“Outward Nature and the Moods of Men”:
Romantic Mythology in Pater’s
Essays on Dionysus and Demeter

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GREEK STUDIES, published posthumously in 1895, is, together with Plato and Platonism and the essay on Winckelmann, Pater’s most substantial contribution to Classical scholarship. Although it is in several respects an unorthodox work, with its visionary lyricism and its sudden leaps into fiction, its intellectual premises are solid: Pater wants to introduce his readers to a different and lesser-known facet of Greek civilization, largely ignored by contemporary criticism, which is close to earth and human flesh and alive with passion and local color. My essay examines Pater’s treatment of myth in the two essays in Greek Studies that deal with mythology most explicitly, “A Study of Dionysus” and “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone.” I want to investigate the features of Pater’s Classicism and the ways it negotiates its Romantic, and especially Shelleyan, roots.

The awareness of the dark side of Hellas had characterized Pater’s approach to classical culture from the beginning of his literary career. As early as 1867 he had claimed that Winckelmann’s “limitation” was to have conceived of the Greek ideal only within “a world of exquisite but abstract and colourless form,” failing to perceive what he calls “a sort of preparation for the romantic temper” in it, and therefore offering a reductive, because partial, representation of its significance.¹ In the study of Classical culture as elsewhere in his scholarship, Pater adheres to the Hegelian notion that all modes of culture are inherently dialectical. In the “Postscript” to Appreciations he identifies classicism and romanticism as the two fundamental, opposing tendencies of all art. Far from being exclusive of each other, these two principles engage in a dialectical opposition, “which may be traced from the very beginning of the formation of European art and literature” (Ap 243–44), and which is the motor of historical evolution in the arts. Pater refuses to historicize classicism and romanticism within rigid time frames: the two tendencies are “really at work at all times in art, moulding it, with the
balance sometimes a little on one side, sometimes a little on the other, gener-
atating, respectively, as the balance inclines on this side or that, two principles,
two traditions in art, and in literature so far as it partakes of the spirit of art”

Pater wrote his essay on Romanticism, which would eventually become
the “Postscript,” in 1876, between the composition of “The Myth of Demeter
and Persephone” and “A Study of Dionysus.” Much of Greek Studies
originates from a similar interest in tracing the aesthetic dialectics at the ba-
sis of ancient culture. In the “Postscript” Pater exhorts the “analyst of the ro-
mantic principle in art” to “walk through the collection of classical
antiquities at the Louvre, or the British Museum” to “record the effects of
the romantic spirit there” (Ap 259). In the essays on Dionysus and Demeter
he isolates and explores the “romantic” element of sorrow and formlessness
in Greek culture which Winckelmann had ignored, and shows it to be ante-
cedent and complementary to the bright and serene images of the Classics
that had been rendered canonical by Winckelmann’s and, in Britain, by
Matthew Arnold’s studies. As in The Renaissance, a current of silent dis-
agreement with Arnold runs through the Greek Studies. Originally published
in the polemical forum of the Fortnightly Review, the essays on Dionysus and
Demeter can be read as an oblique response to Arnold’s theories of “sweet-
ness and light” outlined in Culture and Anarchy. Here Arnold had associated
Hellenism with the humanistic values of civility and culture. The essays in
Greek Studies complete Arnold’s “Apollonian” vision of Hellenism by un-
earthing the Dionysian primitivism of Ancient Greece. It is in the cultural
dynamism that results from the opposition between these two forces that Pa-
ter recognizes the civilizing achievement of the Greeks.

Pater’s interest in myth is poetical in origin. He analyzes myths as “chap-
ter[s] in the history of the human imagination” (GS 81) and looks into the
process by which they came to inspire artists, not only in the Classical pe-
riod, but also in the Renaissance and beyond, reappearing again and again,
from the paintings of Titian and Tintoretto, through the Neoclassicism of
the eighteenth century, to his own Imaginary Portraits. Beside providing it
with thematic inspiration, there is another, more subtle form in which
“Greek religious poetry” continues to shape the modern imagination. In
“The Myth of Demeter and Persephone,” exploring the mechanisms at work
in the birth and development of ancient myths, Pater isolates the charac-
teristics of a “romantic” force at the root of Hellenic imagination which he de-
scribes as

a philosophy more of instinct than of understanding, the mental starting-point of
which is not an observed sequence of outward phenomena, but some such feeling
as most of us have on the first warmer days in spring, when we seem to feel the gen-
ial process of nature actually at work; as if just below the mould, and in the hard
wood of the trees, there were really circulating some spirit of life, akin to that which makes its energies felt within ourselves. Starting with a hundred instincts such as this, that older unmechanical, spiritual, or Platonic philosophy envisages nature rather as the unity of a living spirit or person, revealing itself in various degrees to the kindred spirit of the observer, than as a system of mechanical forces. (GS'96)

The origin of myth is for Pater in the act of recognition of a “kindred spirit” in nature, followed by the development of physical sympathy with the outer world. This is the mental attitude that enabled the early Greeks to see the “spirit of life in the green sap” (GS 18), which a process of aesthetic and moral distillation will gradually transform into the myth of Dionysus. In the essay on Demeter Pater clarifies this process further by distinguishing three stages in the birth and growth of mythology. Following Ruskin’s schematization in The Queen of the Air he argues that myths evolve from an early mystical phase characterized by “certain primitive impressions of the phenomena of the natural world” (GS 91), to a poetic phase, in which they become proper literary objects, to a final ethical phase, in which the particular myth is transformed into an abstract universal. This theory of myth openly privileges the role of poetic imagination, postulating the necessity of the evolution of nature into poetry. This aspect of Pater’s Classicism bears the influence of Winckelmann, who had described the first founders of Greek religion as “poets” and had himself derived his understanding of Greek art from his knowledge of Classical literature.

Winckelmann had also written that Classicism should be regarded rather as an epistemological method, or mode of inspiration, than as a model for formal imitation. He had called Classicism a spirit and claimed that its flame could be rekindled in modern culture. Elaborating on this, in The Renaissance Pater had pointed to Winckelmann himself as an instance of how the Classical spirit could still naturally be part of a modern temperament. In the essays on Dionysus and Demeter Pater follows the same de-historicizing pattern and portrays “this older and more spiritual, Platonic, philosophy” (GS 96) as a trans-historical presence in the history of literature. Mythopoeia, the condition of mind through which the ancients turned nature into narrative, is presented as a characteristic of the human mind, rather than a historically specific phenomenon. As in one of Pater’s own fictions of reincarnation of Classical deities, after centuries of subterranean existence the ancient spirit resurfaces in the form of Romantic poetry, and is the cause of formal and thematic regeneration. In “A Study of Dionysus” Pater writes:

The student of the comparative science of religions finds in the religion of Dionysus one of many modes of that primitive tree-worship which, growing out of some universal instinctive belief that trees and flowers are indeed habitations of living spirits, is found almost everywhere in the earlier stages of civilisation, enshrined in legend or custom, often graceful enough, as if the delicate beauty of the object of worship had effectually taken hold of the fancy of the worshipper. Shelley’s Sensi-
tive Plant shows in what mists of poetical reverie such feeling may still float about a
mind full of modern lights, the feeling we too have of a life in the green world, al-
ways ready to assert its claim over our sympathetic fancies. (GS 11)

Similarly, in “Demeter and Persephone”:

Such a philosophy is a systematised form of that sort of poetry (we may study it, for
instance, either in Shelley or in Wordsworth), which also has its fancies of a spirit of
the earth, or of the sky,—a personal intelligence abiding in them, the existence of
which is assumed in every suggestion such poetry makes to us of a sympathy be-
tween the ways and aspects of outward nature and the moods of men. (GS 96–97)

Similar parallels between ancient myth-making and Romantic poetry appear
throughout the essays. Following his overt intent to divorce mythopoeia from
the rigid historical framework of Hellenism, Pater insists on linking myth-
making to nineteenth-century Romanticism. By a reverse process, in the es-
say on Wordsworth (1874) Pater had identified in the intellectual tempera-
ment of the Romantic poet a “survival” of “that mood in which the old Greek
gods were first begotten” according to which “all outward objects alike . . .
were believed to be endowed with animation, and the world was ‘full of
souls’” (Ap 47–48).9 This rhetoric of displacement repeatedly allows Pater to
construct the Romantics as anonymous myth-makers of Old Greece.

On the basis of this, I want to argue that Pater’s critical approach to Clas-
sical culture is itself Romantic, because based on the adoption of Romantic
categories, and especially Shelleyan, in its insistent preoccupation with the
relationship between nature, language, and lyrical imagination. Before ana-
lyzing any further the features of what already appears as Pater’s own Ro-
mantic myth-making, it seems appropriate to turn to Shelley himself, and to
another eminent nineteenth-century mythographer, Max Friedrich Müller,
whose work was instrumental to the genesis of Pater’s theories. Following
Pater’s own suggestion, I will begin by looking at Shelley’s The Sensitive
Plant.

The Sensitive Plant is one of the prime examples of Shelley’s mythopoeic
practice. It has often attracted allegorical readings, which were common
practice in the nineteenth century, in which the plant is taken to represent
the type of the Romantic poet in general, and of the Shelleyan solitary in par-
ticular.10 The shift in twentieth-century criticism towards an image of a po-
litical and radical Shelley has caused such interpretations to go largely out of
favor: Harold Bloom, for example, claims that this “notoriously popular
‘reading’” of the poem “has done Shelley real harm.”11 The overall tone and
Shelley’s “Conclusion” seem nevertheless to encourage certain allegorical,
or meta-mythical, interpretations in which the poem becomes a reflection
on the origin and nature of poetical language. The figure of the sensitive
It is easy to see how this equation between sensitiveness and the lyrical self should appeal to Pater. Pre-figured in Shelley's description of the sensitive plant is Pater's ideal of the diaphanous temperament, that prototype for the imaginative thinker, characterized by its passivity, receptivity and inconspicuousness, which appears in the very first of his writings, and will continue to haunt his imagination throughout his career. Besides a temperamental affinity with the Shelleyan rhetoric of sensitiveness, Pater's interest in this poem is in its connection between sympathy with nature and poetic imagination. This is, for example, how Shelley introduces the figure of the Lady:

There was a Power in this sweet place,
An Eve in this Eden; a ruling grace
Which to the flowers did they waken or dream,
Was as God is to the starry scheme.

A Lady, the wonder of her kind,
Whose form was upborne by a lovely mind,
Which, dilating, had moulded her mien and motion
Like a sea-flower unfolded beneath the ocean. . . .

The Lady is characterized through her active sympathy with the natural world. She acts as the personification of Spring and the incarnation of the principle of fertility, and is symbolically linked to Persephone in her life-giving faculty and her ritualistic autumnal death. In the act of her primitive identification with the inhabitants of the garden, the physical boundary between individual consciousness and the world of phenomena blurs:

Her step seemed to pity the grass it prest:
You might hear, by the heaving of her breast,
That the coming and going of the wind
Brought pleasure there and left passion behind.

I doubt not the flowers of that garden sweet
Rejoiced in the sound of her gentle feet;
I doubt not they felt the spirit that came
From her glowing fingers thro’ all their frame.14

In *The Sensitive Plant* Shelley explores the ideal of a mythopoetic universe characterized by an unbroken continuity, physical and emotional, between the human and natural elements. “Who has not at moments felt the scruple [writes Pater in “A Study of Dionysus”], which is with us always regarding animal life, following the signs of animation further still, till one almost hesitates to pluck out the little soul of flower or leaf?” (*GS* 11) The origin of mythopoeia resides in this type of “imaginative intelligence” (*GS* 11) which manifests itself in the impulse to refine and humanize nature. Shelley calls this unifying principle Love. It is the communal language of the inmates of the garden, the link between the humanity of the Lady and the beauty of the plants, the enabling factor for the creation of the mythic universe.

The verses of *The Sensitive Plant* echo Shelley’s words in the essay “On Love,” in which he defines love as “the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with everything which exists,” adding:

[In solitude, or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings, and yet they sympathise not with us, we love the flowers, the grass, and the waters, and the sky. In the motion of the very leaves of spring, in the blue air, there is then found a secret correspondence with our heart. There is eloquence in the tongueless wind, and a melody in the flowing brooks and the rustling of the reeds beside them, which by their inconceivable relation to something within the soul, awaken the spirits to a dance of breathless rapture, and bring tears of mysterious tenderness to the eyes, like the enthusiasm of patriotic success, or the voice of one beloved singing to you alone.15

This ability to empathize with nature is a sign of the highest humanity for Shelley, and the origin of creativity. The Lady in *The Sensitive Plant*, who “had no companion of mortal race,” learns to feel this “secret correspondence with [her] heart” in nature, just as Pater’s primitive Greek learnt to see “the mediation of living spirits” in what is “to us but the secret chemistry of nature” (*GS* 13). Different levels of allegory encroach upon each other, as the Lady herself becomes the prototype of the poet: she is “as a God” and “a ruling Grace.” The figure of God-as-poet is a recurrent one in Shelley’s imagery. *Non merita nome di creatore se non Iddio ed il Poeta;*16 hardly a year later, quoting Tasso in the “Defence of Poetry,” Shelley would bring together the poet and God in their exclusive ability to create. Both the sensitive plant, as allegory of the poem or myth, and *The Sensitive Plant* as particular poem and myth, exemplify the idea of creation through love as poetic language.

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At the time of writing his studies on mythology, Pater had become acquainted with the work of Max Müller.17 German of birth but very much an
Oxford figure, in the 1860s and 70s Müller was one of the most eminent authorities on language in Britain. His theories on mythography can be traced to the fundamental principle that mythology is really a sort of dialect, or rather a stage in the evolution of any language. By frequently appealing to the authority of science, Müller claims to be able to locate the origin of all individual myths in a linguistic mutation.

Müller's analytical tool is comparative philology, from which he tries to derive the "science" of comparative religion. He wants to demonstrate that just as comparative etymology has been able to trace all Indo-European languages back to a common ancestor, a comparative study of Aryan myths points to a single origin. This starting point is the extinct Aryan, or Indo-European, idiom. Once the words of this simple, direct language started to lose their purely apppellative value, a period of semantic ambiguity resulted. This situation provided fertile ground for the proliferation of stories, which were quite simply made up to "explain" the change in meaning of isolated words, and which gradually turned into what have been passed down to us as myths. Müller supplies his readers with an enormous wealth of empirical evidence, case studies of words metamorphosing into gods. When Pater in Greek Studies identifies Zeus with "the open sky" (GS 30) or when he sees in the word wine the germ of the myth of Dionysus (GS 38), it is the comparative science of Müller's Lectures that he is silently drawing from.

Although soon understood to be as fantastic as the myths it tries to categorize, Müller's mythographical science remains particularly interesting for its linguistic focus. Seeing mythology as a manifestation of language, Müller cannot help directly or indirectly constructing myth-making as a poetic act. Following Winckelmann's (literary) practice of de-historicization of the classical spirit, Müller scientifically argues that the special relation between individual and object that gave birth to the language of the ancient myths need not be confined to specific historical circumstances. It can indeed be recreated even in the modern period, through the adoption of a "primitive" attitude to the natural world: "And let us look at our poets, who still think and feel in language—that is, who use no word without having really enlivened it in their mind, who do not trifle with language, and may in this sense be called μυθολογοι. Can they speak of nature and similar things as neutral powers, without doing violence to their feelings?" In modern poetry, as in ancient mythology, language invests itself of the stuff of nature, recreating the direct metaphysical link between subject and object that characterized the pre-mythological idiom. Müller goes on to exhort his readers to "open Wordsworth, and we shall hardly find him use a single abstract term without some life and blood in it. . . ." Much of Müller's essay on "Comparative Mythology" is occupied by illustrating the shift from a primitive, or substantive, to an abstracting use of language in early civilizations,
with reference to Wordsworth’s poetry: “Wordsworth feels what he says, when he exclaims—‘Mountains, and Vales, and Floods, I call on you/ To share the passion of a just disdain;’ and when he speaks of ‘the last hill that parleys with the setting sun,’ this expression came to him as he was communing with nature; it was a thought untranslated as yet into the prose of our traditional and emaciated speech; it was a thought such as the men of old would not have been ashamed of in their common every day conversation.”

Using examples from modern poetry to support a scientific investigation into the ancient world appears to be an extravagant choice. Yet Müller seems totally oblivious to the paradox. For him Wordsworth is a “modern ancient,” his poetry “all mythology,” which “to a Hindu and an ancient Greek would have been more intelligible than it is to us.… ” Wordsworth is as the first discoverer of what Müller calls in the Lectures the sensus numinis, the sensuous intuition of a divine presence in nature.

Müller’s point here is remarkably similar to Pater’s claims about Shelley’s use of mythopoeia. The difference is that Pater adopts the humanistic language of sympathy, where Müller had used the scientific one of metaphoric transformation. For what separates the primitive from the mythological phases of civilization for Müller is the introduction of metaphor into language, of the practice of transferring words back and forth between logically-related concepts. The poetry of Wordsworth exemplifies one aspect or stage of this process, which is characterized by innovation and abundance. Yet only a fine line separates it from semantic chaos: “Wherever any word, that was at first used metaphorically, is used without a clear conception of the steps that led from its original to its metaphorical meaning, there is danger of mythology; wherever those steps are forgotten and artificial steps put in their places, we have mythology, or, if I may say so, we have diseased language, whether that language refers to religious or secular interests.” Müller calls mythology a “disease of language,” speaks of “the rank and poisonous vegetation of mythic phraseology” and of its ability to “infect every part of the intellectual life of man.” But in metaphorical language Müller sees both the conditio sine qua non for the intellectual advancement of mankind and the principle of its mental and moral decay.

Metaphor, the conscious exploitation of the strange beauty of words, is also the prime instrument of poetical language. And in Müller’s image of metaphor, or mythopoeia, as “language triumphing over thought” is imprinted the influence of theories of Romantic poetics, of which Shelley’s “Defence” is probably the most memorable:

Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, “I will compose poetry.” The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises
from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure.29

While in the “Defence” images of poetry as the means of human achievement and product of the irrational can coinhabit, it is not so in Müller. His essays attempt to treat language as science—the rationality of its structure is what attests to the inborn rationality of the human mind. “The earliest work of art wrought by the human mind, . . . the human language, forms an uninterrupted chain from the first dawn of history down to our own times.”30 In this continuity resides for Müller the individuating principle of humanity. Following Locke, with whose “Essay Concerning Human Understanding” he is in constant dialogue, the history of human thought for Müller is mirrored in the evolution of language. In this rational universe, it is not surprising that the suggestion of a possible equation between what we would now call “the unconscious” and intellectual progress should be firmly censored. Echoing Shelley’s words in the “Defence” one of Müller’s definitions of mythology is “every case in which language assumes an independent power, and reacts on the mind, instead of being, as it was intended to be, the mere realisation and outward embodiment of the mind.”31 It is not surprising that this language out of control, whether in the metaphors of the ancient myths or in those of modern poetry, should seem an aberration of sense and trigger a rhetoric of degeneration and disease.

Having also inherited Locke’s belief in the importance of the process of linguistic transformation through metaphor for the evolution of human intellect, Müller is caught between Romantic theories of the poetic imagination on one side, and the need to adhere to science and rationality on the other. In his autobiography, Auld Lang Syne (1898), he colorfully expresses this ambivalence claiming to “have had to suffer all [his] life from suppressed poetry as one suffers from suppressed gout.”32 This oedipal suppression of his imaginative background is the condition of Müller’s writings on myth: the Romantics are the absent fathers of his theories of language.

This focus on the poetical is Müller’s strongest influence on Pater: for both Pater the imaginative writer and humanist, and Müller the scientist, the study of myth represents an active engagement with Romantic issues of lyrical language and poetic imagination. This is due to their more or less open practice of reading the ancients through a Romantic interpretative filter: the very category of mythopoeia, on which they both concentrate, is inherently Romantic, originating as it does from the assumption of a natural interpenetration of mythic and poetic discourses.

The moral project of Müller’s comparative science is to show that the study of myth can be instrumental to scientific, and therefore ethical, progress. Following this, and his determination to repress his lyrical, Romantic
origins, Müller refuses to evaluate myths as aesthetic objects. Even when they are “taken by themselves,” i.e. extrapolated from the frame of linguistic evolution, ancient myths appear “absurd and irrational” and attract Müller’s moral condemnation. Their Dionysian, grotesque, imaginative and chaotic side destabilizes his Arnoldian view of the Greeks as champions of the values of civilization.

Pater’s essays on Dionysus and Demeter transform Müller’s suppression of the imagination into a glorification of it. There is no fear of the Chthonian in Pater: he does not shrink from savage mysticism and violence, or the orgiastic irrationality of a bacchanal. Myths embody the cosmic, chaos-ordering quality of the poetic imagination. This is what invests them with that “solemnising power even for the modern mind” (GS 151) that guarantees their cultural relevance in the modern age. In other words, the moral truth of myths is in their aesthetic integrity. Pater’s openly lyrical project can accommodate, and is indeed informed by, Romantic, and especially Shelleyan, syntheses of creative and anti-rational impulses.

As we have seen, Pater constructs the mythological as a fundamentally literary category and by highlighting its trans-historical character sanctions its historical relevance. He is not afraid of anachronism: the poetry of Wordsworth and Shelley is modern mythology. It is thanks to this frank insistence on the anachronistic agency of the Romantic imagination in the formation of Greek myths that, compared to Müller’s, Pater’s project appears to be more transparent. Pater, who writes outside the scientific discourse, accepts the influence of Romantic theories of poetics without creating contradictions. His essays help to illuminate the hidden project behind Müller’s writings, which are complicated by the need to compromise with the moral demands for the assimilation of mythography within the always more hegemonic discourse of scientific inquiry.

In “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone” Pater condemns the disregard for the imagination in Müller’s comparative mythology, warning his readers against the cynicism of “that over-positive temper, which is so jealous of our catching any resemblance in the earlier world to the thoughts that really occupy our own minds,” adding: “The abstract poet of that first period of mythology, creating in this wholly impersonal, intensely spiritual way,—the abstract spirit of poetry itself, rises before the mind: and, in speaking of this poetical age, we must take heed, before all things, in no sense to misconstrue the poets” (GS 112).

Mythological and artistic discourses are often collapsed in the essays: Greek mythology can be studied as poetry. Following the tripartite scheme sketched above, the religious sentiment appears in Pater as a consequence or later stage of the mythological process. In this sense myth, the local, ritualistic, aesthetic or poetic element of belief is integral to the evolution of relig-
This stress on the purely poetical side of mythology also allows Pater who, unlike Shelley, is unwilling to assume an openly atheistic position, to avoid constructing an evaluative binary opposition between paganism and Christianity. Pater can therefore take up Müller’s “scientific” theories and substitute his vocabulary of disease and moral deformity with an explicitly Shelleyan imagery of love and beauty. Like the “Defence” the essays in *Greek Studies* become a radical journey into the origin of the lyrical imagination, which takes the reader back to poetry as to the foundation upon which all the institutions of society are built.

In “A Study of Dionysus” we read: “The body of man, indeed, was for the Greeks, still the genuine work of Prometheus; its connexion with earth and air asserted in many a legend, not shaded down, as with us, through innumerable stages of descent, but direct and immediate; in precise contrast to our physical theory of our life, which never seems to fade, dream of it as we will, out of the light of common day” (*GS* 33). For Pater mythology shows how poetry can be constructed as an alternative to positivism in the interpretation of the natural world. This alternative replaces analysis with sympathy, and adopts imagination as its tool. The essays in *Greek Studies* hint at the possible existence of a topos for the reconciliation between ancient and modern systems of thought, and this utopia is to be found for Pater in the eternal romanticism of the poetic imagination.

But the mechanism of metaphorical substitution, which is for Pater, as for Müller, instrumental to mythopoeia, is timeless. For the ancient Greek Dionysus literally drank the blood that was ritually poured out at the root of the vine to ensure its healthy growth (*GS* 21). Similarly, the onset of Autumn in *The Sensitive Plant* literally brings about the death of the Lady. Mythopoeia operates through the passage from “rhetorical language” to “real illusion” (*GS* 100) that enables the spiritual form of fire and dew to become a physical presence.

This literal, or as Müller would have it, “diseased” use of metaphor is what makes *The Sensitive Plant* a modern myth for Pater. This is where poetical language becomes a metaphysical bridge between the self and nature. Shelley’s “Conclusion” to the poem helps to illustrate this point:

> That garden sweet, that lady fair,  
> And all sweet shapes and odours there,  
> In truth have never pass’d away;  
> ‘Tis we, ‘tis ours, are changed! not they.  
> For love, and beauty, and delight,  
> There is no death nor change; their might  
> Exceeds our organs, which endure  
> No light, being themselves obscure. 36
The “Conclusion” to The Sensitive Plant is, strictly speaking, outside the mythopoeic project: Shelley’s modern persona comes into the narrative, disrupting its integrity and breaking the mythic spell. Nevertheless, it helpfully illustrates how mythological language creates its own universe, which is more perfect than the natural one. The sensitive plant resurrects through poetical language: Shelley exposes the fallacy of human perceptual powers and expresses his faith in the efficacy of poetry in constructing and preserving a moral order which is timeless, transcendent, and true. The Sensitive Plant therefore marks the moment in which the lyrical attempts to substitute nature.

Criticizing this Romantic practice of poetic instrumentalization of nature, Oscar Wilde remarked that Wordsworth “found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there.” More recently, Paul de Man has called this linguistic condition “nostalgia for the object,” language’s desire to approximate the ontological status of nature. This is for de Man at the origin of the rhetoric of humanization of nature that pervades much Romantic poetry and works through the figure of prosopopoeia, an apostrophe to a silent speaker. In the Romantic Classicism of Pater and Müller mythopoeia operates through a similar mechanism whereby nature is invoked only to be replaced by the human voice of the poet. The Sensitive Plant is in this sense mythopoeic because it mourns the natural state and uses language to recreate its direct mysticism. The Romantic myth-maker calls on the natural world in order to legitimize poetic language by claiming its natural origin and by advocating its role in the creation of a metaphysical order (cf. Shelley’s image of the poet as God quoted above).

Their mythopoeic experiments had brought the Romantics to the formulation of a radical critique of traditional Christian faith. While Wordsworth had tried to accommodate his natural religion within the vision of a pantheistic Christianity, Shelley had rejected organized religion altogether in favor of an often defiantly anti-Christian belief in poetry as prime medium for the reconciliation of the human, the natural, and the metaphysical. Müller’s objection to the acceptance of this decadent universe is both a rationalist’s and a Christian’s. Pater, with characteristic enthusiasm for the visionary, embraces its poetical wealth and sees in Shelley, the lyrical poet of the Victorian imagination, a prophet of the metaphysical power of language and of the moral self-sufficiency of art. Following Shelley’s tradition of radical scholarship, Pater endorses a mythical vision of art as epistemological alternative to the positivist faith that, in the late nineteenth century, was rapidly usurping the revelational role of Christianity. In the essays on Dionysus and Demeter Pater uses the Romantic model to articulate his own Romanticism. In Pater’s essays as in Shelley’s poetry, it is poetic language that stands in the centre of a Romantic process of myth-making.