Transfigured World

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Published by Cornell University Press

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Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism.

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And yet, with a kind of inconsistency in one who had taken for his philosophic ideal the μονόχρονος ἡδονή of Aristippus—the pleasure of the ideal present, of the mystic now—there would come, together with that precipitate sinking of things into the past, a desire, after all, to retain “what was so transitive.” Could he but arrest, for others also, certain clauses of experience, as the imaginative memory presented them to himself! In those grand, hot summers, he would have imprisoned the very perfume of the flowers. (ME I, 154-55)

This particular “kind of inconsistency” has been the object of my attention throughout the preceding pages. In the short passage above, the narrator of Marius the Epicurean exposes several characteristically Paterian elaborations of it.¹ For example, the spatial metaphors of imprisonment and “arrest” stand as usual for the retrospective, metafigural capacity and are ironically opposed to the temporal implications of textuality. (I call this opposition “ironic” simply because the retrospective narrator, who exposes with his wistful humor the futility of Marius’s youthful desire to imprison the transient perfume of experience, is engaged in just such a metafigural enterprise.) But the opposition of spatial figuration and textuality is itself “inconsistent,” for in this passage the model of textuality alone cuts both ways: it underwrites both the attempt to retain or “arrest . . . certain clauses of

¹. Many thanks to Jonathan Freedman for reminding me of this passage.

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experience” as well as the relentless passages of “‘what was so transitive’” (emphasis added).

This passage illustrates another dimension of the formal tension between “the ideal present” and “the imaginative memory” as well. For Pater makes it clear that the devotion to an ideal present has its own long history, and Marius’s seemingly personal attraction to “the mystic now” is also, ironically, a cultural artifact. Here it is historicized by means of a quoted tag from Aristippus (as a similarly conflicted devotion is historicized in Pater’s “Conclusion” through the epigraphic figurehead of Heraclitus). Marius’s life history may be traced as a temporalized extension of such moments of attachment to the historical culture, and it is not an exaggeration to say that in Pater’s work the achieved figure of the “person” may be described as the formal composite (retrospective and totalized) of such “‘transitive’” moments. This is also the case with the Paterian critical persona, which is a composite figure too. In this particular passage, Pater places himself within, and differentiates himself from, a more localized tradition by transvaluing Arnold’s “imaginative reason” to generate the characteristically Paterian “imaginative memory.” Thus at several levels the “form” of this passage ironically mirrors its “content,” for even as it regrets a particular “kind of inconsistency,” the passage reenacts it.

From the point of view of my study, this “kind of inconsistency” has been seen, in its various narrative extensions, as a coherent relation. Aesthetic historicism is a complex or, to use a Paterian formula, “many-sided” dialectic. On the aesthetic “side,” Pater describes a moment of complete receptivity or identification followed by a moment of critical detachment from the object of attention. My reading depends upon the notion that this act of detachment re-creates the object as a function of the past, and it is this emphasis in my description of aestheticism which highlights its relation to historicism. The ideal present (to use the vocabulary of our passage above) is the moment of absorptive subjectivity, when the object is “impressed” upon the malleable subject and remains indistinguishable from it. The moment of critical discrimination necessary to distinguish the object is equally necessary to stabilize a subject overwhelmed by its impressions. Thus the aesthetically re-created senses of objectivity and of subjective identity are constituted correlatively, and both are produced as effects of the passage of ideal present moments into the past. It is this recognition of temporality—“that precipitate sinking of things into the past”—which turns the dialectical engine of aestheticism, and turns it in the direction of historicism.
On the "side" of historicism, Pater begins by acknowledging epistemological difficulties that are structurally similar to those involved in the procedures of "aesthetic criticism." He begins, in other words, with the moment of identification between subject and object. Projected into the field of historical inquiry, this identification constitutes the epistemological problem we today call "cultural relativism." Pater was acutely sensitive to this problem—as in his aesthetic criticism—yet while he insists that the moment of identification is the necessary "first step," he also insists that it is only the first step (R, viii). In the effort to restore a sense of objectivity, he proposes an aesthetic solution in which the sense of historical difference is recreated from within the present subject as a representation. "We cannot truly conceive the [past] age: we can conceive the element it has contributed to our culture: we can treat the subjects of the age bringing that into relief" (B, 196). The lines of "relief" separating subject and object are drawn provisionally, of course; this operation manages to provide not objectivity but only the "sense of" objectivity, together with the tacit acknowledgment that such a "sense" is an aesthetic reconstruction. An awareness of the skeptical dimension of historicism, in other words, returns us to the aesthetic. Pater's historical representations are all bracketed by this awareness.

This sort of perspectivism concentrates on the present moment not as the ideal "now," but as the end point of a long history, the retrospective position from which the past may be totalized, its continuity may be constructed, and its differences may be gathered up into an identity. There is, in other words, a "kind of inconsistency" in Pater's treatment of the ideal present moment, which becomes in his work both the figure of radical discontinuity and the figure of retrospective totalization. If the impulse toward "modernity" may in several senses be considered the opposite of the impulse toward "history," Pater holds the two together in a radically conservative, dialectical relation. I have argued that it is Pater's strength to have practiced this "kind of inconsistency" as well as to have theoretically examined its consistent practice.