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Pater’s “Great Change”: *Marius the Epicurean* as Historical Conversion Romance

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In 1814 William Wilberforce wrote effusively to his nine-year old son, Samuel, about the importance of personal religious conversion, swelling the soul like a ripening peach: “I would willingly walk barefoot from this place to Sandgate to see a clear proof of the great change begun in my dear Samuel at the end of my journey.” Wilberforce’s preoccupation with “the great change” is symptomatic of a nervous fascination with the process and effects of conversion throughout the nineteenth century. The Victorian cultural imagination plays repeatedly with the concept of religious transformation. The controversial public impact of high-profile conversions like that of John Henry Newman is well documented. But there are many other traces of the significance accorded to this religious phenomenon by Victorians. Numerous articles in the periodical press focus on the conversion of non-Christians abroad such that “the great change” emerges clearly as a colonizing as well as a spiritualizing tool. The relatively small number and low-key presence of contemporary converts at home, especially compared to those in the Early Church, offer opportunity for reflection on the national moral character: “On our guilty indolence, on our unreceptive hardness, must the blame rest,” wrote John Caird in 1863. The intimate psychological and emotional processes involved in a major shift of denominational commitment are the subject of self-conscious enumeration in diaries and letters as well as religious tracts and autobiographical writing. Oscar Wilde, for example, delighted in conversion as a matter of seductive pleasure and flirtation with “the enemy.” “I could hardly resist Newman I am afraid,” he confided about his possible conversion to Catholicism. Even the testimony of those who collapsed under the strain of engaging with the great change offers an indication of the weight Victorians attributed to this pervasive spiritual and social phenomenon. One Victorian woman who had vacillated in agony over her religious allegiance and eventually renounced religion altogether felt that “no conversion could have brought her more joy than the sudden resolve to have done with the whole thing.”
Such constructions of conversion clearly suggest this private religious experience had wider social and cultural implications for Victorians, not least because it stimulated the assessment of alternative systems of faith and ethics in a period of transition and instability. Narratives of conversion helped to confirm norms for acceptable belief and behavior, particularly in relation to the unorthodox. Such reinforcement may explain the popular taste for religious fiction among all classes and denominations from 1830, including a particular interest in conversion as the key theme which “dominated the fiction of theological, sectarian controversy.”\(^5\) Conversion fictions offer safe explorations of different perspectives on disbelief and faith. Some, like *The Nemesis of Faith, Loss and Gain*, and *Robert Elsmere*, center on a contemporary protagonist who is typically a clergyman or theology student assailed by doubts. Others employ the historical setting of the early Church to chart a movement from pagan to Christian commitment. Notwithstanding their popularity in the nineteenth century, these latter novels have been dismissed by twentieth-century critics as “crude, unliterary, and overpious.”\(^6\) This essay takes issue with such an assessment by examining the historical conversion romance as a discrete genre in Victorian fiction and *Marius the Epicurean* as a special adaptation of it. Pater’s particular dialogue with the conventions and codes of the genre shows him at work defining and validating a special temperament suited to the new demands of modernity, rather than adopting a particular faith or philosophy.

Conversion is a contentious site for Victorians because it could be either an act of enlightening transformation or a dangerous dalliance with difference; as such it has resonance beyond particular religious debates or sectarian oppositions. The interlaced discursive practices associated with conversion are penetrated by the language and structures of secular experience. At times, for example, conversion is characterized as a reassuring economic process, involving both loss and gain, a surrendering of the familiar and a profitable embracing of the new. When John Henry Newman converted to Catholicism, his departure from Oxford involved a tearing away of roots central to his identity. Such loss brings the “inestimable gain” of a spiritual sanctuary: “it was like coming into port after a rough sea.”\(^7\) Converting to the alien or unorthodox position (Catholicism) is represented by Newman as a manly heroic act.

From a different perspective, however, conversion is more anxiously constructed in the period as a modern phenomenon linked to fanaticism, foolishness, and degeneracy in its departure from the status quo. In these terms conversion is characterized using pathological tropes. In the 1850s (following the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in England) anti-Catholic fears surface in discussions of conversion to Rome, a possibility which, like “the pestilence . . . lurks in the rags of the populace, and waits
only some new chance of earth or air, to ravage the land again.”8 In the latter half of the nineteenth century, conversions along with other emotional religious experiences like mystical sensations are analyzed in terms of hysteria, and attributed to “trauma, nervous illness, or sexual panic.”9

Alternatively, by gendering conversion, a shift in denominational allegiance can be rendered as corrupt, elicit behavior. Homophobia and anti-Catholicism combine in popular and high culture representations of “the other side” and those who convert to it. Punch sneers at High Church clergymen who are “very fond of dressing like ladies.”10 Charles Kingsley deplores the dangers of Ritualism with its “foppery,” “so alluring is it to the minds of an effeminate and luxurious aristocracy.”11 J. Cumming is even more explicit in his 1867 lecture on Ritualism, the Highway to Rome: “Prodigious efforts are being made by the Ritualists to enlist converts, or rather I should say perverts.”12 Such negative representations of the conversion process suggest deeper concerns about the assessment of spiritual loss and gain, such as the relative values which might be attached to body and soul and the relationship of spiritual matters to sexual norms.

Moreover, while conversion might be associated with straying beyond safe boundaries, it can also be allied to invasion from without. Fear of disruption by the alien or strange also underpins uncertainties about the process of conversion in the period. For example, popular anti-Catholic denunciations of “papal aggression” take the form of outrage at the secret Catholic conspiracy to achieve “national conversion” through a challenge to orthodox religious and political authority, “the spiritual independence of the nation” and “the Queen’s supremacy.” When conversion becomes a “religious Revolution” or “domesticated treason,”13 the decision to convert is perceived not only as unmanly but as unpatriotic and raises questions about the relationship between personal integrity and social integration.

The historical conversion romance, typically characterized by such novels as Kingsley’s Hypatia (1853), Wiseman’s Fabiola (1854), and Newman’s Callista (1856), exploits these anxious preoccupations. Indeed throughout the last half of the century the genre captures the interest of a wide-ranging contemporary readership as can be seen in popular best-sellers such as Lew Wallace’s Ben Hur (1880).14 The ostensible subject of the genre is the development of Christianity in the first centuries and the contrast of the early Church to different forms of pagan thought and practice. The violent persecution of the innocent, the significance of beautiful liturgy and ritual, the corrupt and duplicitous exercise of power (by secular and, at times, religious authority), and the nature of love as self-sacrifice or self-gratification are important and persistent themes. Simultaneously, this representation of the Christian past is primarily an engagement with the Victorian present. The discourses of economics, pathology, and social disrup-
tion associated with conversion narratives express secular tensions concerning the value of the body, the acknowledgement of elicit desire, and invasion by the alien and dangerous (defined often in terms of race or class).

Historical conversion romance also explicitly reinforces the mainstream religious position of its Christian readership and its denominational interests (Catholic or Broad Church, for example). Such reinforcement is accomplished through a complex dual perspective which implicitly acknowledges the historically radical and the contemporaneously orthodox as one and the same. Narrative structure, the treatment of martyrdom, and the process of conversion are all features of the genre which highlight the rejection of erroneous “establishment” views in the historical setting (such as Neo-Platonism, Epicureanism, or officially sanctioned pagan worship) in favor of Christianity as a revolutionary system of belief. Pater uses the same generic framework in a characteristically ironic, evasive and subversive way. The establishment position undermined in his novel is, paradoxically, institutionalized Christianity and his revolutionary “faith” embraces an unorthodox commitment to subjectivity, homosocial relationships and the value of worldly sense experience. For a select readership this does constitute the new orthodoxy, but Pater’s skilful encoding of these attitudes through use of a genre concerned with mainstream Christian belief offers him a significant degree of protection.

Pater’s own implication in conversion controversies underpins the reception of his work throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The traces of his dangerous “conversion” away from Christianity and public knowledge of this can be seen in different ways: McQueen’s denunciation of him to the Bishop of London; Hopkins’s diary note of 1866 (“Pater talking two hours against Xitianity”); his early essay on Winckelmann with its sympathetic portrayal of the scholar as convert to Catholicism purely for expediency to serve his artistic instincts; Pater’s professional career damage after the publication of *The Renaissance*; Mallock’s snide portrait of Pater as Mr. Rose who claimed that religion “never lights our lives so beautifully as when it is leaving them like the evening sun.” On the other hand Pater later seemed to reconstruct his religious identity and at least suggest an open interest in conversion from unbelief to faith. His letter to Violet Paget in 1883 about his projected fictional trilogy beginning with *Marius* indicates his commitment—“as a sort of duty”—to the identification of a “religious phase possible for the modern mind” (*LWP* 52). Contemporaries also recorded his special sympathy for Roman Catholicism in terms not only of its pleasing liturgy and ritual but also its scope for enlarging a sense of spirituality in a materialistic culture. Mrs. Mark Pattison noted Pater’s view that the Roman Catholic Church had much to offer: “If it would abandon its folly in political and social intrigue, and take up the attitude of a purely spiritual power, it
would be, if not the best thing that could happen, at any rate better than the selfish vulgarity of the finite aims and ends which stand in place of an ideal in most lives now.”

Nonetheless Pater as a man of (dis)belief remains very much “the mask without the face” described by Henry James. His personal writings do little to clarify his attitude to religious belief. For example, in comments to Mrs. Humphry Ward and in unpublished essay fragments such as “Art and Religion” and “The Writings of Cardinal Newman” he indicates a qualified attraction to the intriguing possibilities and reassurances of belief, to “natural religion” as manifested in the doctrines of “the historic church” and its “function in the world.” Yet, while he admits these “might wisely [be] accepted as a workable hypothesis,” there is no proof and they can but remain an “assumption” (LWP 64–65). Elsewhere, he is reported as claiming the Roman Catholic Church “is what we are all tending to,” but in his unpublished essay on “The Writings of Cardinal Newman” he refers briskly to “the lost cause of his [Newman’s] adoption.”

Despite—or perhaps because of—Pater’s teasing ambivalence and caution in expressing his religious attitudes, both his contemporaries and later scholars have focused on Marius’s development and death as a conversion process which offers insight into Pater’s own religious affiliation, encouraged to do so by Pater’s cross-reference to his novel in the amended “Conclusion” to the third edition of The Renaissance. But there is no consensus on the “meaning” of Marius’s narrative. For Victorian reviewers, depending on the intellectual and theological leaning of the journal concerned, this philosophical romance was simultaneously: an exhortation to “Utopian paganism”; a new sympathy for religion “as a graceful addendum to the fulness and charm of existence”; an endorsement of “the Epicurean principle of aesthetic loss and gain”; “a tendency toward Catholicism”; a text with “a remarkable religiosity and belief in the individual desire to believe”; and a portrait of “the confused condition of thought in our day.”

Twentieth-century critics are similarly divided. While there is a general acceptance that Marius’s “conversion” is a key focal point of the novel, there is strong disagreement about what Marius’s final faith might actually be: Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Aestheticism as a substitute religion, have all been offered as the end-point of Marius’s spiritual quest. However, I wish to argue that Marius’s journey is best understood by reading the novel in the context of the historical conversion romance and the wider cultural concerns demonstrated by it.

The narrative structure of the Victorian historical conversion romance is both linear and iterative. In part it borrows the developmental process-product model from the Bildungsroman, focusing on a central protagonist with a deepening spiritual attraction to Christianity. At the outset this char-
acter is personally committed to classical paganism in its most elegant and intellectualized forms. Kingsley’s Hypatia is a beautiful, fervent neo-Platonist; Wiseman’s Fabiola is a beautiful “morally irreproachable” patrician,\(^{23}\) dedicated to an ascetic version of Epicureanism; and Callista is a beautiful Greek sculptress in North Africa, yearning for her native Hellenic culture.

The gendering of the conversion process as feminine through the frequent use of a female protagonist suggests a complex interaction between a range of cultural assumptions. It legitimizes the appeal of religious zeal to the emotions (typically seen as a female domain) as well as to the intellect. It reinforces the need for—and heroism of—submissive repression and self-sacrifice (for women and for Christians). Pater’s choice of a male protagonist shadows the conventions and challenges them too. Like the protagonists in precursor texts, Marius initially espouses a paganism of a refined and ascetic kind, if more low-key and homely. He resembles Callista or Hypatia because his spirit is imbued with and shaped by the attractions of his native pagan religious practices. For him “the spell of his religion . . .[is] a part of the very essence of home, its intimacy, its dignity and security” \((ME\text{ 1: 12})\). At the same time the siting of a sensitive male protagonist in a traditional “feminine” space and plot gives potential for revising gender difference and orthodox definitions of manliness.

Pater also departs from the genre in his exploration of the relationship between the religion of Numa and the attractive grace of soul which characterizes Marius throughout the novel. This is Pater’s alternative to willed intellectual assent to particular doctrines.\(^ {24}\) Most examples of the historical conversion romance emphasize the emptiness of paganism. Fabiola, for example, yearns for some better, “infallible standard of truth, some master-key which opened equally every closed deposit of moral knowledge . . .”\(^ {25}\) Only the loss of an inadequate system of belief and the gain of Christianity will satisfy. Pater’s approach is much more syncretic and radical, for he offers a keener sense of Marius’s pagan beliefs and practices as integral to his personality, and thus of continuous influence and significance. He repeatedly suggests the worship of Numa fosters Marius’s most important qualities—his “instinctive seriousness” \((ME\text{ 1: 13})\) and his sensitive connection to the material aspects of experience. Additionally, he exploits the context of the genre to imply such secular qualities have, in effect, a religious or spiritual validity. For example, Marius’s reverence for the simple artifacts of ritual “had regained for him, by their use in such religious service, that poetic and as it were moral significance, which surely belongs to all the means of daily life” \((ME\text{ 1: 11})\). Most significantly, it is his early devotion to the familiar rituals of Numa, so lacking in doctrinal content, which encourages a valuable speculative spirit. From the outset in Marius, therefore, paganism is
represented neither as an alien force to be feared nor an inadequate philosophy to be devalued and replaced. The “other” which is paganism is itself a gain because it is connected to a set of practices that stimulate the idealistic search for personal perfection, for “unlimited self-expansion” (*ME* 1: 44).

The more unusual structural feature of the historical conversion romance is its comparative and iterative format. The narrative is typically based on an enactment, juxtaposition and dialogue of contending systems of belief and moral action. In *Hypatia*, for example, the diverse range of subordinate characters clearly represents different kinds of spiritual allegiance. The Prefect Orestes cynically espouses the official religion (Christianity) to foster his bureaucratic ambition (“a governor must be content with doing very much what comes to hand”). Through plot developments and conversational debates, the reader is encouraged to make a moral evaluation of such a superficial, worldly approach to belief and to compare it to other spiritual and ethical perspectives: the honest questioning of the Jew-turned-atheist-turned-Christian, Raphael Aben-Ezra; the earthy family and communal values of the heathen Goths; the sensual, degrading self-centered hedonism of the hero’s sister, Pelagia; the attractive muscular Christianity of Bishop Synesius; the corruption of the hardened professional cleric and fanatical celibate monk, Cyril; the neo-Platonic abstractions of the philosopher, Hypatia. Similarly, in *Fabiola*, human mortality offers a focal point for exploring the adequacy of different belief systems—aesthetic, religious, philosophical and material—in the face of death. When her father dies, Fabiola tries each in turn, but none eases her grief, confusion and loss. Wise-man’s personification of each system as ridiculously melodramatic and ineffectual satirizes these alternative forms of intellectual consolation:

Poetry had pretended to enlighten it [the grave], and even glorify it; but had only, in truth, remained at the door, as a genius with drooping head, and torch reversed. Science had stepped in, and come out scared, with tarnished wings, and lamp extinguished in the foetid air .... A n d philosophy had barely ventured to wander round and round, and peep in with dread, and recoil, and then prate or babble....

Only the imaginative vision of the resurrected body juxtaposed to Fabiola’s meditation by her Christian slave is allowed to provide a meaningful understanding of death as a gateway to a transcendent state: “Spiritualized and free, lovely and glorious, it [the dead body] springs from the very hot-bed of corruption.”

Pater adheres to such structural schematics if anything more rigorously and strictly than his predecessors. The travels of Marius serve as the framework for a systematic encounter with key philosophies and religions of the late classical and early Christian world: Epicureanism, the philosophies of Heraclitus and Pythagoras, Cyrenaicism, Stoicism, and Christianity itself. Like Callista and Fabiola, Marius is a seeker, and Pater uses the dis-
course of Christian religious practice to locate his spiritual journey in a wider historical context, “his individual mental pilgrimage [retracing] the historic order of human thought” (ME 1: 134). Marius is motivated in this continuous journey by some of the same doubts and dissatisfactions of key Christian converts in earlier historical conversion romances. He resembles Fabiola, for example, when confronted by human mortality and the inadequacy of most philosophies in dealing with it. Flavian’s death provokes “a feeling of outrage, of resentment against nature itself, mingled with an agony of pity” (ME 1: 119). And Marius is struck, too, by the way Marcus Aurelius’s elevated, detached Stoicism easily fractures into desolation with the death of his son.

Yet the differences in Pater’s handling of this structure are more significant than the similarities in assessing the nature and effect of Marius’s conversion-martyrdom. Novels like Hypatia and Callista oppose contending pagan and Christian creeds so that protagonists must ultimately reject one for the other. The genre also typically shows the difficulties of such change in religious assent for the protagonists without a sudden, apocalyptic reversal of fortune or spiritual intervention. Arrested mistakenly as a Christian, Callista, for example, adheres to her intellectual independence despite her best interests, neither espousing the new faith nor sacrificing to the gods: “She was neither a Christian, nor was she not . . . not changing her life from habit, from the captivity of nature, but weary, disappointed, fastidious, hungry, yet not knowing what she would have. . . .” But in her lonely prison when she has read the Gospel, with its attractive portrayal of a loving and authoritative personal God, she quickly abandons the old and embraces the new. The Gospel provides that external evidence and compelling force of argument for Christianity which appeals to her intellect, which she “could approve and acknowledge,” though not “originate.” In terms of the economic model of conversion the result is the clear exchange of one set of values for another: she “came to walk by a new philosophy; and had ideas, and principles, and recognized relations and aims, and felt the force of arguments, to which before she was an utter stranger.”

The spiritual development of Marius is, on the other hand, of a more incremental nature rather than a “pilgrimage” based on a strict assessment, rejection and substitution of different belief systems. Marius’s evaluation of each philosophical position he discovers is not dependent on external evidence, intellectual coherence or logical consistency as in Hypatia or Fabiola or Callista. The attraction of belief for Marius is its connection with his own desires and personality. Pater, unlike his predecessors, emphasizes the “subjectivity of knowledge” and doctrine, the ways in which “in the reception of metaphysical formulae, all depends, as regards their actual and ulterior result, on the pre-existent qualities of that soil of human nature into
which they fall” (*ME* 1: 137, 135–36). Marius measures each philosophy he encounters by identifying “his own way of life cordially with it” (*ME* 1: 139). Thus, the merit of the Cyrenaic doctrine lies in its appeal both to Marius’s delight in “healthfully sensuous wisdom,” his need for a restrained “practical ethics” to comfort his sense of “moral principle,” and his desire for human perfection and insight into the “fulness of life” (*ME* 1: 142, 140, 150, 151).

While ostensibly adhering to the standard structure of a Christian narrative genre, Pater covertly establishes a heretical alternative in which the self becomes the standard of all things, its cultivation into a type of perfection becomes religious practice. Conversion for Pater is not willed adherence to an external religious doctrine or code but a gradual realization of one’s “capacity of vision” and “the seeing of a perfect humanity, in a perfect world” (*ME* 2: 219, 218). Repeatedly he ironically validates this subversive non-Christian position through the delicate use of religious tropes. Marius’s contemplation of the beautiful—an activity sanctioned by Cyrenaic teaching—creates a sense of himself as “something of a priest,” his aesthetic meditations “a sort of perpetual religious service” (*ME* 2: 17). Even as a youth Marius is aware of the “unsuspecting exercise of himself” as “a rival religion, a rival religious service” (*ME* 1: 44). In these terms, Marius’s death is no Christian baptism of fire, conversion by martyrdom. His “decision against himself, in favor of Cornelius” (*ME* 2: 217) is not self-abnegation for Christ’s sake. It depends on yet another sensation consistent with his own temperament, “the feeling of human kinship” (*ME* 2: 217). His spiritual climax and conversion is not based on a commitment to new principles external to the self but on the self-cultivation of a particular sensibility—“being something,” rather than “the having, or even the doing, of anything” (*ME* 2: 218).

The narrative structure of Pater’s historical conversion romance also differs from its predecessors in its tendency to synthesize rather than oppose contending systems of belief. The representation of Christianity in *Marius* highlights the way the new faith borrows eclectically from different pagan philosophies and rituals: “... the church of the ‘Minor Peace’ had adopted many of the graces of pagan feeling and pagan custom; as being indeed a living creature, taking up, transforming, accommodating still more closely to the human heart what of right belonged to it” (*ME* 2: 125). The “new spirit” of Christianity in *Marius*, is, paradoxically, based on its continuity with and respect for difference seen in its assimilation of the pagan past. Similarly, Pater compares particular Christian doctrines and pagan philosophy in such a way as to suggest the Church imitated classical beliefs rather than supplanting them. The Catholic “cultus of the saints” is presented as a “sequel” to Marcus Aurelius’s merging of “personal devotion towards the whole multi-
tude of the old national gods” with a theory of a single animating principle for the universe (ME 1: 182). While the narrator of Marius insists the comparison is reverent, the effect is to undercut the privileged status of Christian doctrine and direct attention to the attractiveness of any creed which responds to the secular instinct for human contact and a sense of continuity and expanded family life.

Additionally, the unusual emphasis on the humanistic side of early Christianity, its gracious response to quite fundamental human needs, is a subversive use of the structural principles of the historical conversion narrative for it critiques a reading of the Church’s origins as austere and ascetic. Pater’s construction of Christianity directly challenges the strict other-worldliness often associated with the early and medieval Church and its nineteenth-century institutionalized variant as echoed in most exemplars of the historical conversion romance. Hypatia, Callista and Fabiola all emphasize the unimportance if not danger of the material world. The pagan protagonists usually signal their potential for Christian conversion and heroic status through their simple living and renunciation of worldly appetite and pleasure, including sexual experience. Hypatia’s restraint and chastity inform her beauty, grace and nobility. Similarly, Fabiola’s virginal purity as well as her intellect mark her from the beginning as a likely convert: “What a noble soul, and what a splendid intellect she possesses!... And how jealously does she guard in herself that pearl of virtues which only we know how to prize! What a truly great Christian she would make!” Pater actively challenges such models by suggesting the early Church celebrated “the world of sense, the whole outward world” as well as “the kingship of the soul” (ME 2: 116). Cecilia’s house exemplifies this. Its bricolage of architectural fragments offers aesthetic pleasure and “an air of grave thought, of an intellectual purpose” (ME 2: 103).

The gain of embracing the beautiful world of the senses is thus not simply aesthetic. Pater claims high moral ground for such sensuous sensitivity through a deft manipulation of conventional themes of historical conversion fiction. The genre normally portrays the fervor and self-abnegation of the early Christians favorably and accounts for it in large measure by their dedication to Christ as a warm and welcoming individual with a personality that attracts love as well as devotion: “He who kindled a warmth on the cheek... [exuding] tenderness and love.” Pater echoes this characterization of Christ through Marius’s vision of the Ideal as compassionate friend, “divine companion” and “unfailing ‘assistant’” (ME 2: 70) who ameliorates his sense of transience, decay and death. But once again Pater both alludes to and rewrites the convention. Rather than make a commitment to this external, personal godhead, Marius renews his “search for the equivalent of that Ideal, among so-called actual things... [in] his actual experience” (ME 2:
72). In other words, the apprehension of the “Great Ideal” does not draw the convert away from earth to heaven. Instead, the world of sense experience and human feeling becomes the site where spiritual fulfillment is best achieved. In Marius such happy harmonization, even more than the “austere ascēsis which had preceded and were to follow” this period of the Church, reflects the essence of Christ’s teaching and His sensitivity to humanity, “that element of profound serenity in the soul of her Founder” (ME 2: 117). By implication, nineteenth-century Christianity, with its suppression of the flesh in favor of the spirit, is untrue to Christ’s temperament and intentions. Moreover, sympathy for the experience of the world is reinforced by numerous references in Marius to the serious “religious temperament” of the true devotee of the world of the sense. The conventional diction of spirituality employed in the genre is exploited in Pater’s novel to justify and ennoble those considerations which, the narrator of Marius admits, “the religious temper holds it a duty to repress” (ME 2: 20).

One such consideration is the value of the body. The cult of the martyr and the heroic status accorded the victim of persecution are characteristic of historical conversion narratives. But the representation of bodily suffering and torture is an ambivalent one, and as such reveals unresolved cultural anxieties about the importance of the flesh and the sexual implications of bodily spectacle. Conversion narratives explicitly suggest that the degradation and destruction of the body are prerequisites for the gain of spiritual rewards in the next life. Typically the humiliation of the flesh produces a sense of spiritual pleasure and fulfillment; plots validate a kind of transcendental (rather than sexual) masochism. In Fabiola, “peace, serenity, cheerfulness, and joy” mark the group of Christian prisoners when they learn they are to be torn apart by wild animals. Callista approaches the rack with tenderness and modesty: “her lips spoke of sweet peace and deep composure.” There is also an underlying erotic dimension in this physical torture. Agnes embraces death keenly, viewing her executioners as “bridesmen coming to summon me.” The conversion narrative thus evokes troubling and unresolved questions concerning gender. Through its insistence on chastity and martyrdom it simultaneously violates and re-enacts the marriage plot of romance—and realizes this disturbingly through abuse of rather than reverence for the body.

Yet there is also a revealing contradiction to the spiritual pleasure of bodily pain. The attractive body which must be broken for heavenly gain is paradoxically associated with the conversion of others and with spiritual ennoblement. The inspirational Christians in these narratives are typically handsome and elegant, even if impoverished slaves and blind beggars. There is a tacit admission that the engaging purity and vitality of the saint are recognizable only through an enticing physical appearance which reinforces
conventional gender differences. Good manners, strength and a comely physique attract Fabiola to the Christian Tribune Sebastian, for instance, whereas the evil Fulvius is womanly and given to artifice: “almost effeminate in look, dressed with most elaborate elegance, with brilliant rings on every finger.”

Moreover, anxieties about gender, deviance and power also underpin the spectacle of the suffering body and create a further troubling ambivalence for the reader. While the bravery of persecuted Christians is emphasized in terms of stoic endurance of violent cruelties, the reader is positioned ambiguously both as collaborative voyeur and moral critic of the persecutor’s perverse blood-lust. In *Fabiola*, for example, the reader is explicitly invited to engage every sense in savoring the sadistic torture of St. Lawrence on the gridiron: “To look at his tender flesh blistering and breaking over the fire . . . to see the steam . . . rise from his body, and hear the fire hiss beneath him, as he melted away into it . . . to observe the tremulous quivering that crept over the surface of his skin, the living motion which the agony gave to each separate muscle . . .”

Even more disquieting is the erotic sensationalism which characterizes the murder-martyrdom of Hypatia by the mad monks in Kingsley’s novel. They tear the naked woman to pieces blasphemously before the crucifix. In her death-scene she is disturbingly encoded simultaneously as the staunch, superior heroine-martyr, the vulnerable, innocent, modest figure of victimized womanhood, and the sexual object of perverse male desire in a way which ambiguously positions the reader as horrified and titillated spectator:

She shook herself free from her tormentors, and springing back, rose for one moment to her full height, naked, snow-white against the dusky mass around . . . With one hand she clasped her golden locks around her; the other long white arm was stretched upward toward the great still Christ appealing—and who dare say, in vain?—from man to God . . . and then wail on wail, long, wild, ear-piercing, rang along the vaulted roofs . . .

Disturbingly, too, the dead bodies of converted martyrs are similarly implicated in practices which are both officially sanctioned Christian devotions and linked to acts of superstition and illicit desire. The physical remains of martyrs become part of a material system of exchange which purports to have a supernatural objective but involves relic-seekers in a dismemberment not unlike that perpetuated by executioners, pagan maenads and heathen witches. Crowds seize what they can of a martyr’s corpse: “portions of the flesh for magical purposes; a finger, or a tooth, or some hair, or a portion of her tunic, or the blood-stained rope which was twisted round her wrist and ankle.”

In *Fabiola* there are disturbing echoes of necrophilia in Pancratius’s adoration of the sponge soaked with his martyred father’s blood, liquefied by his mother’s tears: “the holy matron put it to her son’s quivering lips, and
they were empurpled with its sanctifying touch.”42 From this perspective, the inspirational rewards of conversion—martyrdom and eternal glory—are overshadowed by uneasy and unresolved cultural tensions about the place of the body in any spiritual economy. For both authors and readers the body is rendered a confusing sign of spiritual ennoblement and a sensual temptation to illicit lust and desire. Its denial seems both a requirement for redemption and also a potentially sinful encouragement of feelings categorized as perverse.

Like representations of gender and the body, the treatment of class in the genre is as much concerned with the fragile location of power within secular social structures as with rival belief-systems. Class mobility and indeterminacy are unsettling in their challenge to the status quo. For the representatives of the (pagan) establishment in novels like Callista and Fabiola, Christians are threatening because their sense of spiritual worth and equality is out of keeping with their social place and implies secretive designs on the social and political structure (echoing Protestant characterization of Catholics in the 1850s). Small in number, seen as poor and outcast, the Christians are, for pagan property owners, dangerous vermin in social terms: “the country already swarms with them; they are as many as frogs or grasshoppers...the air breeds them like plague-flies; the wind drifts them like locusts. No one’s safe; anyone may be a Christian; it’s an epidemic.”43

From the Christian perspective (including that of the typical Victorian reader of the genre), it is the pagans who should be feared as the alien, invading force, especially when they seek to destroy Christian communities. Significantly, the representation of the pagan populace from the Christian perspective focuses on their lower class origins rather than on any doctrinal difference. When the “mob” at large persecutes Christians, it is typically represented as the unruly low class of society, full of envy, “hatred, contempt, and fury.”44 In Callista Newman makes much of the degraded nature of the pagans who hunt Christians. They are despicable and threatening by reason of their difference but what is alien is their class position—“ragged and famished, wasted and shameless”—and race—“brutal blacks, the aboriginal race of the Atlas, with their appetites written on their skulls and features.” In terms of danger, their pagan idolatry comes a poor second to their position as “the riffraff of the city, who lived by their wits, or by odd jobs, or on the windfalls of the market.”45 Kingsley similarly locates the threat of social destabilization with the lower classes (with whom he also links celibate Catholics). The brutal purge of the Jews in Hypatia is carried out by an intolerant, violent and greedy “mob of monks, costermongers and dockworkers, fishwives and beggars.”46 By contrast, converts and often their mentors or guides are elite or patrician, like Hypatia and Fabiola, or well placed in social and political circles (like the Tribune Sebastian). They have the natural
grace, intelligence, and composure of well educated middle-class men and women. Even the Christian slave of Fabiola is finally revealed as a free woman entrapped through the machinations of her brother Fulvius.

Marius the Epicurean also explores issues related to the body and class, but these have different implications for Pater’s treatment of conversion. Bodily degradation is the subject of two set pieces in Marius which are conventional episodes in the historical conversion romance: the officially sanctioned state “games” in the coliseum and the torment and execution of individual Christian martyrs. However, the incidents gain much of their significance from their interpretation by Marius, rather than from their direct appeal to the faith, sentiment and denominational sympathy of the reader. For example, the reader is distanced from the torture of individual martyrs by its presentation as a quoted epistle from the Christian community in Gaul. The report acknowledges traditional links between incredible human endurance of pain and total submission to Christ. But instead of inspiring awe for the “power from the Lord” (ME 2: 193) which can strengthen human fortitude, these incidents define heroism for Marius in relation to the value of the excluded and victimized. The martyr Blandina, for example, demonstrates “that what seems mean among men is of price with [Christ]” (ME 2: 192). And Marius is inspired by such examples, not to creep under the Lord’s powerful protection, but to expand his own sympathy for mankind by drawing “sword for the oppressed, as if in some new order of knighthood” (ME 2: 191). 47

This emphasis on the heroic importance of the marginalized is given a different inflection in the chapter dealing with the vicious butchery of the Roman games. Here the strategies of degradation and victimization are explored as a means of redefining the very Victorian concept of manliness (and, by implication, “unmanliness” or effeminacy with all its connotations of alternative sexualities). The association of conventional masculinity in the period with authoritative power, physical prowess and competence, control over the wild and natural for the service of civilization, and a noble championing of the weak and feminine is hideously parodied in the activities of the games and behavior of the “manly” spectators. Marcus Aurelius, the supreme male figure of authority, averts his eyes from the distasteful, ugly show but remains indifferent to the evil of human suffering in the amphitheatre. His tolerance of cruelty is, for Marius, a sign of moral inferiority, not heroic manliness. Other ostensibly “manly” qualities are similarly called into question. Physical dexterity and skill are devoted to “useless suffering and death,” to perverse “practical joking upon human beings” (ME 1: 237, 238). Manly practicality and “finesse” are defined in this context as the ability after one knife cut to “slip the man’s leg from his skin, as neatly as if it were a stocking” (ME 1: 239). A noble masculine concern for the weak is mon-
strously transformed into delight in hideous abortions or premature births among tortured animals: “there would be a certain curious interest in the dexterously contrived escape of the young from their mothers’ torn bosoms; as many pregnant animals as possible being carefully selected for the purpose” (ME 1: 238). The “normal” and the “unnatural”, manliness and effeminacy, are reversed in this appropriation of the plot features of conversion fiction. The dehumanizing practices of the amphitheatre associate revulsion with so-called manly qualities; compassion lies with the disdained victim. This ironic exchange is reinforced when the narrative focalization takes up the perspective of the excited spectator of the games, his sense of secure masculinity stimulated and reinforced by the humiliation of the persecuted: “By making his suffering ridiculous, you enlist against the sufferer some real, and all would-be manliness, and do much to stifle any false sentiment of compassion” (ME 1: 239).

The value of the outcast and marginalized, the suspect moral standards of the manly (and the attractiveness of its opposite, associated with sensitivity and compassion) are subversive positions for a mainstream readership, but are disguised and promoted by Pater’s reliance on conventional plot episodes of the historical conversion romance. In a similar way Pater develops the genre’s usual treatment of class to reinforce his own preoccupation with defining a new sensibility appropriate to the modernity of second-century Rome or nineteenth-century Britain. Marius’s visual fastidiousness is gradually and seamlessly translated into moral acumen. The disquietude initially associated with “what was repugnant to the eye” (ME 1: 24) is transformed into a clear-sighted “merciful, angry heart” (ME 1: 241) which compares favorably with the complacency of Marcus Aurelius in the face of corruption and cruelty. The “loyal,” “decisive,” “unfailing conscience” which guides Marius in matters of taste and morals is an elite gift, for “the select few” (ME 1: 241, 242). The “carnivorous appetite” and taste for “vulgar spectacle” typical of the Roman mob are for Pater an apt indication of “their vulgarities of soul” (ME 2: 199, 200). Like the martyr-saints in typical examples of the genre, Marius is set apart; however, he is different not by virtue of his commitment to an external faith but by special qualities of temperament. His sympathy for all mankind, his “intelligent seriousness about life,” his “power of physical vision” (ME 2: 96–97) and his ability to perceive a sanctity within the beautiful mark him as one of a distinctive coterie. Indeed, he is an exemplary illustration of a way of life represented as admirable in an increasingly explicit way. To be excluded from the philistine mainstream, to be marginalized for one’s unique sensibility, is to be poised for conversion, martyrdom and redemption of a distinctly Paterian kind.

This sense of the convert-martyr as elite, characteristic of the genre, requires a double positioning on the part of the reader. Understood in the con-
text of their own particular social and political environment most early Christian converts can be seen to move from the position of accepted insider at one with the expectations and beliefs of the pagan establishment, to that of rejected outcast. Christians are demonized by their pagan society through the scandalous rumors which circulate about them and which emphasize their unnaturalness and monstrosity. They are despised for their unmanly restraints and “womanish words,” their practice of witchcraft and cannibalism. For example, in both *Marius* and *Callista*, the Christians are held responsible for such natural disasters as plague and earthquake by the superstitious pagan townsfolk who fear the old gods have been angered by a “new enemy among them” (*ME* 2: 210).

Yet Christian converts are, from another readerly position, not outcast at all. They represent the true orthodoxy for a nineteenth-century Christian reader. If they stand apart, it is by virtue of their superhuman bravery, their single-minded devotion to the Invisible Lord, and their spiritual “breeding” as with the martyr Agnes in *Fabiola*: “there was a noble air about her, a greatness of look and manner, which Fabiola would have compared to that mien and stateliness . . . [by which] a being of a higher sphere was recognized on earth . . .”49 The abstract language of class superiority (“noble,” “greatness,” “stateliness,” “higher”) establishes a new kind of exclusivity for the Christian martyr. Agnes is already canonized, an elite saint worthy of admiration, respect and reverence, set apart by virtue of her purity, her spiritual and bodily perfection. This dual perspective—exclusion as loss and gain—is an important way in which the historical conversion romance constructs its ideal reader. The economy of conversion requires the reader to perceive both the worldly cost of change (vilification, social exile, persecution and death) for in this lies its heroism, and its transcendent profit (ennoblement and elevation to spiritual superiority) for in this lies its logic of self-destruction. To retain both angles requires a doctrinal understanding as well as emotional sympathy with the character, a shared perspective rooted in Christian belief.

*Marius* constructs its ideal reader in a similar way yet within different parameters. Pater’s close adherence to the conventions of the historical conversion romance genre ensures Marius’s own final status will also be read as that of the sanctified elite, the product of a process which, through its generic link, can seem as “orthodox” as that undertaken by more mainstream convert-martyrs in other texts of the kind. But such understanding of the real loss-gain dynamic for Marius (rather than its metaphorical expression in Christian terminology) depends on the reader who values, not Christian doctrine, but a certain kind of modern sensibility, the crystal spirit with its “unclouded receptivity of soul” (*ME* 2: 220). Marius’s nobility, unlike that of Agnes, rests not in other-worldliness and abstract perfection of virtue but
in his “sense of economy” (ME 2: 219). The narrator of Marius draws explicit attention to a standard conversion trope—a “jealous estimate of gain and loss”—in defining Marius’s spiritual state and creed: to “use life . . . [as] an end in itself—a kind of music,” to search for the mystical spiritual center of life, “some profound enigma in things,” and to deepen a sympathy and love for particular individuals and “the generations to come after him” (ME 2: 219, 220, 222). Not the abstractions of class, but diction connecting closely to lived experience—“music,” “things,” those he had loved, future generations—suggests a new way of defining the purpose and outcomes of a desirable cultivation, perfection and fulfillment of self.

In a similar way Pater adapts the triggers for conversion which are traditionally found in the genre. The beauties of Christian ritual are important in these conversion fictions as a contrast to coarse or perfunctory pagan rites and a spur to an inspired change of creed. The genre shows how Christian liturgy can strengthen believers in their resolve and refresh the spirit. In Hypatia the metaphysical abstractions of neo-Platonism, “an eternal sleep of snowy stone,” ultimately prove unsatisfying. By contrast the Christian ecclesiastical chant in Callista has a “transporting effect,” and the ritual elements of the requiem Mass for the martyred Caecilia in Fabiola are likened to an experience of heavenly concord, with music “like a chorus of angelic voices” and lamps bringing light “like a dawn glowing into day.” Pater also highlights the delight of the Christian service, though with more emphasis on its earthly perfections and their spiritual impact. Ritual becomes expressive of the “beauty of holiness” (ME 2: 123) but also the holiness of beauty. For example, the music suggests strength in soul and body. It is sung by “a voice of joy and health” (ME 2: 104). Words like “mystic” are used to convey solemnity, though whether this depth of mystery is religious or aesthetic is left to the judgement of the reader. Moreover, working within the terms of the genre, Pater reverses the traditional priority given to doctrine and spirit over ritual and its appeal to the senses. For his Christian worshippers liturgy gives a sense of “a regeneration of the body by the spirit” (ME 2: 133). The artistic performance of devotion (whether the old worship of Numa or the new system of Christianity), this aesthetic satisfaction of religious instincts, is itself the origin of coded belief. For this reason Marius responds most fervently to “the aesthetic charm of the catholic church, her evocative power over all that is eloquent and expressive in the better mind of man” (ME 2: 123). And his position as contemplative spectator of the beautiful—a position he holds throughout the novel—most ably equips him to respond intelligently and with restraint to this elegant sanctity and “beauty of holiness” wherever it might occur.

Emotional connections also initiate the process of conversion in the genre. Admiration, friendship and love for Christians are important stimuli
which draw pagan protagonists to belief in Christ. Fabiola’s attraction to Sebastian, Callista’s respect for Caecilius, Agellicus, and the slave Chione are all relationships which encourage non-believers to consider more thoughtfully the motivating principles of those to whom they are drawn. More importantly, such attractions soon broaden to encompass a sense of community of all believers, living and dead. The communion of saints gives comfort and strength in the face of trial because it suggests that death can be gloriously faced and overcome. Yet human love for the converts of these novels is of little significance compared to their final object of affection—Christ himself—to whom the converts respond with intimate, personal knowledge. In Fabiola Agnes, for example, views Christ as her betrothed: “I recognize no lover but himself... to whom I interest myself with undivided devotion.” For Callista He is a brother “who is calling me.”

Pater’s novel similarly acknowledges the importance of personal attraction to that elevation of spirit associated with the transformations of conversion. But his main example, though carefully coded, is controversial. A homosocial friendship with the handsome Cornelius is Marius’s conduit to a sustaining, loving community. Whereas earlier historical conversion romances tend to avoid the erotic and focus on more neutral qualities of warmth, joy, serenity and kindness, Pater represents Cornelius’s charms as all physical display, though expressive of a heroic spirit. His physicality is emphasized by his “brotherly” hand on Marius’s shoulder or his careful dressing in “his knightly array,” a kind of manly striptease in reverse: “... the breastplate, the sandals and cuirass, lacing them on, one by one, with the assistance of Marius, and finally the great golden bracelet on the right arm. . . . And as he gleamed there, amid that odd interchange of light and shade, with the staff of a silken standard firm in his hand, Marius felt as if he were face to face, for the first time, with some new knighthood or chivalry, just then coming into the world” (ME 1: 170).

Marius never does develop a personal relationship with a Divine Brother as do converts in other narratives of this type, but Cornelius offers a connection through their intimate friendship with the Christian coterie of Cecilia. This wider community is an important stimulus to satisfy his instinctive need to give and receive sympathy, his craving for maternal tenderness and family solace, and for cheerful serenity. But the initial attraction for Marius is quite explicitly the physical presence of Cornelius, “that reverent delight Marius had always had in the visible body of man” (ME 2: 53). The erotic nature of the attraction to this “one true temple of the world” (ME 2: 54) is consistent with Marius’s privileging of the sensuous in his relationships with other male friends, like Flavian. But Pater also uses the genre’s codes to validate same-sex friendship by describing its spiritual worth and characterizing it as “companionship” and brotherly friendship, part of Marius’s more gen-
eral warmth and sympathy for mankind. And, ultimately, it is a companion-
ship worth the dying for. Marius’s self-sacrifice is no self-sacrifice for a
transcendent or Incarnate deity, but an instinctive expression of his own
generous and open nature, his delight in “the feeling of human kinship” and,
even more importantly, a testing of a new dimension of self, “the discovery of
his possession of ‘nerve’” \(ME\ 2: 224, 213\).

Marius’s death is no clear martyrdom and marks no certain commit-
ment to Christianity. Pater underlines the enigmatic irony of his hero’s
semi-conversion repeatedly in the closing pages of his novel. The dreary
scene, his rescuers’ misunderstanding, his own uncertainty and depression
all combine to rob the final episode of the impressive and theatrical deaths
usually associated with martyrdom in other historical narratives of conver-
sion. Even Pater’s language, evasive, much qualified—“the nature of a mar-
tyrdom,” “a kind of sacrament,” their “generous view” \(ME\ 2: 224\)— focuses
attention on Marius’s silence, his “extreme helplessness” \(ME\ 2: 224\), the
unspectacular nature and confused significance of his passing. He becomes
as much a victim of others’ well-intended interventions and interpretations
as a hero-saint attesting belief through his own willed self-sacrifice for Cor-
nelius.

Yet it is this very passivity and surrender, this being rather than doing,
which best defines the nature of Marius’s heroism. “That age and our own
have much in common—many difficulties and hopes,” suggests Pater at the
opening of Chapter XVI, and his novel is an attempt to address these con-
nections in an unorthodox way. Pater’s exploitation of the conversion ro-
mance’s economy of victimization—gain through submission, exclusion,
suffering and loss—allows him to define his own ideal, elite hero and a new
system of belief and practice which reverses prescribed views and establish-
ment assumptions. To be outside the dominant culture—pagan or Chris-
tian—to be shunned and silenced for one’s truth to self (be that sexual,
aesthetic or moral integrity) is the new ennobling martyrdom. The new
sanctity depends on the sensitive expansion of consciousness, on self-
culture by means of a sympathetic and serious-minded response to sensuous
experience and, through this, achieving a connection with like-minded indi-
viduals and thence all human culture. It is thus that Pater makes rhetorical
use of the logic of the conversion narrative. He capitalizes on generic expec-
tations to suggest Marius, the sensitive and marginalized hero with his ho-
mosocial devotions, reserved sensuality and accommodation of difference,
possesses an inner beauty of character which will be his salvation and is a
model for others. His uncommitted but responsive perspective has a spiri-
tual, even redemptive, value as yet unrecognized but which heralds the plu-
ralistic, agnostic and questing spirit best suited to the challenge of modernity.