It is appropriate to conclude the history of the age of eclecticism with a writer for whom eclecticism became the necessary foundation of all his literary and critical efforts: “In this late day certainly, no critical process can be conducted reasonably without eclecticism” (Appreciations 16). Walter Pater seems to relish living late in history. He makes no effort to dissociate eclecticism from a perception of decline or belatedness. His “critical process” is one of “winnowing” and “searching,” and of becoming “conscious of the words he would select in a systematic reading of a dictionary, and still more of the words he would reject” (15). The elements of language “change along with the changing thoughts of living people”; the resources of literature increase rather than diminish; the accumulation of knowledge—of precursors—over time enriches rather than impoverishes. Logically, then, Pater feels none of that pessimism about the future of poetry that many Romantic and post-Romantic writers did. In his criticism Pater is always seeking beauty of mixed parentage, what I would term, thinking of Tennyson, the beauty of the medley. In all his work, but most deliberately in his novel Marius the Epicurean (1885), Pater carries on the work that Tennyson began in The Princess, that is, the conscious effort to formulate a poetics of eclecticism, and to write the eclectic self.
A familiar marker of eclecticism is its preference for mixtures, combinations, and medleys over all exclusive doctrines and devotions. In an 1868 review of the poetry of William Morris, Pater begins to develop an aesthetic that depends on the fulfillment of this eclectic principle. His admiration for Morris’s poetry stems from its perfect representation not of any particular moment in history, but of “an artificial or ‘earthly paradise’ [...] a finer ideal, extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal” (“Poems by William Morris” 144). In Pater’s view Morris thus exceeds the limitations of the nineteenth-century historical revivals: “This poetry is neither a mere reproduction of Greek or mediaeval life or poetry, nor a disguised reflex of modern sentiment” (144). Morris’s handling of historical material never becomes antiquarianism, which would constitute “a waste of the poet’s power” (146), nor does it become allegory or roman à clef. Rather Morris throws into relief the Greek or medieval life in a way that illuminates our relation to it or even our desire for it; he gives meaning to the past by making the reader feel the vitality of the past within the present: “The composite experience of all the ages is part of each one of us; to deduct from that experience, to obliterate any part of it, to come face to face with the people of a past age, as if the middle age, the Renaissance, the eighteenth century had not been, is as impossible as to become a little child, or enter again into the womb and be born. But though it is not possible to repress a single phase of that humanity, which, because we live and move and have our being in the life of humanity, makes us what we are; it is possible to isolate such a phase, to throw it into relief, to be divided against ourselves in zeal for it, as we may hark back to some choice space of our own individual life. We cannot conceive the age; we can conceive the element it has contributed to our culture; [...]” (146–47). In this important passage from Pater’s early criticism, a key element of his volitional eclecticism is already present: neither can we develop beyond any age or phase of our history nor can we cease moving through time to settle into only one: “the choice life of the human spirit is always under mixed lights, and in mixed situations” (147). At these moments, the spirit is expectant, ready to leap forward to “the promise.” Pater highlights those mixed elements of Morris’s poetry, where he senses that division of self, where distinct influences or “sentiments” create a mixed situation. The Arthurian legends of The Defence of Guenevere (1858) yield their “sweetness” only in a “Christian atmosphere” (144); the simpler passions of The Life and Death of Jason (1867) come as a Renaissance in Morris’s poetry, “explain[ing] through him a transition which, under many forms, is one law of the life of the human spirit” (146); and again, “It is precisely this effect, this grace of Hellenism relieved against the sorrow of the middle age, which forms the chief
Chapter 7: Walter Pater and Thomas Hardy

motive of *The Earthly Paradise* [1868], with an exquisite dexterity the two threads of sentiment are here interwoven and contrasted” (147). Morris and his characters live in medley, through the contradictions of accumulated history, revealing the nature of self in a late age. The conclusion to Pater’s review of Morris (later revised as the conclusion to *The Renaissance*) celebrates the ability of the best poets to enlarge and enrich our experience, something Morris accomplishes by throwing into relief those elements of history that have contributed to our culture and are seen to be still at work within it.

Thomas Hardy’s 1881 novel, *A Laodicean*, which has been the (sometimes hidden) keystone of this account of the age of eclecticism, might seem like an uneasy playfellow for Pater’s great works, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* and *Marius the Epicurean*. Critics have rarely considered these contemporaries together, and when they do, as Uttara Natarajan has noted, it is only in passing (849).¹ Natarajan herself goes much further in making the case for Pater’s importance in shaping Hardy’s idea of modernity (in *The Return of the Native*)—something that interests me as well, but in the context of their engagement with volitional eclecticism. Eclecticism was for Hardy, as for Pater, an inescapable condition of (literary) modernity. In *A Laodicean* Hardy takes two characters who have a practical, rather than intellectual, relationship with (and within) their own very mixed conditions, and demonstrates by the conclusion of the romance that their survival and their progress as human beings depend on their choosing to be eclectic. It is a heroic struggle, tinged with humor, an updating of romance (and Gothic) to suit the time and place.

Romance in *Marius the Epicurean* and *A Laodicean* is the generic equivalent of the historical mixed situation that Pater found in Morris’s poetry. Diane Elam theorizes romance in much the same way that Pater theorizes Renaissance. It is a mode that always exists, and the mode of romance has always been postmodern, “a counter-discourse on history and the real” (3). Romance never really sees history as past (unlike realism, she says, which narrates history only in order to put it aside): “the postmodern romance re-members the past, re-situates its temporality, in order to make the past impossible to forget” (15). Like eclecticism, romance plays fast and loose with history, preferring the anachronistic to the diachronic; but this anachronism is always a point of integration and blending, a mélange—or medley—of past and present. In romance, it does not matter that history is unraveled and re-sewn on a new pattern, because romance wants to remake the world in its own image through subversion and play.² As Fredric Jameson puts it in “Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre,” it is “that struggle between two worlds which characterizes the romance as a
genre” (145). If Matthew Arnold’s lines “Wandering between two worlds, one dead / The other powerless to be born” may be made to stand, as they often have, for the Victorian Zeitgeist, then it is not surprising that so many writers, Hardy and Pater among them, should return to romance by the end of the century to represent that struggle. For Jameson, “Romance as a form thus expresses a transitional moment, yet one of a very special type: its contemporaries must feel their society torn between past and future in such a way that the alternatives are grasped as hostile but somehow unrelated worlds” (158). Hardy dramatizes a Battle of the Styles in A Laodicean—Gothic versus Greek, tradition versus modernity—in such a way that it becomes a debate on what it would mean to choose eclecticism instead of any one style. Elam’s theorizing of romance as postmodern, anachronistic, and playful helps me to read the fictions of Hardy and Pater as repudiations of organic historicism. They choose revolution over evolution—they choose to return. History is still an object of desire, but it is no longer a distant one, because eclecticism brings the past closer to the present, and validates the activity of romance in picking up the pieces.

Eclecticism as Renaissance

Pater’s flexible use of the term “Renaissance” in the review of Morris to describe a phase in the life of a poet hints at both further refinement and further expansion of the idea. In The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry (originally published as Studies in the History of the Renaissance [1873]), Pater attends to a series of “mixed situations” that create the opportunity for what he defines broadly as rebirth or Renaissance. In each of the nine studies, he attempts to distinguish the particular enabling mixture of characteristics and circumstances in the lives and works of artists who lived between the late Middle Ages and the eighteenth century. Pater’s principle of selection, if it might be called that, depends on locating those moments of Renaissance that emerge when the artist casts the peculiar or “mixed” light of his personality over his creation. As Pater tells his readers in the preface, he aims “to distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced” (xx–xxi). Emphasizing, with a quote from Sainte-Beuve, that this can be accomplished only by contact with works at first hand, the passage recalls the process by which the early-nineteenth-century eclectic philosopher Victor Cousin hoped to recover and synthesize the truth from all the
various systems of thought that had existed throughout time—but with a crucial difference that makes Pater a new kind of eclectic. Instead of attempting a totalizing eclecticism that would encompass the best thoughts and aspirations of humanity (such as Cousin or Arnold might have done), Pater abandons that line of inquiry for a personal eclecticism, asking, what is this work of art to me? Instead of relying on Cousin’s “internal eye” to map an external truth, the aesthetic critic analyzes his own impressions for what they mean, first of all, in relation to himself. Eclecticism remains for Pater what it was for Cousin and Arnold, a method of study and discovery, but it quickly transmutes into something else, a method of creation. Nevertheless, Pater’s eclecticism has more in common with the praxis of nineteenth-century culture than with any effort to establish a criterion of truth by which one might judge the productions of the past. In the character of the dilettante, he makes a claim on our attention, as perhaps having found the way forward in the arts. While Cousin and Arnold hoped that progress, both social and aesthetic, could be achieved through volitional eclecticism, Pater assumes it. He compares his own eclectic operation to that of the chemist who, discovering an element, makes a note of its properties for himself and others, and so presumes to build on humanistic knowledge and aesthetic experience the way that scientists have always done. As the critic learns to recognize the types and varieties of influence that works of art have on him, he becomes more susceptible to beauty in all its diversity. In this way he overcomes at once the dilemma of style and the anxiety of being eclectic: “What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects. He will remember always that beauty exists in many forms. To him all periods, types, schools of taste, are in themselves equal. In all ages there have been some excellent workmen, and some excellent work done. The question he asks is always:—In whom did the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period find itself? where was the receptacle of its refinement, its elevation, its taste?” (xxi). The temperament of the critic is paramount, because Pater does not believe there are any objective criteria by which the works of history can be arranged, compared, and judged. Neither will tradition be a guide, since all judgments established by habit or custom are to be avoided. At once cut adrift from history and totally immersed in it, the aesthetic critic responds to beauty as to a physical rather than an intellectual force—seeing and feeling rather than thinking and judging. Eclecticism—selecting the best that has been thought and known—now becomes a matter of personal conviction. The extreme relativity of this position is not disconcerting, a cause for anxiety or pessimism
about the future, because each age, as each critic and artist, will view the past in its own mixed light.

Much of the preface to *The Renaissance* reads like an answer to Arnold’s “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.” Beginning the essay by setting out the goal of aesthetic criticism, Pater slyly concedes, “‘To see the object as in itself it really is,’ has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever”; but he then proceeds to refigure Arnold’s objectivist (outside-the-time-stream) criticism as an entirely subjective project: “in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly” (xix). As Geoffrey Tillotson suggests, the disinterested criticism that Arnold advocated “was, and is, impossible in practice” (92–93). The problem with seeing the object as in itself it really is could be traced back to history; Arnold wanted to pretend he could step outside the time-stream, to proceed as though “unaware that the date of a mind mattered” (Tillotson 94). No one, as far as Pater was concerned, could step outside of time; as he wrote of Morris, every individual is a composite of all the ages that came before. The object could not be independent of history any more than the spectator or reader could be. In absorbing Arnold’s criticism, Pater simply took what he could use and transformed it according to his different understanding of history. Another significant difference between Arnold and Pater is in their principle of selection (of the “best”). While Arnold searches for those works that are “modern” in the sense of being adequate to comprehend and represent the age in which they were produced (Arnold dips into history only to extract objects from it), Pater uncovers the “virtue” or “active principle” in a work, “the action of [its] unique, incommunicable faculty” (xxii). In emphasizing the individual virtue of a work of art, Pater does not neglect its place in history: “The various forms of intellectual activity which together make up the culture of an age, move for the most part from different starting-points, and by unconnected roads. As products of the same generation they partake of a common character, and unconsciously illustrate each other; but of the producers themselves, each group is solitary, gaining what advantage or disadvantage there may be in intellectual isolation” (xxiii–xxiv). In *The Renaissance* Pater wants to account for culture, not a culture that has come and gone, but culture that continues to shape the present. By contrast, Arnold wants to reform and improve the culture of the present on a model extracted from the past. At the end of the preface, Pater is again thinking of Arnold when he says that certain eras do provide more favorable conditions for the mutual impacting of art, poetry, philosophy, and religion. The Renaissance was just such a “many-sided, centralised, complete” age,
in which each producer participated “in the best thoughts which that age produced” (xxiv). Pater believes this, but it is not the structuring principle of the work; the movement of the Renaissance is not centripetal, but centrifugal—outward through space and time. In his studies the importance of Renaissance derives not only from the discovery of “old and forgotten sources” of imaginative pleasure but also from the “divination of fresh sources thereof—new experiences, new subjects of poetry, new forms of art” (2), which give new resources to the present and the future.

The preface to The Renaissance provides only the first instance of Pater’s coming to terms with the personal, even private, nature of criticism. Deeply influenced as Arnold was by French literature and criticism, Pater, too, looked to the eclectic examples of Renan and Sainte-Beuve in particular, to reach some of his most enduring conclusions about the means and ends of criticism. In her exhaustive, two-volume study Walter Pater’s Reading, Billie Inman cites “Renan’s eclectic mode of thought” as one of the three major influences on Pater by 1866 (xi). Renan’s thesis in “The Religions of Antiquity” underlies “Pater’s idea that the modern mind is eclectic” (98). It is the same source from which Arnold would have imbibed Renan’s eclectic principles. Unlike Arnold, Pater does not regard eclecticism as a cure for the naïve eclecticism of the period, because he is not interested in the age as a particularly eclectic one. Like renaissance, eclecticism as a concept is not fixed historically or geographically. Eclecticism is instead most persuasive, and most fruitful for Pater, as an explanation of the peculiar operations of his own mind. Inman, who has most carefully traced Pater’s unscholarly borrowings, translations, transformations, and misquotations, puts it this way: “Pater developed a remarkable originality through self-confident judgment, selective imitation, bold modification, and a gift for expressive phrasing. With a great mass of material to work upon, he was able to select, shape, and define ideas—indeed to form an authorial identity for himself” (ix). His eclectic reading, conducted apparently without system, permitted him to explore the relation of each text to his own mind, to read “responsively.”

Pater’s style of criticism derives from his style of reading, which can be characterized by its unusual receptivity. Not surprisingly, then, one of the traits of the Renaissance that attracts Pater is its openness to new ideas. As a “student” of the period, Pater has an advantage, he feels, over the student of the Reformation or French Revolution, because “he is not beset at every turn by the inflexibilities and antagonisms of some well-recognised controversy, with rigidly defined opposites, exhausting the intelligence and limiting one’s sympathies” (20). Like the French Romantics who saw eclecticism as a way beyond ideological polarization, Pater
sees the Renaissance as a model for overcoming the false dilemma posed by the historical inheritance: “Here there are no fixed parties, no exclusions: all breathes of that unity of culture in which ‘whatsoever things are comely’ are reconciled, for the elevation and adorning of our spirits” (20–21). Pater probably owes something of this catholic attitude to Sainte-Beuve, whose work (like Renan’s) stands behind so much of The Renaissance. In his famous essay “What Is a Classic?” Sainte-Beuve argues against the old, narrow definition of the term. In France the Academy determined which authors were classics or models, “established rules for composition and style, strict rules to which one must conform” (86). A largely reactionary effort meant to beat back the advance of romanticism, the restriction of the meaning of the term “classic” did little to nurture “classic” literature. Sainte-Beuve, in attempting to redefine as classic “an author who has enriched the human spirit,” emphasizes that a classic can be born in any time and place: “The important thing today, it seems to me, is to maintain the conception and creed, while at the same time broadening it” (92). Sainte-Beuve, who had a difficult relationship with the French philosopher of eclecticism, Victor Cousin, is nonetheless echoing his teacher by acknowledging the need for selection without dogmatism. Rather than contracting the size of the literary canon, Sainte-Beuve would give it more generous proportions: “Moreover, there is really no question of sacrificing or disparaging anything. The Temple of Taste, I think, needs to be rebuilt; but in rebuilding it we have only to enlarge it, that it may become the Pantheon of mankind’s best, of all those who have made a notable and lasting contribution to the store of the spirit’s treasures and delights” (93). Sainte-Beuve also probably influenced Pater’s personal approach to criticism. After listing those authors whom he would invite to his remodeled Temple of Taste, Sainte-Beuve gestures toward an infinite process of selection and revision: “The imagination of each reader will enable him to complete the sketch and even to choose the group he prefers. For choose one must, because the primary condition of good taste, after all has been understood, is to cease from endless voyaging and finally settle somewhere and take a stand” (96). With the comfortable, solid example of French eclecticism before him, Pater can proceed with confidence to judge and classify the literature of the past, to give it an order that, while entirely his own, will nonetheless guide others toward a revised understanding of their own and past cultures.

As part of a general effort to see all ages and tastes as equal (in the sense of what they have to offer to the student of culture), Pater continually bears witness in The Renaissance to those moments in which historical oppositions are overcome or held in balance within the works of exceptional artists, precisely the mixed situations he prefers in Morris’s poetry.
A few examples will demonstrate the eclectic pattern of Pater’s judgments. In general, Pater conceives of the Renaissance as the period when “the rude strength of the middle age turns to sweetness; and the taste for sweetness generated there becomes the seed of the classical revival in it” (2). Pater considers the poetry of Provence, with its “earthly passion, with its intimacy, its freedom, its variety” to represent a starting point for a medieval Renaissance (3). The poetic expression of liberty he finds there marks the beginning of a new phase of human experience, “the free play of the human intelligence around all subjects presented to it” (3). The literature of the medieval Renaissance, described in “Two Early French Stories,” is the product of mixed parentage: the “outbreak of reason and the imagination” within the intense atmosphere of the Christian ideal. Much of the essay concerns the form taken by the era’s “antinomianism,” especially the “search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination” (18–19). The one-sidedness of Christianity gives rise to these desires, a conclusion that strongly echoes Arnold’s in the “Hebrew and Hellene” chapter of Culture and Anarchy. Not surprisingly, like Arnold, Pater wants to suggest that a balance, or mixture, is more likely to produce great art.

Pater also pursues this theme in “Sandro Botticelli” where he identifies the peculiar appeal of the painter’s work as having its source in a “middle world.” Preoccupied neither with Heaven nor with Hell as were so many of his contemporaries, Botticelli wanted to paint “men and women, in their mixed and uncertain condition” (43). Pater even theorizes that Botticelli subscribed to a heresy of the time, that human beings were actually fallen angels, who had taken no side in the war for Heaven. This uncertain, in-between condition evokes the painter’s sympathy, causing him to paint his figures with a shadow of this knowledge upon them, of a great chance not taken. The mixture Pater perceives in Botticelli’s subjects was evident in his practice as well. In language reminiscent of Reynolds’s Discourses, and the post-Renaissance academic tradition more generally, Pater describes Botticelli’s genius as eclectic: “the genius of which Botticelli is the type usurps the data before it as the exponent of ideas, moods, visions of its own; in this interest it plays fast and loose with those data, rejecting some and isolating others, and always combining them anew” (42). While Donald Hill cites William Blake’s (largely negative) annotations of Reynolds as an influence on Pater’s preface to The Renaissance (and by extension on his aesthetic criticism), the Botticelli essay points to a different way of interpreting Blake’s aphorism “Ages are all equal, but genius is always above its age” (xxi; qtd. in Hill 299). What the geniuses of the Renaissance shared, in Pater’s reckoning, was the capacity to usurp and combine data they are given, to make it their own. Blake is typically figured as
a proponent of uninstructed, native genius (in the same vein as Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition*) when he derides Reynolds’s educational methods (master the tradition first, and then create something new); but Pater clearly makes Blake his own when he makes Botticelli’s genius—his membership in the broader Renaissance—dependent on his eclecticism.

For the sculptors Pater takes up in “Luca della Robbia,” membership in the Renaissance is again the result of a transitional historical situation and an eclectic method. In Pater’s account, the fifteenth-century Tuscan sculptors lie somewhere between the universalizing practice of the Greeks (meant to express the perfect type of the individual, free of accidents) and the incompleteness of Michelangelo (meant to express individuality and intensity). They “unite to an intense and individual expression by a system of conventionalism as skillful and subtle as that of the Greeks” “elements of tranquillity, of repose” (54). Reynolds would have approved. They mastered convention, and brought to it their particular individuality. In “The Poetry of Michelangelo,” Pater elaborates on his judgment that the genius of Michelangelo had been “spiritualised by the reverie of the middle age, penetrated by its spirit of inwardness and introspection” (52), blending a “lovely strangeness” with classical form, “sweetness” with strength (58). The fifteenth century into which both Leonardo and Michelangelo were born presents the historian with a “two-fold” movement, “partly the Renaissance, partly also the coming of what is called the ‘modern spirit,’ with its realism, its appeal to experience” (86). The Renaissance is modern because it is backward-looking—and both nature and antiquity are compassed in its view. In Leonardo’s painting Pater sees the same “peculiar atmosphere and mixed lights” (86) that define his revolutionary modernity; there is, for example, in Leonardo’s *Saint John the Baptist* a “strange likeness to the Bacchus which hangs near it, and which set Théophile Gautier thinking of Heine’s notion of decayed gods, who, to maintain themselves, after the fall of paganism, took employment in the new religion” (93). The invocation here is not fanciful. Pater regards the blending as a “symbolical invention” that will be used “as the starting point of a train of sentiment, subtle and vague as a piece of music” (93). One gets the sense in reading *The Renaissance* that this is the music Pater has been hearing all along. When he comes to the description of “La Gioconda,” the reader knows it is the climax of his quest. The historical blending recurs, but on a huge scale, with Pater seeing all the “thoughts and experience of the world” in her face (98). In this justifiably famous passage, he seems to follow the woman, who has been dead many times, through the graveyards and “deep seas” of history. She is a singular being, but she is also the
pictorial embodiment of the eclectic, “modern idea,” the representative of collective human experience.

The essays on the arts of the Renaissance, along with the preface and conclusion, were certainly the most important for determining the shape of literary modernism in Britain, but they do not reveal as clearly the terms of the Victorian debate on eclecticism, as does Pater’s one essay on a fellow scholar. In “Pico della Mirandola,” Pater exposes one of the peculiar passions of the Renaissance, the desire to reconcile the Christian religion with that of ancient Greece. Pater responds to Pico’s effort with both fascination and uneasiness, much as a contemporary might have done. In the first instance, Pater recognizes the impulse as a “generous” one: “To reconcile forms of sentiment which at first sight seem incompatible, to adjust the various products of the human mind to one another in one many-sided type of intellectual culture, to give humanity, for heart and imagination to feed upon, as much as it could possibly receive, belonged to the generous instinct of that age” (23).

Pico himself, while embodying the “picturesque union of contrasts” (37) present in so much Renaissance art, yet failed to discover the perfect order that would explain all differences and resolve them. As J. B. Bullen has argued, the process of Renaissance at work here allows us to access the “composite experience” of all past ages (Myth 282)—what Pater saw and felt in La Gioconda. The uneasiness Pico’s contemporaries felt, and which Pater’s probably felt, derives from their anxiety that having access to rival traditions would ultimately displace Christianity. And though Pater admires Pico’s effort, he finally concedes that the “reconciliation” between Christianity and paganism can be only an “imaginative” one, achievable exclusively through art.

Pater responds to the efforts of Pico as to a precursor who attempted the same experiment under similar conditions. As a working model of aesthetic criticism, the imaginative reconciliation of opposing forces becomes the keynote in all of Pater’s writings; but even he was not immune to the powerful sense of failure provoked by the eclecticism of his age, a failure always marked by intellectual confusion (arguably of the kind represented by Pico). His attitude toward Pico’s effort to resolve the differences between Christianity and paganism is complicated by Pater’s acceptance of a developmental historical model, derived from Hegel and Lessing, among others. Countering the instinct that drives Pico and others like him, Pater writes that a “modern scholar” would remember that “all religions may be regarded as natural products,” organically related to the age in which they were born (25). By contrast, the scholars of the fifteenth century “lacked the very rudiments of the historic sense, which, by an imaginative act, throws itself back into a world unlike one’s own, and estimates
every intellectual creation in its connection with the age from which it proceeded” (26). In essence, Pater brings historicism to bear on the question of eclecticism; the strength of nineteenth-century historicism gave birth to eclecticism and its attendant crises, but it also appeared to be the surest means of arresting the eclectic tendency. Passages on the subject in *Plato and Platonism*, generally considered to be his mature pronouncement on these competing critical methods, are especially revealing in this respect. Commencing his account of Platonic philosophy with a brief sketch of the intellectual situation of the period, Pater shows us a world not so different from the late nineteenth century: “the world Plato had entered into was already almost weary of philosophical debate, bewildered by the oppositions of sects, the claims of rival schools. Language and the processes of thought were already become sophisticated, the very air he breathed sickly with off-cast speculative atoms” (*Plato and Platonism* 6). Demonstrating that every age experiences the burden of history, Plato has to become, at least in the *Timaeus*, “an eclectic critic of older [theories]” offering “a sort of storehouse of all physical theories” (6–7). These older thinkers are “everywhere” in Plato’s philosophy, “not as the stray carved corner of some older edifice, to be found here or there amid the new, but rather like minute relics of earlier organic life in the very stones he builds with” (7). This image, perhaps more than any other in Pater’s writings, portrays the natural eclecticism of intellectual work. He does not represent Plato’s intellectual architecture as naïvely eclectic, with tacked-on ornamentation, but neither is it volitionally eclectic; rather he invokes a third term, a kind of organic eclecticism, best represented by the image of fossils in stone. The image also suggests the necessity of excavation, and the operation in the present, of the historic method. There is nothing new in Plato, “or rather, as in many other very original products of human genius, the seemingly new is old also, a palimpsest, a tapestry of which the actual threads have served before” (8). When Pater on the very next page rejects eclectic criticism in favor of that historic method that will allow him to excavate Plato’s philosophy, he does so, I believe, not in consequence of the obsolescence of eclecticism, but because it is not the proper tool with which to criticize “speculative opinion” (8). Pater calls eclecticism “the method which has prevailed in periods of large reading but with little inceptive force of their own” (9). Its defect, he claims, is its “tendency to misrepresent the true character of the doctrine it professes to explain, that it may harmonise thus the better with the other elements of a pre-conceived system” (9). Rather than view Pater’s judgment on eclecticism as his final word on the subject, I want to look carefully at his characterization of Plato’s philosophizing, Plato had to become eclectic to cope with the mass of existing theories,
but his own strong personality shaped these “relics of earlier organic life” into a new dwelling of his own creation. Unlike many earlier critics of eclecticism (especially G. H. Lewes), Pater does not view eclecticism as the study method of an apprentice. In fact, he views eclecticism as having too powerful a creative tendency; it misrepresents others’ ideas (as Pater so often does) in order to harmonize them with an inner vision. Nevertheless, Pater is keenly aware that, in his own century, the “historic method” has discredited the “generous, eclectic or synthetic method” in criticism, because eclecticism colors one’s object of study too vividly (9). The products of history are really only intelligible, Pater concedes, at their own date and in their own environment. This claim, while seeming to go against his own scholarly and critical method, can only have been intended as a starting point to the study of history, but never the goal of the (imaginative) historians he admired, such as Winckelmann or Michelet, who transcribed not mere fact, but “fact in its infinite variety, as modified by human preference in all its infinitely varied forms” (Appreciations 10–11). Indeed, it is not even the result of his study of Platonic thought, since Pater is always returning to the notion that Plato is modern because he was a relativist, unwilling to rest in any conclusion. Like eclecticism, Platonism cultivates the “habit . . . of tentative thinking and suspended judgment” (Plato and Platonism 195). It is not surprising, then, that the American classics scholar Paul Shorey, after reading Pater, made Plato “the true spiritual father of the long and illustrious line of sceptics and eclectics,” in which he also numbers Victor Cousin and Matthew Arnold (261).

Bullen and many others have observed that Pater’s “studies” are largely about the discovery of selfhood, precisely what made his contemporaries so uneasy about the work. Indeed, Pater’s final essay has often been read as the key to his project and Winckelmann as the precursor who, like Pater, remade the world according to his own peculiar vision of a moment in history. Winckelmann acknowledged that great art would be both imitative and original, and he lived his life in much the same way; in his lifestyle he emulated, as he thought, a Greek existence and, through this discipline, became in his own time thoroughly original. In Winckelmann’s life and writings, Pater discovers the same pattern of Renaissance—a “mixed situation,” and rebirth through combination: “The basis of all artistic genius lies in the power of conceiving humanity in a new and striking way, of putting a happy world of its own creation in place of the meaner world of our common days, generating around itself an atmosphere with a novel power of refraction, selecting, transforming, recombining the images it transmits, according to the choice of the imaginative intellect” (Renaissance 170). In his reconstruction of Winckelmann’s life, Pater focuses his
attention on just these effects of artistic genius. When he moves to Rome, eats only bread and drinks only wine, and creates friendships with “brilliant youths,” Winckelmann puts “a happy world of [his] own creation in place of the meaner world of our common days.” Coming into contact with the antique, first in Dresden and then in Rome, the antiquarian “escape[s] from abstract theory to intuition, to the exercise of sight and touch” (147); he generates around himself “an atmosphere with a novel power of refraction, selecting, transforming, recombining the images it transmits, according to the choice of the imaginative intellect.” As Hegel famously testified, Winckelmann opened a new organ for the human spirit through this critical effort. But it was not distant, disembodied criticism that could accomplish the revival of the Greek spirit in art; rather it was Winckelmann’s bodily immersion in the past that allowed for the transformation of the present. Only the revival of the (albeit imagined) Greek style of life could make their art viable again.

That powerful sense of historical development evident in all of his writing made Winckelmann the first modern historian of art; and perhaps, too, his comprehension of a historical situation bounded by loss and mitigated by irreversible decline gave subsequent writers and artists a perspective from which to criticize their own culture. Even as he recognized that “Greek art was determined by its particular environment: the climatic, social, and political conditions [. . . ] made it unique” (Reflections xix), he saw past this determining moment to a “period of beginning [. . . ] an age when man came slowly to realize it was not some superhistorical force or authority but he himself who determined the course of his destiny” (xxi). This acceptance of historical development in conjunction with its opposite, the loosing of the trammels of history at the moment of self-awareness, gave birth to the enlightened eclecticism of the nineteenth century (and of Pater in particular), an eclecticism whose modus operandi was the resuscitation of styles of life (in order to revive whatever particular element of that lifestyle seemed desirable, whether art, architecture, social organization, or literature). Winckelmann himself escapes the taint of naïve eclecticism because his system of imitation appeared to be internally coherent. James Eli Adams makes a compelling argument for the influence of Winckelmann’s anachronisms on the development of Pater’s critical persona. Characterizing Winckelmann himself as “a relic of classical antiquity,” Pater “associates the critic’s life with previous discoveries of the physical relics of Greek art, events that confirm and extend the authority of ‘the Hellenic tradition’” (Adams 158). Adams further argues that “Pater recasts that identity [the instinctive, anachronistic pagan] as a tradition in which his own reception of Winckelmann participates. [. . . ] Pater’s essay takes
its place in a series of critical encounters that constitute the authority of the Greek ideal as a tradition renewed and extended with each discovery of a ‘relic’ of Greek culture” (158). Viewed as an entry in a series of recurrent Renaissances, Pater’s recovery of Winckelmann perpetuates, I think, the kind of eclecticism that Winckelmann himself attributed to the Carracci. As Nachahmer (artist-imitators), they had no choice but to come to terms with the historical inheritance. In order to become inimitable themselves they had to imitate ancient art. Winckelmann imitated Greek culture, and in imitating Winckelmann, Pater too becomes completely original and inimitable.

Eclecticism as Romance

Until the end of the nineteenth century the romance of architecture was literature’s privileged interlocutor for conversations about the proper mixture of past and present, and romance and realism in modern life. And as J. B. Bullen has observed in connection with Hardy in A Laodicean, “the choice of architectural styles [. . . ] is but a symptom of a multiplicity of other choices” (The Expressive Eye 122). When the architect-hero of A Laodicean makes his first appearance, he is sketching a medieval church. At the time Hardy published this novel, in 1881, George Somerset’s pastime would have been a respectable one, even a middle-class cliché—but with a difference. The Gothic Revival in architecture is in decline, and Somerset has only just become enthusiastic. During his formative years, while Gothic was in ascendance, he favored the classical styles; about to embark on his professional life, he believes that it would be profitable to have more than a passing acquaintance with medieval architecture. While in the vicinity of De Stancy Castle, he comes upon a Baptist church where he witnesses a young woman, Paula Power, refuse to go through with her baptism into the community. The minister, Mr. Woodwell, delivers a scorching sermon on her lack of commitment to her father’s faith, introducing into the novel the theme of the “Laodicean.” He draws attention to these words in the Book of Revelation: “I know thy works, that thou are neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. . . . Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (14). Originally directed at the Christians of a wealthy trading community in a Roman province of Asia Minor, the designation “Laodicean” came to mean any person who was half-hearted in religion or politics, and in this
novel, in the choice of a style. Hardy has already informed us that Somerset, too, is a Laodicean: he vacillates on the question of style; although he is highly educated and even talented, he remains unformed by his still-limited experiences and uncommitted to any particular aesthetic doctrine or more conventional faith. Hardy describes him as having “more of the beauty—if beauty it ought to be called—of the future human type than of the past” (4). An aspect of this future life will be—is—indecision resulting from excessive introspection: George Somerset “had suffered from the modern malady of unlimited appreciativeness as much as any living man of his own age” (7). To be modern, perhaps, means seeing—and enjoying—too much, because one has too much access to everything: sights and ideas, past and future.

Paula and George share the same dilemma, the same contradictory impulses and perceptions, which Hardy concentrates in the Gothic castle that brings them together. The young and beautiful heiress to a railway fortune inherits her father’s profound modernity and the castle, representing history and all that her father could not give her—traceable genealogy, a portrait gallery exhibiting family physiognomy, a place in the nation’s history, and so on. The castle provokes a crisis; even as George demonstrates to Paula that he is capable of undertaking a sensitive expansion and restoration of the dilapidated buildings, Paula—“A mixed young lady” (30)—anachronistically wants to construct a Greek court in its center. She confides to George that she is not a medievalist, but an eclectic who longs for the romance of history (78). She wants to manufacture Greek pottery in a town that she will build herself, a utopian community of artisans. She exercises in a special gymnasium. Her castle room is cluttered with books and periodicals from America and the Continent: “These things [George observes], ensconced amid so much of the old and hoary, were as if a stray hour of the nineteenth century had wandered like a butterfly into the thirteenth, and lost itself there” (31). George associates Paula with “the march of mind—the steamship, and the railway, and the thoughts that shake mankind” (79), but the young architect witnesses the shifting of her allegiance toward the Gothic. When she is condemned in the newspaper as a barbarian outsider who threatens to destroy the castle, instead of holding it in trust for the public, Paula abandons her eclectic plan. Further, the spell of everything associated with the De Stancy family affects her deeply, so much so that Mr. Woodwell fears she is losing her faith under the influence of medieval Catholicism: “Sometimes I think those Stancy towers and lands will be a curse to her. The spirit of old papistical times still lingers in the nooks of those silent walls, like a bad odour in a still atmosphere, dulling the iconoclastic emotions of the Puritan” (54). Although George had
“inclined to each denomination as it presented itself” and “had travelled through a great many beliefs and doctrines without feeling himself much better than when he set out” (48), he too is repelled by Paula’s threatened return to the national religion. By giving up her Dissenting inheritance and restoring her castle to a “pure” Gothic, Paula moves one step closer toward a dangerous mistake: marriage with Captain De Stancy. This melodramatic turn in the plot is precipitated by the novel’s villain, De Stancy’s son William Dare, a cosmopolite photographer who specializes in creating illusions. He perceives Paula’s weakness, her artistic predilection for “a well-known line of ancestors” (96), her desire to be “romantic and historical” (95). As George falls in love with Paula, his own artistic principles loosen to the extent that he adopts an eclectic point of view against Paula’s dangerously exclusive Gothic outlook. When Paula first poses the question “Do you think it a thing more to be proud of that one’s father should have made a great tunnel and railway like that, than that one’s remote ancestor should have built a great castle like this?” (79), George still favors the castle. After examining the great railway tunnel and observing its integration within the landscape, Somerset and Hardy seem to offer a contrary response, or at least an eclectic one. Hardy’s architect hero begins to recognize that medieval architecture is dead, while modern constructions such as the elder De Stancy’s suburban villa and the ugly Baptist chapel are vital and vibrant.

As the melodramatic plot unfolds against the backdrop of a realistic novel, and Paula first accepts Captain De Stancy’s offer of marriage—he wins her heart when he poses before a De Stancy portrait wearing armor and asking “Is the resemblance strong?”—and then rejects him when Dare’s plot to gain her fortune and discredit Somerset is uncovered. Paula then literally goes on a quest to win the love of Somerset, following him on a journey through Europe. This final reversal of the conventions of romance had been anticipated earlier in the story when Paula rescued Somerset from a castle tower where he had been entrapped. In the end, when Paula has found the object of her desire, she accepts Mr. Woodwell’s designation for her: “What I really am, as far as I know, is one of that body to whom lukewarmth is not an accident but a provisional necessity, till they see a little more clearly” (376). As if to maintain her inconsistency to the end, Hardy has Paula wish that her castle had not burnt down and that her lover were a De Stancy (379), even as George is planning to “build a new house from the ground, eclectic in style” (378). The castle will truly be, what it should already have been, a ruin whose original faith and significance were irretrievably lost long before the nineteenth century. Hardy’s fiction articulates well the despair of contemporaries such as William
Morris over the possibility of a Gothic Revival, and also the dilemma of his heroine as she tries to separate herself from the Gothic influence, to find out what she will become herself.

The question of exactly how to do this was a vital one, both for those working in the architectural profession, and for those simply caught up in its romance. Hardy answers decisively in favor of eclecticism, by making architecture the figure for all the other choices one has to make in the nineteenth century, when all the old authorities have gone the way of Stancy Castle, and by foregrounding the desire for romance. Twice during Captain De Stancy’s courtship of Paula Power, the narration comments on the desire that is driving the heroine’s story. The first time it is the narrator who defines her romanticism as natural, even healthy: “Human nature is at bottom romantic rather than ascetic, and the local habitation which accident had provided for Paula was perhaps acting as a solvent of the hard, morbidly introspective views thrust upon her in early life” (188). Even though the castle leads Paula astray, in one sense, it does allow her to forge a connection with the past that has been missing from her previous experience. That might be a good thing, the narrator tells us, for making her views less dogmatic and narrow. When she asserts at the novel’s end that it is right to be lukewarm until she sees a little more clearly, she might be making a broader claim for the age, and for human beings in general. Is it not better to be a Laodicean than to be resolutely, even passionately wrong? (One thinks here of William Butler Yeats’s memorable lines from “The Second Coming,” which refer to the events of the Russian Revolution, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity” [7–8].) The second time the narration comments on romantic human nature, it is focalized through Somerset: “But romanticism, which will exist in every human breast as long as human nature itself exists, had asserted itself in her. Veneration for things old, not because of any merit in them, but because of their long continuance, had developed in her; and her modern spirit was taking to itself wings and flying away” (242). For Somerset the old thing lacking merit is first of all the De Stancy line, which has enchanted the woman he loves; but the claim here has far-reaching implications for the dilemma of style Hardy represents. If Paula’s “modern spirit” takes wings and flies away, if she tries to put the castle back the way it was, ignoring all of the intervening centuries, then she is being untrue to herself and to the present age. The eclectic does not time-travel. She does not put herself into the past; rather, she brings the past forward. In Elam’s terms, this is what romance has always done. It “re-members” the past in order to make it “unforgettable.” The Gothic Revivalists who tried not to be eclectic had to fail, because they were neglecting the modern spirit.
As Hardy and Morris recognized in their SPAB (Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings) activities, restoration that stripped away the accumulated layers of history was a crime against the history the restorers pretended to honor. Only in the blending of the layered past with the multifarious present is history actually preserved. When Paula finally rejects De Stancy, she says that she does not “care one atom for artistic completeness and a splendid whole” (309). Paula does not stop longing for romance, but she will have it through eclecticism.

As a romance, *Marius the Epicurean* probably has more in common with the aestheticism and dreamlike narratives of George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* (1858) or his later *Lillith* (1895) than it does with Hardy’s *A Laodicean*, and yet it is the closer kin of Hardy’s mixed work because it foregrounds the problem of eclecticism in the formation of the self. In it Pater largely repeats Winckelmann’s effort to recombine images according to the author’s (and character’s) peculiar sense of fact, but it also represents Pater’s supreme effort to “reconcile” competing styles of life—just as Hardy has Paula Power do. Pater would have been attracted to the second century A.D., where he sets the action, for much the same reason he was intrigued by the Renaissance. As a period in history that allowed for the simultaneous existence of various literatures, philosophies, religions, and ritual practices, it would have been rich with the alloys created by their amalgamation. Marius enters this complex world from one bound by the traditions of home and the ancient religion of Numa. Very early in the narrative, Marius lets go of his exclusive devotion, so “that that early, much cherished religion of the villa might come to count with him as but one form of poetic beauty, or of the ideal, in things; as but one voice, in a world where there were many voices it would be moral weakness not to listen to” (I:43–44). The initial rival to the religion of home is simply a new phase of life, rich with new opportunities. He begins to think that he has spent too much time in contemplation of the past (one of the tendencies of his traditional form of worship), observing that when the modern world turns toward or absorbs something of the past, “for the purpose of a fastidious self-correction, in matters of art, literature, and even, as we have seen, of religion, at least it improved, by a shade or two of more scrupulous finish, on the old pattern” (I:48). These observations are in accord with Pater’s usual attitude regarding the quarrel of the ancients and moderns; modernity offers incremental improvement on the past, because of the accretion of all past times. Pater even manages to avoid any prolonged note of nostalgia in the early chapters, by this turn of Marius’s toward the present and the future. Marius begins to see that neither individuals nor societies are impoverished by time, but rather are made richer by its perpetual motion.
As he turns decisively toward the future, Marius encounters the character who will voice some of Pater’s most enduring views on language and literature (that will be reiterated and extended in *Appreciations*). Together with Flavian, a young poet, Marius reads the “Golden Book” of the day, Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*. From describing the external appearance of the precious book, the narrator turns to what is inside, prefiguring as he does something of Pater’s description of Tennyson’s language in “Style”: “And the inside was something not less dainty and fine, full of the archaisms and curious felicities in which that generation delighted, quaint terms and images, picked fresh from the early dramatists, the lifelike phrases of some lost poet preserved by an old grammarian, racy morsels of the vernacular and studied prettinesses—all alike, mere playthings for the genuine power and natural eloquence of the erudite artist, unsuppressed by his erudition, which, however, made some people angry, chiefly less well ‘got-up’ people, and especially those who were untidy from indolence” (I:56). Pater’s admiration for the mixed languages of contemporary authors such as Newman, Carlyle, and Tennyson is translated, here, into Marius’s appreciation of certain ancient writers, who were equally affected by a mixed situation. Most of Pater’s readers would not instinctively have grouped the “classics” with such authors of their own day whose literary languages were personal and complex, thinking perhaps that ancient writers were pure, fresh, and unburdened by precursors. The narrator, whose temporal location is coterminal with Pater’s, as the references to Swift and Gautier in this chapter indicate, declares emphatically, “No! it was certainly not that old-fashioned ease of the early literature, which could never come again” (I:56). By acknowledging the problem of self-consciousness here, Pater rejects an entire tradition of literary criticism (operative for more than three centuries) that bemoaned the loss of originality, freshness, naïveté, purity, an unconditioned self—whatever ideal condition was held against the self-consciousness of the belated artist. Pater is more interested in showing his readers an ancient literature that shares certain key elements, even a sensibility, with the literature of his own, eclectic age. His generation delights in “archaisms,” such as those to be found in Morris’s poetry; they take pleasure in the “racy morsels of the vernacular” that might be uncovered in Browning; and they recognize the “natural eloquence of the erudite artist” in someone such as Arnold, who indeed made them angry enough to cry for more of Alexander Smith! Apuleius, too, wrote in the vernacular, and like the literary languages developed by Morris, Browning, Arnold, and Pater himself, it was written “with all the care of a learned language” (I:57).
Chapter 7: Walter Pater and Thomas Hardy

The chapter on “Euphuism” that follows the boys’ reading of Apuleius sets out some of the elements of eclecticism that Pater repeats three years later in “Style.” The narrator tells us that Flavian himself possessed “a fine instinctive sentiment of the exact value and power of words,” and he designs for himself a “literary programme” that distinctly resembles Pater’s own, at least as he represented it in “Style”: “He would make of it a serious study, weighing the precise power of every phrase and word, as though it were precious metal, disentangling the later associations and going back to the original and native sense of each,—restoring to full significance all its wealth of latent figurative expression, reviving or replacing its outworn or tarnished images. Latin literature and the Latin tongue were dying of routine and languor; and what was necessary, first of all, was to re-establish the natural and direct relationship between thought and expression, between the sensation and the term, and restore to words their primitive power” (I:96). The young man is both ambitious, seeking to become a leader among men by increasing the power of his words, and patriotic, wishing to rehabilitate “the mother-tongue, then fallen so tarnished and languid” (I:94). Flavian envisions an improved, vernacular literary language, a combination of the “increasingly artificial” and “barbarously pedantic” classical Latin with the “colloquial idiom” and its “thousand chance-tost gems of racy or picturesque expression” (I:95). This combination is what Pater discovered in “Joachim Du Bellay” and the Pleiad school of poets in sixteenth-century France: “Du Bellay’s object [was] to adjust the existing French culture to the rediscovered classical culture” (The Renaissance 128). This project was based, like Flavian’s, on the writer’s faith in the vernacular. Great literature comes from a language that is free, and alive. Du Bellay wanted to learn from the classics, but to bring the strength of antique words and images into French, rather than to borrow Greek and Latin, to put another’s words into his mouth. The passage in Marius also echoes the familiar pronouncements of Vico, Wordsworth, or Carlyle on the necessity of returning to origins (“primitive power”) in order to reinvigorate a dying language. Pater recommends a similar operation in “Style,” in which the writer uses eclecticism to find his own original vocabulary: “A writer, full of a matter he is before all things anxious to express, may think of those laws, the limitations of vocabulary, structure, and the like, as a restriction, but if a real artist will find in them an opportunity. His punctilious observance of the proprieties of his medium will diffuse through all he writes a general air of sensibility, of refined usage” (12–13). Though Pater admits that some writers might fall into “mannerisms” and “fopperies,” a great writer, “braced by those restraints,” will discover “his own true manner” (14). A “real artist” finds
opportunity in restriction, and a treasure house in the burden of the past. Pater’s argument here should sound familiar, not only because it runs all through his work, but because it is identical to the claims made by eclectics from Winckelmann and Reynolds to Cousin and Arnold. For Pater, then, Euphuism is not mere affectation; rather it is care of language, care of the instrument with which the artist creates. He answers the question of why a writer cannot say a thing simply, like the old writers of Greece, with a spirited defense of Euphuism: “Certainly, the most wonderful, the unique, point, about the Greek genius, in literature as in everything else, was the entire absence of imitation in its productions. How had the burden of precedent, laid upon every artist, increased since then! It was all around one:—that smoothly built world of old classical taste, an accomplished fact, with overwhelming authority on every detail of the conduct of one’s work. With no fardel on its own back, yet so imperious towards those who came labouring after it, Hellas, in its early freshness, looked as distant from Flavian even then as it does from ourselves. There might seem to be no place left for novelty or originality,—place only for a patient, an infinite, faultlessness” (Marius I:99–100). Neither Flavian nor Pater retreats from “the burden of precedent,” feeling instead what Harold Bloom named, in Pater’s honor, “the intoxication of belatedness.” Pater reiterates here what he wrote in The Renaissance, that there are neither poetical nor unpoetical ages. Poetic beauty was not “a thing ever one and the same,” but “changing with the soul of time itself” (I:100). As the soul accumulates experience, it becomes more complex, yielding greater riches to the artist. Pater has Flavian wonder whether future ages would look back on his time and think it ideal in comparison to their own, underscoring the essential continuity of the conditions of creation throughout history.

The central problem of the romance is not literary but religious, although Pater clearly sees parallels between them. After Flavian’s death from the plague (brought, not insignificantly, by the imperial armies of Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher-emperor), Marius tries out various approaches to life, but is unable to rest in poetry, mysticism, or Greek philosophy. In finding a resolution to Marius’s philosophical dilemma in “complete education” or Cyrenaicism, Pater defers the religious question. The practical goal of his philosophy and his life (apart from the idealistic one of experiencing as many sensations as possible) would be to understand “the various forms of ancient art and thought, the various forms of actual human feeling” (I:152) with impartiality; to accomplish this end he would become, of necessity, a critic because, “in a world, confessedly so opulent in what was old, the work, even of genius, must necessarily consist very much in criticism” (I:153). As an interpreter “of the beautiful house of art and
thought which was the inheritance of the age” (I:153), Marius would have to live much in reminiscence, turning inward, achieving intimacy with his impressions.

In Marius’s subsequent adventures, the narrator reveals some of the dangers involved in the hero’s endeavor. As he encounters competing systems of thought, most significantly that embodied by the Stoic emperor, Marcus Aurelius, he risks the loss of his own system. We follow in chapters such as “Second Thoughts” and “A Conversation Not Imaginary” Marius’s dialectic, the process by which he tests and ultimately secures his own beliefs. The gravest challenges to Heraclitus, Epicurus, and Aristippus of Cyrene come from the emperor and from Christianity, the emperor representing “the strange medley of superstition, that centuries’ growth, layer upon layer, of the curiosities of religion” that was the Roman empire in the second century, and Christianity embodying a somewhat different selection of the old religions. The key point, I think, is that both challenges to Marius’s already eclectic philosophy come from varieties of religious syncretism. In Rome, “A blending of all the religions of the ancient world had been accomplished” (I:184). Far from disdaining the “medley of superstitions” held by his people, the Stoic emperor (perhaps enlivening his own bleak outlook) entered into all their rituals. But Marius cannot accept either Marcus Aurelius’s religiosity or his Stoicism once he has seen the spectacle of animal sacrifice. The emperor and the general mass of his followers reject no practices, no rituals, no beliefs at all, and therefore, in their naïve form of eclecticism, seem to confound true religion entirely. Even in Cyrenaicism, there had to be distinctions, such as that between good and evil. In sharp contrast to the semiofficial naïve eclecticism of the empire, Christianity offers an attractive blending of the art, philosophy, and literature of various faiths, which Marius sees for the first time in the “church” in Cecilia’s house. Like Kingsley in his early Christian novel, Hypatia, Pater wants to show how Christianity grew up eclectically around a set of core beliefs. Within this paradigm, Christianity’s wisdom is found in its eclecticism: “‘Wisdom’ was dealing, as with the dust of creeds and philosophies, so also with the dust of outworn religious usage, like the very spirit of life itself, organizing soul and body out of the lime and clay of the earth. In a generous eclecticism, within the bounds of her liberty, and as by some providential power within her, she gathers and serviceably adopts, as in others matters, so in ritual, one thing here, another there, from various sources—Gnostic, Jewish, Pagan—to adorn and beautify the greatest act of worship the world has seen” (II:126–27). When Marius is moved to sincere admiration of Christianity’s “generous eclecticism,” he enters the final phase of his romance, where he is able, finally, to reconcile
the moral and the aesthetic; but the conclusion of *Marius the Epicurean* is not definitive. It is a triumph of the sort that is characteristic of modern literature, what Ruskin called “triumph in mutability.” Rather than placing Christianity teleologically at the end point of the romance, as the fulfillment of the narrative, Pater carefully makes the hero’s conversion and martyrdom ambiguous, a sacrifice more for a feeling (hope) than a purpose (friendship). Eclecticism is described here as operating in accord with “the very spirit of life itself” when it organizes “soul and body out [. . .] of the earth.” When the “dust” of the “outworn” returns to the “lime and clay,” eclecticism molds it into a new form, in harmony with the self and the age. Eclecticism is generous, because it is inclusive; but it is also moral, because it works “within the bounds of [. . .] liberty.” And, finally, it is aesthetic, because it takes for the adornment of Christian worship all that was beautiful in the Gnostic, the Jewish, and the Pagan. Nothing that was beautiful is ever really lost, so long as the eclectic “gathers” and “adopts.”

Pater, more than any other nineteenth-century writer, explores the natural eclecticism of the human mind—the fossils in the stones, or the dust in the clay—and in particular, the eclecticism of the modern self, thereby dispelling the anxiety that had perplexed his immediate precursors, who feared there would never be a style to represent the age. As he contends in the “Postscript” to *Appreciations*, the nineteenth century has its style, and it is “an eclectic one”; “Appealing, as he may, to precedent in this matter, the scholar will remember that if ‘the style is the man’ it is also the age: that the nineteenth century too will be found to have had its style, justified by necessity [. . .] an intellectually rich age such as ours being necessarily an eclectic one, we may well cultivate some of the excellences of literary types so different as those: that in literature as in other matters it is well to unite as many diverse elements as may be: that the individual writer or artist, certainly, is to be estimated by the number of graces he combines, and his power of interpenetrating them in a given work” (261). In order to function at all, he seems to tell us, we must live with this complexity, and in order to create, we must learn to be conscientiously eclectic. Neither our language, nor our art, nor our religion can ever be simple; we can recover primitive language at times as a “corrective,” but our real style—our best style—will always be mixed. In his early essay on “Coleridge” (1865, rev. 1880) he wrote of the “sickly thought” that struggled against the spirit of the age, and “saddened [Coleridge’s] mind, and limited the operation of his unique poetic gift” (*Appreciations* 69). Modern thought, Pater recognized, cultivates the relative in place of the absolute, but Coleridge went on seeking absolutes. Pater speculates that Coleridge would have gained much by pursuing “the relative spirit”; but instead there is his failure, and “endless
regret, the chords of which ring all through our modern literature” (104). As a critic Pater is sensitive enough to recognize the interconnectedness of the sickness (relativism) and the cure (eclecticism). Though Pater refines and extends his philosophical and literary eclecticism in the essays that make up *Appreciations*, he has already written his true apologia in *Marius*, with its mingling of triumph and regret. It is usually read as an explanation of a philosophical position that was misunderstood in the conclusion to *The Renaissance*; but it is equally important, in literary-historical terms, to read the work as an apology for eclecticism, and as the coda for an eclectic age.