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

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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).
the individual then fills up with meaning, "drop by drop," through personal experience in time. On the other hand, the language develops these general terms over the course of historical time as a result of particular experience. Whether a particular experience "survives" to become a general term has everything to do with conscious repetition; the formation of a type, in other words, is a testimony to its perceived recurrence, the residual evidence of a tradition that has formed "in the human mind itself."

Let us look at one telling example. Pater argues that the quarrel between Plato and the Sophists was in part quite characteristic of its age, and in part it was "a mere rivalry of individuals." As such, he goes on to say, the quarrel might have been remembered "only as a matter of historical interest." I would like to focus on that striking word "only." What sort of interest does Pater have in mind that would surpass the merely historical? He goes on to explain:

It has been otherwise. That innocent word "Sophist" has survived in common language, to indicate some constantly recurring viciousness, in the treatment of one's own and of other minds. (PP, 115)

The sense of repetition generates a value that has its basis in, but tends to transcend, the historical. A term's survival in the "common language" is evidence for the general value of that term, and conversely, the process of survival involves repetition in contexts other than the original, "only" historical, context. The transposition of a term from one particular historical context to another actually generates representative value, which can then be used to "figure" further particularity. In Pater's interpretation, then, the history of language is another vehicle of his aesthetic historicism.

Pater analyzes this same process in the chapter on Plato's theory of ideas, where he discusses the operation of general terms. Well aware that the "type" might seem to violate the claims of each particular instance, he begins by playing devil's advocate for the particular:

We cannot love or live upon genus and species, . . . but for our minds, as for our bodies, need an orchard or a garden, with fruit and roses. Take a seed from the garden. What interest it has for us all lies in our sense of potential differentiation to come: the leaves, leaf upon leaf, the flowers, a thousand new seeds in turn. It is so with animal seed; and with humanity, individually, or as a whole, its expansion into a detailed, ever-changing, parti-coloured history of particular facts and persons. Abstraction, the introduction of general ideas, seems to close it up again; to reduce flower
and fruit, odour and savour, back again into the dry and worthless seed. We might as well be colour-blind at once . . . ! [PP, 155]

The value of particularity here is clearly associated with organic, historical process, whereas “abstraction” obliterates the temporal dimension so necessary to produce difference. Pater then considers the state of things from his own present-day perspective, when everything seems to be classified and “reduced to common types.” Into the garden of unfolding difference the philosopher-as-classifier has come.

To that gaudy tangle . . . the systematic, logical gardener put his meddlesome hand, and straightway all ran to seed; to genus and species and differentia . . . with—yes! with written labels fluttering on the stalks, instead of blossoms. (PP, 156)

The “seed” here has been wittily transvalued from its context in the earlier passage. Instead of the organic potential for future growth and differentiation, it now figures the messy and decaying end of a life cycle. Blossoms have been replaced by labels, organic life by writing, and unfolding differentiation by names, categories, differentia. The “logical gardener” tends to the generic names of things, not to the unique particularity of living things themselves. He has transformed the profusion of natural process and has made of it a ruined garden. Pater’s secularizing wit here turns on the notion that too much naming in the garden has resulted in a fallen language as well as the ruination of the Edenic garden.

And according to the hypothetical case Pater is putting, all this is the result of a “generalising movement” that effectively begins with Socrates and Plato. The Homeric world before this “generalising movement” began now seems to be a golden age, when “experience was intuition, and life a continuous surprise, and every object unique, where all knowledge was still of the concrete and the particular, face to face delightfully” [PP, 156]. In this figure the value of particularity is clearly associated not with history but with a myth of immediacy. Pater has taken Socrates and Plato as the dividing line between mythic immediacy and historical mediation, the beginning of a process that has culminated in the modern “reduction” of everything to “common types.”

But Pater’s argument then turns abruptly to defend the modern profusion of general terms. The particular instance gains in value through classification, he argues. What seems at first to be a reduction of concrete experience turns out to be its enhancement. The general term has a power to focus the intense particularity of a concrete form.
To illustrate this epistemological process, Pater tells a little story, which I call “The Anecdote of the Shell.” Unlike the trained naturalist, an ordinary person picking up a shell on the seashore will not understand the value of classification, “the subsumption of the individual into the species.” That ordinary person with his seashell is like a child with a toy. When the child goes to school, he must put away his toys, and it seems for a very long while as if he studies everything except the thing itself. He studies other shells, the perfect type of each sort of shell, the general laws operating in the life of shells. But when he comes out of school and again on the seashore finds another shell, his “converse with the general” enables him really to see the shell in all its vivid concreteness. Through his knowledge of its difference from other objects, even its difference from its own perfect type, he sees the shell’s particularity as if for the first time. Indeed, he has learned “about it.” It has been enriched by juxtaposition with everything around it, everything that is “not it,” and now “the whole circumjacent world [is] concentrated upon, or... at focus in, it.” We should recognize here Pater’s figure of concentric definition, which features a point focused within a surrounding field. A long experience in time has engendered this ability to collapse time: to see “in a single moment of vision,” to read “by a kind of short-hand,” the shell’s “legible” alliance with the entire world (PP, 157–58).

Pater’s “Anecdote of the Shell” bears a marked relation to Plato’s own pedagogical allegories, but it is significant that Pater shifts his emphasis from the individual’s process of learning to the general historical process, and in so doing also changes the figure:

You may draw, by the use of this coinage (it is Hobbes’s figure) this coinage of representative words and thoughts, at your pleasure, upon the accumulative capital of the whole experience of humanity. (PP, 159)

Here Pater throws the emphasis on the long course of general history that has produced (or “coined”) general terms for individuals to spend in their own experiences of learning. The language is like a communal fund: it provides general terms that individual experience draws upon,

1. After Wallace Stevens’s “Anecdote of the Jar,” which considers the same problem from the other direction, focusing on the power of a concrete form to organize the “slovenly wilderness” around it.
2. See above, Part Two, sec. 5.
3. See McGrath’s treatment of this anecdote, which he correctly calls a “parable” (F. C. McGrath, The Sensible Spirit [Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1986], pp. 154–62).
and each generation can contribute to the fund by coining new general terms, new "common types," that accrue value through the accumulated sense of repeated use.

Pater holds fast to the "modern view" in this understanding of the historical construction of general terms. For him, as for Darwin, "the 'type' itself is not but is only always becoming" (PP, 19). And yet, at any given time, it effectively is. As Pater explained in his description of Diaphaneity, certain general types are recognized by "the world." Such a general category is treated as given, datum, its value produced by the accumulated repetitions of past experience. Pater's is a limited, historical idealism.

What is most important for us to see is that this treatment of general ideas differs radically from Plato's. Pater elides the difficult notion—which he, following Aristotle, duly mentions—that Plato makes his Ideas "separable" from their phenomenal, shadowy instantiations (PP, 163). Instead, Pater continues to focus on the Platonic figure of the "ladder" by which we reach the Forms by means of their phenomenal forms. According to Aristotle, Plato's great step beyond Socratic induction was in making the Ideas "separable" from their instances, but according to Pater, Plato's advance over Socrates was instead to make the Ideas real things and then to make them persons (PP, 166–67). Thus, even while preserving his "modern" emphasis on the historical construction of general ideas, Pater manages to invest them with a mythic, Platonic value.

Pater follows Plato in claiming the "enthusiasm" for ideas as a true form of possession (PP, 172). But his possession by the ideas, types, or Forms differs significantly from Plato's. Like other "moderns," Pater's greatest affinity is for the other "side" of Plato's doctrine—not its passion for the acquisition of "eternal and immutable ideas," but the practice or method of a tentative, hesitant, never-concluding aspiration toward "ideals" (PP, 195). This modern emphasis is all on the side of becoming, of process, of "tendency." Its philosophical practice is called dialectic.

6 · Dialogue and Dialectic

On the one hand, Pater's interpretation of Platonic dialectic assumes the priority of real dialogue, of an actual conversation between two or more different interlocutors. On the other hand, that reality exists in