in the Christus Patiens of Gregory Nazianzen, and he calls the workman of the marbles of Aegina "the Chaucer of Greek sculpture" [GS, 80, 268].

The cross-cultural analogy represents Pater's most powerful historicizing trope. Like all such tropes, it works always to relativize both terms of the analogy, each becoming the background for the other; the secularization-effects of the analogy extend both backward and forward in time. On the one hand, they work to familiarize the past, the culturally different, the inaccessible; on the other hand, they defamiliarize the present, the modern, the habitual. Their particular effect is most interesting and problematic when Greek myth and Christian story are brought into analogy with one another. Greek myth and ritual are vaguely Christianized, with a resultant reduction of the difference, the otherness, of Greek myth. By the same token, the Christian story is mythologized or anthropologized. Christianity is seen as a later development of something already there and an early development of something yet to be.

This strategy breaks down the notion of origins, for as Pater traces back into the obscurity of the prehistoric, there is always something prior to the earliest known recorded form. Even the Olympian gods
were “conscious also of the fall of earlier divine dynasties . . . , the weary shadows of an earlier, more formless, divine world” (R, 224). And this strategy also works to generate abstract, “ethical,” recurrent analogous forms seen from the point of view of retrospective reflection. Within the logic of these historicizing tropes, both Greek myth and Christian story become merely phases of something else that transcends them both: the identity, the continuity of Western culture, retrospectively contructed.

Let us look at some examples from the Greek Studies of these “ethical” types in the process of formation. Pater explains the conception of Demeter by comparing her to the Egyptian Isis, the German Hertha, and the later Greek conception of Pan (GS, 97). But his most radical effort to familiarize us with Demeter ends by relativizing his own culture’s chief myth as well, for he sees Demeter in her “ethical” phase not only “humanised” as a mourning mother but also as mater dolorosa, Our Lady of Sorrows (GS, 114). In “Winckelmann” Pater had claimed that “there is no Greek Madonna; the goddesses are always childless” (R, 217). But in the Greek Studies these historical analogies work both ways, paganizing the Christian at the same time that they Christianize the pagan. As Demeter becomes Our Lady of Sorrows, the Virgin Mary implicitly begins to seem more like a fertility goddess.2

Finally, interpreted as both, she can be neither. What is left of the history of her transformations is Pater’s distillation of an abstract, “ethical” type that federates her periodic manifestations under the auspices of an aesthetically constructed unity. From Pater’s long view, Demeter the wanderer may be seen alike in the Greek myth, Michelangelo’s mater dolorosa, and the peasant women of Corot or Wordsworth. Her conception becomes so extensive that Pater’s “Demeter” finally names a transhistorical ethos, the “sentiment of maternity.”

Pater likewise finds the types of Dionysus everywhere in art and history. As a romantic lover, Dionysus is represented with Ariadne by Titian and Tintoretto; as patron of reed instruments, he phases into Marsyas, the satyrs, and Pan; as “inherent cause of music and poetry” he is assimilable to Apollo (GS, 23, 17–18).3 But Pater describes


3. The dialectical relation of Dionysus to Apollo especially highlights the point where separate mythic persons are exfoliated expressions or aspects of a mythic manifold. These transhistorical myths of history seem to be a period phenomenon—see, e.g., Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy. On the relation between Pater and Nietzsche, see Patrick Bridgewater, Nietzsche in Anglosaxony (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972), pp. 21–36.
him as the young, suffering god in terms that tacitly though patently allude to Christ's passion and resurrection:

A type of second birth, from first to last, he opens, in his series of annual changes, for minds on the look-out for it, the hope of a possible analogy, between the resurrection of nature, and something else, as yet unrealised, reserved for human souls; and the beautiful, weeping creature, vexed by the wind, suffering, torn to pieces, and rejuvenescent again at last, like a tender shoot of living green out of the hardness and stony darkness of the earth, becomes an emblem or ideal of chastening and purification, and of final victory through suffering. (GS, 49–50)

This describes a "worship of sorrow" indeed, and the masochistic sexuality of the passage recalls a recurrent strain in Pater's own romanticism. 4 "Minds on the look-out" for the "hope" of this analogy must be retrospective and historicist, and Pater's coy tentativeness only emphasizes the potential force of this "something else, as yet unrealised, reserved for the human soul." But if the conception of Dionysus eventually comes to incorporate seasonal change, the seeds of cultural renaissance, the resurrection of Christ, enthusiasm and ecstasy in general, and the rebirth of the individual soul—where, then, is "Dionysus"?

Dionysus as a "person" disappears in the kaleidoscopic array of his "aspects." And as the culturally specific mythic character disappears into an infinite number of "possible" analogical relations, the spiritual value of the conception correspondingly grows. As Pater points out, "the human form is a limiting influence" (GS, 34). But Pater's form of interpretation undoes that limitation. He concentrates (perforce) on the period of time after the personal, mythic character has coalesced as a unity, when reflection paradoxically seems to reverse the concentration of physical form. The same struggle he recognizes in the history of Greek art is also apparent in his own work:

there is a struggle, a Streben, as the Germans say, between the palpable and limited human form, and the floating essence it is to contain. (GS, 34)

This spiritualizing tendency is intimately tied, in Pater's scheme of mythic development, to the passage of time and the distance of retrospection. His own long view stresses the "ethical" phase of myth, "in

which the persons and the incidents of the poetical narrative are realised as abstract symbols, because intensely characteristic examples, of moral or spiritual conditions" (GS, 91). But Pater's is not only a particularly late development of the ethical phase; it has also been located in a cross-cultural register. That crucial focus causes Pater's scheme of the three phases of myth to be transposed or transfigured. The schematic development Pater offers for Greek myth—oral, literary, and ethical phases—is transposed in the larger conceptual scheme of his own cross-cultural perspective to the Greek, the Christian, and the modern, synthetic, and secularized phases.

The deeper Pater goes beneath the surface of historical change (or the "higher" above it), the more equivalencies he finds, until all phenomenal manifestations seem to be only "aspects" of the same permanent material, shaped anew from time to time. He uses, for example, the history of a symbol to illustrate the flexibility with which it can be adopted to almost any use. The pomegranate,

because of the multitude of its seeds, was to the Romans a symbol of fecundity, and was sold at the doors of the temple of Ceres, that the women might offer it there, and bear numerous children; and so, to the middle age, became a symbol of the fruitful earth itself, and then of that other seed sown in the dark underworld; and at last of that whole hidden region, so thickly sown, which Dante visited, Michelino painting him, in the Duomo of Florence, with this fruit in his hand, and Botticelli putting it into the childish hands of Him, who, if men "go down into hell, is there also." (GS, 150–51)

Finally there are pomegranates everywhere, their dizzying profusion testifying to nothing so much as the fluidity of signification. In a chain of symbolic appropriation over time, Pater's pomegranate represents fertility as well as the barrenness of the underworld, sexual generation as well as the fertility of the earth in general, the mythic underworld as well as Dante's literary inferno, and finally the Renaissance association of the infernal fruit with Christ himself, the penetration of the mythic underworld by Christian poet and its appropriation by Christian painter. Needless to say, the story of Persephone, eating six seeds in the despair of Hades, is quite lost.

Similarly, Pater finds the myth of Persephone everywhere:

Her story is, indeed, but the story, in an intenser form, of Adonis, of Hyacinth, of Adrastus—the King's blooming son, fated in the story of Herodotus, to be wounded to death with an iron spear—of Linus, a fair
child who is torn to pieces by hounds every spring-time—of the English Sleeping Beauty. (GS, 109)

Here we see the extreme form of literary comparativism at work, with all its gains and attendant losses. All stories for a moment seem to be the story of Persephone, in one “phase” of its development or another. In Orphic poetry she is associated with Dionysus Zagreus (GS, 44, 51), so that even the largest most comprehensive and “separate” mythic forms seem finally only shape-shifting “aspects” of one another.

This phenomenon is at the foundation of mythic conception itself, since myth attempts to represent the whole of human experience, in all of its aspects. Neither the characters nor the stories will stay separate; they ramify into one another with more complexity and confusion the closer one looks. The dialectical duality of Persephone’s character testifies to its mythic, unifying power; the fact that Persephone and Dionysus can “mean” the most opposite things—can even blend into and “mean” each other—is exactly their point. My crucial point is that Pater conceives his histories of myth in precisely the same way. His cross-cultural analogies finally reveal so many connections and overlappings that every version of every story seems to be part of a vast totality, a deep and stable structure that reiteratively expresses itself throughout history.

Pater considers this problem himself in the Greek Studies. He recalls that Plato objects in The Republic to all episodes of mythology that represent doubling, disguise, or metamorphosis, because those episodes violate the stability of form and teach a dangerous “Heraclitean philosophy of perpetual change.” But Pater defends those episodes of doubling and transformation against Plato’s charges; for Pater, characteristically, they signify spiritual “presence”:

Stories in which, the hard material outline breaking up, the gods lay aside their visible form like a garment, yet remain essentially themselves, —[are] not the least spiritual element of Greek religion, an evidence of the sense therein of unseen presences, which might . . . be recognised . . . by the more delicately trained eye . . . Whatever religious elements they lacked, they had at least this sense of subtler and more remote ways of personal presence. (GS, 119-20)

He attributes to these stories a “quite biblical mysticism and solemnity,” bringing mythic metamorphosis into a familiarizing analogy

with Judeo-Christian transfiguration. It is clear that his own historical analogies highlight episodes of just such doubling and transformation in time. As it grows less "personal" and more "remote," religious "presence" is more clearly aestheticized; the dizzying play of secularization-effects generates aesthetic value where a more directly accessible "presence" was once thought to have been. In the "ethical" or abstract phase of myth, Pater attends more to repetition than to difference, more to the characteristic element than to the character. As myth is historicized, and thus released from its culturally specific religious function, its aesthetic value appreciates proportionately, fed by the energy of these transformations.

From one point of view, to secularize is to "demythologize," to empty a cultural form of its religious content and to refill it with aesthetic value. But in Pater's case, to secularize is also to "re-mythologize," to posit a mythic unity and structure of repetition in history that transcends its different periods or "aspects."

4 · The History of Philosophy

Published in 1893, Plato and Platonism was based on the series of lectures Pater delivered at Oxford in 1891–92, close to the end of his life. He had been thinking about Plato and the history of Greek philosophy throughout his career, and in many ways the volume stands as a summary statement not only of Pater's views on Plato but also (and more important for our present purposes) of his own most habitual argumentative strategies. In Plato and Platonism he is more explicit than ever before about many issues that will seem familiar to us by now.

For example, Pater opens by grappling with the adjustment of the organic model of development to the aesthetic model: "With the world

1. A useful compendium of sources on Pater as a lecturer may be found in Wright, Bibliography of Pater, pp. 179–83.