Transfigured World

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Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism.

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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 "remythologize," 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.
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of intellectual production, as with that of organic generation, nature makes no sudden starts" [PP, 5]. Following out the implications of that opening analogy, he asserts in no uncertain terms that political institutions, laws, arts, and language, "all the products of mind, the very mind itself . . . are 'not made,' cannot be made, but 'grow'" [PP, 20–21]. Therefore traces of previous forms of life will be visible in later forms, as if preserved in geological or archaeological strata. Bits of older philosophies reside within Plato's formulations as "minute relics of earlier organic life in the very stone he builds with" [PP, 7]. And yet within this very statement is a tacit acknowledgment of the aesthetic, shaping act implicit in historical conception, for Plato "builds" with the "stone" that has been formed from the residue of previously organic life. His work marks the transition from oral to literary culture, prehistoric to historical culture, organic to aesthetic culture.

Pater makes it clear that Plato has always "seemed" to be the "creator of philosophy" only because of his consummate literary form. Close to Pater's claim that "nature makes no sudden starts" is his explicit acknowledgment that to "fix" on this beginning is his own aesthetic choice. Indeed, Pater begins by stressing the "organic" beginnings before this "aesthetic" beginning, the prehistoric oral culture that survives only in fragments, the "unconscious poetry" that precedes philosophy [PP, 5–7]. One of the tenets of Pater's particular version of organicism holds that the basic genetic material is present from the first; the "seeds" of all science were "dimly enfolded" in the mind of antiquity, to be "fecundated . . . in after ages" [PP, 18]. He proceeds to argue that no matter is new under the sun. But the other side of Pater's synthetic view emphasizes the difference of forms rather than the sameness of matter:

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that in Plato . . . there is nothing absolutely new: or rather . . . the seemingly new is old also, a palimpsest, a tapestry of which the actual threads have served before, or like the animal frame itself, every particle of which has already lived and died many times over. Nothing but the life-giving principle of cohesion is new. . . . In other words, the form is new. But then, in the creation of philosophical literature, as in all other products of art, form, in the full signification of that word, is everything, and the mere matter is nothing. [PP, 8]

The juxtaposition of figures in this passage expresses Pater's attraction to both organic and aesthetic models in this ongoing argument, with
images of revisionary writing and weaving followed by an image of the generic "animal frame." The very principle Pater here asserts must be reflexively applied to his own text, for all these figures are familiar Paterian material: the metaphor of the palimpsest has figured prominently in *Marius*; the recycled "threads" are familiar from the opening paragraphs of the "Conclusion" and the essay on Coleridge; and the example of the animal frame resonates with the description of the physical basis of life in the "Conclusion" as well as with Pater’s many mythical portraits of "spiritual form"—the Mona Lisa, Dionysus, now Plato himself.

In fact, what we find here, as in the *Greek Studies*, is Pater’s representation of the pivotal and mythic moment when organic, unconscious life first develops consciousness, when history and literature emerge within and against the primeval manifold. Pater focuses this moment in the history of philosophy by explicitly relying on Hegel’s definition of tragedy, which takes the life and death of Socrates as its case in point. Genuine tragedy, Hegel argues, cannot be "merely personal." Instead, it occurs when two "opposed Rights come forth" and "the one breaks itself to pieces against the other." In the case of Socrates, Hegel defines these two opposed Rights as, on the one hand, "the religious claim, the unconscious moral habit," and, on the other hand, "the equally religious claim, the claim of consciousness." This conflict engenders the moment when the claim of consciousness emerges as "the common principle of philosophy for all time to come" (PP, 91–92). In Hegel’s example, the historic shift into consciousness—indeed, the shift into history itself—is represented by Socrates and the concretely dialectical response to his life and teachings: the death penalty, which, instead of obliterating them, immortalized the claims of consciousness. Pater refigures this Hegelian example to make Plato the representative of literary self-consciousness retrospectively acknowledging its Socratic, preliterary, "organic" roots.

Pater’s treatment of his own "historic method" is much more explicitly linked in *Plato and Platonism* to the contemporary influence both of Hegel and of Darwin than ever before (PP, 8–9, 19). Pater implicitly makes a distinction between two aspects of the method, which we would call the synchronic and the diachronic, but both these aspects of his method have been influenced by Hegel and by Darwin. On the one hand, Pater pursues the uniquely adjusted synchronic "fit" between an organism and its environment, attempting to "replace" the doctrine of Plato within the "conditions" of its production. This argument has affinities with Pater’s understanding of
natural selection as well as with his belief in the personal character of the "'Time-Spirit' or Zeitgeist":

That ages have their genius as well as the individual; that in every age there is a peculiar ensemble of conditions which determines a common character in every product of that age . . . ; that nothing man has projected from himself is really intelligible except at its own date, and from its proper point of view in the never-resting "secular process"; . . . by force of these convictions many a normal, or at first sight abnormal, phase of speculation has found a reasonable meaning for us. [PP, 9–10]

The weirdly twisted pine tree that is unintelligible on an English lawn becomes intelligible when we imagine the Alpine forces that have "determined" its shape; so too "fantastic doctrines" like Plato's "'communism'" must be seen amid the conditions that produced them. This synchronic aspect of Pater's historic method might be called "anthropological" in a particularly prestructuralist mode, and in Plato and Platonism he frequently reaches toward racial and geographical arguments as ways to make this approach more concrete. Often Pater places the word "environment" in quotation marks, as if to call attention to the neologism of the hour [e.g., PP, 10]. He is sharply aware of the contemporary vogue for this line of argument, naming it as one of the most popular questions of his own day [PP, 154].

In Plato and Platonism, Pater seems to have theorized the dialectical relation between the synchronic and diachronic aspects of his "historic method," treating them both as parts of the "centripetal" tendency, the unifying force that spatially links organism to environment and temporally links "one period of organic growth to another" [PP, 105]. [Pater tellingly describes this "centripetal" force as the organic become conscious of itself.] The relation between synchronic and diachronic is expressed in the form of the volume, which in its largest sense is an attempt to describe the history of philosophy using Plato as the figure of originary wholeness. Antecedent forms of thought that give rise to Plato's philosophy are treated as the synchronic "environment" within which he writes. Not until chapter 6 does Pater turn to the argument that we must judge Plato by his followers as well as by his antecedents. Thus the form of the volume is itself an essay in the "historic method": five chapters "placing" Plato within the "conditions" of his own time and place, then five
chapters exfoliating Plato’s “genius,” his doctrines, and their influence in later ages.

The form of Pater’s diachronic argument displays the full finesse of his dialectic (though the diachronic dimension is finally subsumed by the synchronic, as we shall see). Pater first sketches a three-stage dialectical process leading up to Plato, in which the philosophies of Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Pythagoras represent thesis, antithesis, and synthesis—the principles of “motion,” “rest,” and “number.” The Heraclitean flux and the Parmenidean One are evaluated antithetically, from two sides, both for what each doctrine has contributed to Platonism and for what has been most stringently argued against each one. Heraclitus rightly appreciates the radical uniqueness of phenomenal forms, but his “centrifugal” doctrine leads to chaos. On the other hand, Parmenides creates a conception of unity, but at the expense of color and form; his idea of the One seems to many people to be “but zero, and a mere algebraic symbol for nothingness” (PP, 40). In an intensely witty formulation, Pater explains that the reaction against Heraclitus’ philosophy of motion was a “fixed idea” with Plato (PP, 12). Likewise, Plato reacted against the Parmenidean “infectious mania... for nonentity” with a more mobile “axiomata media” (PP, 40, 42).

Pater’s interpretation of the Pre-Socratics calls attention to the dialectical reversal that engenders the doctrine of rest directly out of the doctrine of motion: Zeno, favorite disciple of Parmenides, was an adept in “dialectic art,” and Zeno’s paradox demonstrates that “perpetual motion is perpetual rest” (PP, 28–30). The Pythagorean theory, however, achieves a reconciliation of motion and rest without conflating the two principles as a paradoxical identity. The theory of number and music formulates cosmos as “unity in variety,” structure in motion (PP, 52). For Pater, the essence of the Pythagorean doctrine lies not in the infinite but in the finite, and he defines “art as being itself the finite, ever controlling the infinite, the formless” (PP, 60). This emphasis is characteristically Paterian. Though this dialectic of motion, rest, and number is once again the familiar tripartite scheme of romantic history, “music” (the chosen end term of Pater’s dialectic) privileges a “higher multiplicity” rather than a “higher unity,” motion directed toward rest rather than rest itself, dialectic rather than paradoxical identity or harsh dualism.

Indeed, one dimension of Pater’s argument in Plato and Platonism treats each of the historically concrete figures (Heraclitus, Parmenides, Pythagoras, Socrates, the Sophists, and Plato) as representatives of permanent “tendencies” or recurring types in “the human mind
itself." Pater argues, for example, that the Heraclitean doctrine of perpetual flux has only been fully realized in his own age:

It is the burden of Hegel on the one hand, to whom nature, and art, and polity, and philosophy, aye, and religion too, each in its long historic series, are but so many conscious movements in the secular process of the eternal mind; and on the other hand of Darwin and Darwinism, for which "type" itself properly is not but is only always becoming. [PP, 19]

In this view, the theory of development itself has developed from an ancient seed, "fecundated . . . in later ages." Similarly, Pater finds Greek, Indian, and Christian expressions of the Parmenidean One [PP, 40–41], and he asserts that Pythagoreanism represents a permanent instinct "of the human mind itself," which is therefore expressed as a periodically recurring emphasis, a tradition in human history. This amounts to asserting the periodic recurrence of a theory of recurrence, since the Pythagoreans contributed the doctrine of spiritual preexistence to the Platonic synthesis. Pater closes the chapter on Pythagoras with a quotation from Vaughan's "The Retreat" and the invocation of Wordsworth's Intimations Ode, thus bringing the philosophy of preexistence, recurrence, or "re-action" up to date [PP, 73–74]. Elsewhere in the volume, Pater names various historically recurrent forms of "animism" ranging from the Homeric conception of an anthropomorphic pantheon, to Plato's theory of ideas, to the "survival" of this spiritual condition in the primitive negro, to the culture of Wordsworth, Shelley, Goethe, and Schelling [PP, 168–69]. In each of these cases, historical difference is practically effaced in the service of familiarizing analogies.

So we see that the extremely broad-brush cross-cultural analogies that Pater drew throughout the Greek Studies operate in Plato and Platonism as well, on the largest level of its argument. In Plato and Platonism less emphasis is placed on the specific relation of Greek to


Christian religious expression, and more emphasis is put on the general structure of repetition implied by these analogies. This “side” of Pater’s historicism has always been present, and it has always tended toward a myth of recurrence which transcends the diverse, ephemeral surface of things in the search for a deeper (or “higher”) structure of permanent form. But this dimension of historicism has never before been so explicitly formulated as the framework of a volume’s general argument. Pater might say that the form of *Plato and Platonism* truly expresses its matter, for in his discussion of Plato’s theory of Ideas, Pater discusses the formation of these general Forms. Nowhere else in his works do we find such a crisp and summary statement of Pater’s understanding of the problematic relation between representative terms and particular instances.

Chapters 3 through 5 construct a second level of dialectical argument. Chapter 5 concentrates on the Sophists, the contemporary background against which Pater defines himself, while chapters 3 and 4 focus on Pythagoras and Socrates, precursor figures of synthesis who are each identified with Plato. In other words, after Pater has sketched the three-stage dynamic of Pre-Socratic development, he turns to focus on two figures, each of whom mirrors and prefigures Plato’s own dual nature. Both these prefigurative relations mediate the emergence of Plato from the obscurity of the preliterary, the development of self-consciousness from within an “organic” ground. This function is especially clear in Pater’s treatment of Socrates, whose relation to Plato he takes as the model of “educated common-sense” transformed into a higher, “mystic intellectualism” (PP, 85). The Platonic dialogue is “the literary transformation . . . of what was the intimately homegrown method of Socrates” (PP, 177). Though we have no writings of Socrates, we have in Plato’s literary recreation the memory not only of a vivid historical character but also of the prehistoric roots of literature itself.

But Pater’s ability to cast Pythagoras as a mythic figure of synthesis is also due in part to the fact that his writings have not survived except in fragments; “nothing remains of his writings: dark statements only . . . in later authors” (PP, 52). In other words, the Pythagorean theory has the status of primitive, mythic unity, and Pythagoras’ life is also susceptible to such a mythic interpretation, because many stories have been passed down of his descent from Apollo and his legendary reincarnation as “various persons in the course of ages” (PP, 53–54). As usual, Pater bolsters this mythic interpretation with historical evidence, giving it a slightly allegorical twist. Pythagoras was a native of Ionia who later settled in a Dorian city, and Pater makes that
geographical movement and habitation symbolic of Pythagoras' philosophy, its self-conscious choice of a "musical discipline" over the fluidity of the phenomenal world. For Pater, Pythagoras embodies the dominance of centripetal forces over centrifugal forces, which he will find so saliently at work in Plato (PP, 56).

The relation between Plato and Pythagoras is abstract. Plato, like Pythagoras, consummates the development of the Pre-Socratics. By identifying him with Pythagoras, Pater suggests that Plato assimilates the synthetic, "musical law" of unity in variety. But Plato's relation with Socrates, on the other hand, is historically concrete. Like Pythagoras, Socrates was a "two-sided being" (according to Alcibiades in the *Symposium*), and Pater plays with this traditional notion in several ways (PP, 76). The ungraceful appearance of Socrates (again as attested by Alcibiades) suggests to Pater the Platonic distinction between phenomenal appearance and a higher reality, as if the source of Plato's theory of ideas might have been his puzzlement at the rude physiognomy of his master. This personal connection with Socrates is at the heart of Pater's interpretation of Plato. In a characteristic transition he passes, after a typographical break, from considering Socrates' vision of an afterlife to imagining its effect on Plato: "Plato was then about twenty-eight years old" (PP, 97). Pater loves to imagine these moments of timely conjunction, when two historical figures may be conceived in personal relation; his fables of historical transmission turn on such pivot-points, which seem to enfold the past and the future in a blaze of imagined presence. These moments are themselves two-sided figures, for they join two historically separate persons in a momentary unity, from which will issue the divided forms of the future.

In Pater's historical dialectic, a "two-sided" figure signifies the momentary synthesis of past influences and the generative force toward further development. Thus Pater also interprets Socrates' synthetic nature in terms of its historical generativity. In his own time, Socrates gave rise to antithetical classes of enemies—both the Sophists and the anti-Sophists opposed him—and in later days his constitutional "twofold power" gave rise to "an influence... of which there emerged on the one hand the Cynic, on the other the Cyrenaic School" (PP, 75, 87, 89). Plato of course is also a two-sided figure, joining in his philosophy the greatest possible demand for certainty in knowledge.

5. The relation between Pico and Ficino, for example, which is historically documented (though not as Pater reports); or the imaginary relation he constructs between Goethe and Winckelmann; or the momentary image of Raphael, at age nineteen, watching Leonardo and Michelangelo work (R, 36–37, 196–97, 127).
with the utmost possible uncertainty in his method of inquiry (PP, 188). This paradoxical union is the generative seed of two very different traditions in the history of philosophy, both of which Pater attributes to the influence of Plato: an ontological tradition, which develops from his demand for absolute knowledge, and a skeptical tradition, which develops from his dialectical method (PP, 192–96). In Pater's history of philosophy, then, Plato figures as mythic unity, expressed in literary form. He represents a moment of wholeness that will be split afterward into "divergent streams," a synthesis of everything that came before it, which generates everything that came after. Pater's Plato enfolds within him the entire history of philosophy.6

5 · The Anecdote of the Shell

The nature of the relation between general terms and particular objects of experience, says Pater, is "one of the constant problems of logic," and what Plato's commentators have called his "theory of ideas" is not so much a theory as a way of regarding this relation (PP, 150–51). Pater presents his readers with the three "fixed and formal" answers to this problem—realism, nominalism, and conceptualism. Then, instead of explaining Plato's theory of ideas, he gives the "modern view" of the "nature of logical 'universals'" (PP, 151–52).

Pater's modern view synthesizes elements of all three "fixed" formulations. He tacitly agrees with the realists that the general term is res, a real thing. He agrees with the conceptualists that general terms are the product of subjective thought, but he interprets "subjective" not on the individual level but on the level of general culture. This is a crucial move, and it enables him to base his own "theory of ideas" on a collective or "general consciousness, a permanent common sense." Finally, he gives the nominalist his due by explaining that the individual is in touch with this collective consciousness through the medium of language. The language provides general terms as outlines that

6. Harvard MS. 3, "History of Philosophy": "successive metaphysical systems have been, in fact, little more than so many recombinations of the pieces which Plato had so long ago placed, once, for all upon the board" [Inman, Pater's Reading, 42]. Jenkyns recalls Whitehead's remark that European philosophy could safely be characterized as a series of footnotes to Plato and comments: "This is a remark which could only have been made in the later nineteenth or earlier twentieth century" [Richard Jenkyns, "Plato," in The Victorians and Ancient Greece (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 227–63].