Walter Pater

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Marius at Oxford: Paterian Pedagogy and the Ethics of Seduction

UPON READING Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, John Addington Symonds confessed to a correspondent: “His view of life gives me the creeps, as old women say. I am sure it is a ghastly sham; & that live by it or no as he may do, his utterance of the theory of the world has in it the wormy-hollow-voiced seductiveness of a fiend.”¹ That Symonds lauded the book shortly thereafter in a review, that he made respectful reference to it in his own scholarly work, that he nonetheless accused Pater in private of fiendishness and seduction, bespeaks the raw nerve which the book and especially its “Conclusion” struck with Pater’s peers, the visceral distaste induced by its purported amorality and voluptuosity, by the seductive wriggling of Pater’s “wormy” voice.² The story is well known. Pater omitted the controversial “Conclusion” from the second edition of *The Renaissance*. He reinstated it eleven years later in the third edition with, however, a cautionary footnote, encouraging “those young men into whose hands it might fall” to read his novel *Marius the Epicurean* for clarification, lest it “possibly mislead” them (Ren 233). Understandably, some readers, Pater’s contemporaries, those who remembered the chilly reception *The Renaissance* received, might have construed this footnote as a retreat, an attempt by Pater to temper his headiness, to reconcile his aestheticism with the ethical instruction, the moral forthrightness, demanded of his profession. This “retreat hypothesis” might have been buttressed, in the eyes of some Victorian readers, by the generic structure of *Marius* itself, the novel Pater proffers as textual corrective, ethical compass, should “those young men” lose themselves in the epistemological thicket of his aestheticism. For, despite the fact that Pater sets his novel in Antonine Rome, *Marius the Epicurean* “enacts,” James Eli Adams notes, “a familiar pattern of the Victorian *Bildungsroman*”: the nineteenth-century genre which—with the exception of the conduct book and the anti-masturbation pamphlet—most enthusiastically promotes self-discipline and socialization.”³
The notion that Pater turned to ethics, wrote a *Bildungsroman* in order to legitimate, chasten, his seductive aestheticism, rests upon several problematical assumptions: first, that seduction and ethics are mutually exclusive; second, that pedagogue and seducer make uneasy neighbors; and third, that the socializing mission of the *Bildungsroman* is incompatible with the seductive agenda. I suggest, therefore, that a tripartite analysis of *Marius*, which consists of an evaluation of the text as *Bildungsroman*, an assessment of the lost ethical dimension to seduction, and an historicization of Paterian pedagogy as counter-pedagogy within Oxford, will together reveal one of the most neglected acts of demystification in Pater’s oeuvre. With *Marius*, Pater betrays—in all senses of the word “betray”—the conservatism underlying the pedagogical ideal of self-discovery, presenting his reader with an alternative to bourgeois individuality: an ethical subjectivity rooted in reciprocity. In *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater’s most seductive text, the *Bildungsroman* is turned against its own prescriptive project of socialization, diverting its Oxford readers from the complacent subjectivity toward which the *Bildungsroman* traditionally aspires.

Seduction—by which I mean quite simply the art of manipulating a person rhetorically or psychologically into submitting to one’s pleasure, a submission which is itself pleasurable—lies at the nexus of Paterian politics, aesthetics and ethics. For Pater, seduction makes possible knowledge itself, dialectical enlightenment. The philosopher, literally, the “lover of knowledge,” who understands most profoundly the nature of seduction is Plato, whose Socrates attains knowledge, the highest pleasure, through the manipulation of his susceptible interlocutor: for Plato is, Pater proclaims in *Plato and Platonism*, “by nature and before all things, from first to last, unalterably a lover” (*PP* 134). Much has been written in recent years, by Linda Dowling and others, of the tacit articulation of an homoerotic ethos inadvertently afforded Pater by curricular reforms implemented in the 1850s by Benjamin Jowett and other Arnoldian liberals, who sought to revitalize Oxford. Dowling suggests, “for the secular purpose of producing a new civic elite to lead Britain out of sociocultural stagnation and into a triumphal age of imperial responsibility.” Hellenism—“the systematic study of Greek history and literature and philosophy”—replaced Christian theology as the university’s metaphysical cornerstone, a process which included enshrining Platonic philosophy at the curricular core of undergraduate education, as well as Platonizing the tutorial system, revived during Oxford’s Tractarian years. Understanding the role played in late-Victorian sexual politics by anti-homophobic counterdiscourses, informed by an institutionally sanctioned appreciation of Greek culture, is certainly productive. One risks overstating the case, however, losing sight of the fact that for Pater the transformative capacity of Platonic *eros* lay not so much in the gender of the
beloved but in the reciprocal—and hence ethical—nature of dialectical seduction, in its potential as a non-coercive model of socialization.6

II

The word “seduce” derives from the Latin verb seducere, “to lead to the side.” The initiatory movement of seduction is always sideward: a stepping-away, a turning of the head, an invitational gesture. Plato’s dialogues often commence with sideways movements, with Socrates and his interlocutor meeting in a road, or at a temple, from which they draw one another into un-anticipated discourse, divert each other from their respective paths. Phaedrus, for instance, commences in the shade of a plane tree, from which Socrates hails the passing youth: “My dear Phaedrus, whence come you, and whither are you going?” Apollodorus inaugurates The Symposium with an anecdote about how his commute from his “home at Phalerum to the city” was unexpectedly interrupted, when he was “playfully” hailed by an “acquaintance, who had caught sight of [him] from behind.”8 In Lysis, it is Socrates, en route to the Lyceum, who catches the eye of Hippothales and is then drawn by the young man into “an enclosed space,” wherein Socrates engages several youths in a discussion of the nature of friendship.9 Were it not for this enticement from the side, a gesture to his left, or a voice to his right, the wayfarer would remain, in all senses of the word, pedestrian, faring his way, unseduced, unenriched by the knowledge excited by sideward movement. Christianity of course—in fact, any majoritarian value system—equates this move to the side with a deviation from the path to God. Whereas the proverbial road to heaven, then, is straight and narrow, in Platonic ethics, the attainment of truth is a necessarily circuitous procedure, with progress marked not by one’s adherence to one’s method, but by side-to-side movement, the back-and-forth motion of dialectic.

Seduction is sustained by one’s artful manipulation of one’s discussant, by one’s handling of another person, placing him or her within one’s hands. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Parmenides proceeds from an actual handshake, with Adeimantus “taking [Cephalus] by the hand.”10 Thus, in Charmides, when Socrates pays an “unexpected” “visit” to the palaestra, a wrestling arena where contestants literally handle one another, he is greeted both with salutations “from . . . all sides” and by a silly fellow “seizing [his] hand,” attempting to engage him in dialogue.11 Not surprisingly, Socrates is annoyed, for not only does he prefer to be the one doing the handling, but the man is brusque and coercive, a “madman,” Socrates complains. Manipulation, then, the successful handling of one’s interlocutor, necessitates a delicate touch: the gentle hand of the sage versus the heavy hand of the manhandler. Neither coercive, nor exploitative, the manipulation at which Socrates excels is steeped in mutuality. The Socratic caress disarms, lowers the interlocutor’s defenses, renders that person susceptible, sensitive.
Whether physical or rhetorical, a caress constitutes a technology of reciprocity, one’s fingertips functioning both to distribute pleasure across a surface and to elicit, to extract, from that surface pleasure, to instigate an exchange of pleasurable sensation, its communication. Thus, Plato is—to reiterate—“by nature and before all things, from first to last, unalterably a lover.” Thus, seduction makes possible knowledge itself, the fruits of communication, the object of dialectic.

Underlying the pedagogical culture of some of the most prominent Greek city-states—the most notable exceptions being Ionian—was a cult of male beauty, a fetishization of the warrior body as synecdoche for polis, and a belief that initiation into manhood belonged to mentorship, to the sociosexual reciprocity between a grown man and a boy. The sexual component of the relationship, historian Eva Cantarella suggests, was “considered necessary on the grounds that it could transfuse the manly virtues into the boy through the sperm of his lover”: hence, the Greek use of the word “inspiration” to denote insemination with virtue.12 Even in Plato’s idealized philosophy, “spiritual procreation” is premised on the assumptions that erotic attraction occurs between men, that central to the education of a youth is his partaking in an amorous-pedagogical relationship with an older man, and that this relationship is reciprocal, in that the beloved is infused with virtue, inspired, while his lover, in turn, is elevated spiritually by his beauty. Platonic pedagogy is the refined cousin of Athenian mentorship, which was itself highly procedural, replete with a courtship akin to a cat-and-mouse game, a means of discouraging suspect lovers, those incapable of participating in a process of mutual enrichment. The rhetorical art of rendering a youth receptive to one’s virtue, or inspirational potential, was for the Greeks seduction, a necessarily transparent process of self-promotion and the articulation of affection. For a lover to employ ignoble tactics meant that he was ignoble and thus devoid of inspirational potential; likewise, for the beloved to be “won” ignobly meant that he was ignoble and thus incapable of elevating a lover ethically. Transparency, however, does not equal artlessness. In Lysis, for instance, Socrates advises a frustrated lover to refrain from lauding his beloved: “[T]he more vain-glorious they are, the more difficult is the capture of them.”13 Socratic manipulation—what Socrates terms in The Symposium “tak[ing] . . . education in hand”14—elicits from the interlocutor an acute sensitivity, self-reflection: “Those young Athenians whom he was thought to have corrupted,” Pater writes in Plato and Platonism, Socrates, in fact, “loved and understood,” “giving them that interest in themselves which is the first condition of any real power over others” (PP 90). To render the beloved reflective, receptive to one’s virtue, requires acuity and elegance, and thus precludes those with heavy hands or a paucity of character. In sum, seduction consists of three motions: first, sideward, diverting the person from his path
by refocusing his attention; second, *inward*, preparing him for inspiration by taking him gently in hand; and third, *upward*, consummating one’s pleasure through mutual elevation.

There exist, in Pater’s eyes, two educators: one a teacher, the other a seducer. The former trains the pupil, imposes virtue from without, instills order through instruction and proscription. The latter socializes, too, but by questioning the pupil’s set ways, eliciting virtue from within the youth and learning alongside him. Socrates, writes Pater, “does not propose to teach anything”—instead, he awakens “latent knowledge,” joins with his youthful partner in exploration, using, in Plato’s words, “eyes in common” (*PP* 179), his questions “fall[ing] like water on the seed-ground” of his fertile friend (*PP* 63). In his analysis of *Meno*, Pater suggests that for Plato “what we call learning is in fact reminiscence” (*PP* 62), that truth exists, dormant, “in the boy,” “laid up in him, to blossom again” through dialectic, “so kindly, so firmly” (*PP* 66). “According to Plato,” Pater reiterates in *Marius*, “all vision was but reminiscence” (*ME* 2: 40): hence the ingredients of enlightenment lie within, awaiting manipulation, in the “interior, mental condition of preparation or expectancy” (*ME* 1: 8). To impart knowledge to the boy, instead of recalling it from within him, amounts to indoctrination, a pedagogy which is certainly firm but hardly kind. Seduction, on the other hand, constitutes the pedagogical art of inspiring such recollection, of manipulating human susceptibility, not for the purpose of rendering one’s pupil docile, but in order that he might momentarily transcend his imitative impulse.

III

If the dialogue is the preferred genre of the seducer, then the *Bildungsroman* is the teacher’s favorite. Pater proclaims the essay—his form—the modern heir to the dialogue (*PP* 188). Where the dialogue manifests a light touch, the *Bildungsroman* betrays a heavy hand. Both pedagogical technologies, of course, aim to produce viable adult subjects, to present their youthful audiences with models of meritorious citizenship. Between them, however, exist two crucial ethical differences. First, whereas the dialogue socializes by means of seductive manipulation, the *Bildungsroman* socializes by means of comfort-inducing mystification, obfuscation of the contradiction inherent to bourgeois individuality. According to Franco Moretti, preeminent theorist of the *Bildungsroman*, the individual—whose formation the genre describes—constitutes an inherently contradictory creature, representing one of the most ingenious “solutions ever offered to a dilemma conterminous with modern bourgeois civilization: the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization.” The ideology of the individual harmonizes the irreconcilable conflict between conformity and freedom, modernity’s insistence that its subjects be both unique and normal. What Moretti terms “the comfort of civilization,” the
nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* disseminates the individual to a primarily middle-class audience, obscures its contradictory nature, seamlessly fusing socialization and self-determination. Whereas the dialogue coaxes its audience from its established path, demystifies, the *Bildungsroman* anesthetizes its reader’s dialectical impulses by naturalizing contradiction, endows the individual with a reassuring aura of inevitability, thereby inducing in the reader—or, rather, attempting to induce—a complacent dream, a blind eye to the violence percolating beneath subjectivity. In diverting its reader’s critical gaze, dimming his or her dialectical faculties, the *Bildungsroman* renders its own ideological work invisible, disappears from sight. This brings us to the second ethical distinction between the seductive manipulation of the dialogue and the ideological objective of the *Bildungsroman*: whereas seduction necessitates reciprocity, the interdependence of seducer and seduced, mystification muffles its own footsteps, conceals interdependence, obscures the fact that ideology, as Louis Althusser has said, *needs* subjects.\(^{16}\) In sum, the seducer’s hand is subtle but visible, transparent in its need for what it caresses; the mystifier’s hand, by contrast, is heavy but invisible, concealing its dependence upon the subject over which it wields authority, and from whose submission it derives that authority.

Pater levels his seductive *Bildungsroman* at two targets. The first is the traditional *Bildungsroman*, more specifically, the docility which its mystified, albeit entertaining, narrative of self-discovery inculcates in its youthful reader. In a Wordsworthian vein, Pater laments the violence wrought on the ethical constitution of the reader by novels which posit individuality not as a by-product of reciprocity but as the inevitable fruits of intellectual insularity and social isolation, in *Marius* comparing these texts, somewhat hyperbolically, to the spectacular carnage of the Roman amphitheatre: “For the long shows of the amphitheatre were, so to speak, the novel-reading of that age—a current help provided for sluggish imaginations, in regard, for instance, to grisly accidents, such as might happen to one’s self; but with every facility for comfortable inspection” (*ME* 1:239). Such novels are superficially stimulating, yes, but at the cost of the reader’s eventual desensitization, an amoral yet reassuring sense of invincibility, which leaves the reader titillated by exterior sensation yet insulated against it, shielded by an impervious yet ultimately alienating membrane of individuality. Although Pater critiques novels in general in the above passage, the docile subjectivity, the glorified anomie, which he accuses novels of encouraging, in essence, is precisely that sort of subjectivity which Moretti suggests the *Bildungsroman* promulgates. Pater understood that there can be no ethics without risk: injustice cannot be addressed from afar, from a state of “comfortable inspection,” egoistic impenetrability. One must throw open one’s doors, communicate, partake of mutuality. One’s skin must be porous and sensitive, not “sluggish” but
primed to the touch: hence Marius, with his “untired and freely open senses” (*ME* 1: 48). There can be no ethics without susceptibility, the willingness to risk one's skin.

Where the traditional *Bildungsroman* naturalizes the individual, obscures the ideological strings of its puppeteer, in *Marius* Pater denaturalizes individualization, discloses—with his incessant pedagogical-authorial intrusions, as well as his Hellenization of the pedagogical relationship between author and reader, between Marius and his various mentors—that "self-discovery" is the byproduct of reciprocity between a susceptible youth and an inherently needy authority. In short, Pater confesses, as a representative of institutional socialization, that power seduces, that *he needs his pupil as much as his pupil needs him*. Socialization, in Pater's view, is politically and ethically suspect only insofar as the pupil is unaware that his socializer—"inspirer," in Platonic parlance—*needs* him, depends upon his subordination for his own intellectual elevation. In *Marius*, then, its protagonist's self-discovery is by necessity a joint venture, a journey undertaken by pupil and mentor "with eyes in common." Self-discovery is not a solitary descent into selfhood, where, in the cramped shadows of one’s psyche, one mistakes isolation for autonomy, confinement for freedom. In retreating into interiority, barring its entrances, in succumbing to the fantasy of impermeability, the subject ultimately serves as sentry at its own cell door, a self-policing body, encoded by the very powers of which it fancies itself master. Without the reciprocity of dialectical manipulation, without that gentle touch which inspires virtue in one's pupil, whose beauty in turn inspires one's touch—in short, without seduction, socialization is mere mystification, a laboratory for indoctrination, for the mass production of automatons with deep thoughts.

This brings us to *Marius*'s second target, the anti-seductive forces within Oxford itself, those for whom a classical education does not include an adequate appreciation, in Pater's eyes, of the role seduction plays in Platonism, either because its reciprocity in practice threatens institutional stability, or because seduction is too easily conflated with pederasty. For Pater, for whom homoeroticism is but an added bonus, seduction is not only the salient feature of Platonic pedagogy, but without it the Hellenistic mission of the university risks drift, deterioration into indoctrination. Pater knows that the nation’s need for a steady stream of classically educated civil servants takes precedence over ensuring that those young men possess the ethical rigor which a life of dialectical examination necessitates. In *Plato and Platonism*, Pater intimates that the sophists, in their “large, fashionable, expensive schools,” a veiled reference of course to his own alma mater, reduced the pursuit of truth to “a conscious method, a practical philosophy,” and thereby spurred the “ruinous fluidity” of Classical Greece (*PP* 106). Far from the political retreat that some deem it, *Marius the Epicurean* offers se-
duction as an ethical corrective to vulgar imperialism, to the “ruinous fluid-
ity” of Pater’s own culture. This imperialism is represented within the
novel by the impending reign of the cold-blooded Commodus, by his degra-
dation of Marcus Aurelius’s Hellenism, with its ethical axis of Platonism. At
Oxford this imperialism is manifested in Jowett’s political expediency, in his
embourgeoisment and bowdlerization of Plato, in his single-minded quest
for what Dowling terms a “quasi-Platonic set of guardians at home and
abroad,” a “civic elite of laity and statesmen whom he trusted” “to take over
the work of the English clergy.” So ideologically effective, in fact, was
Jowett’s Hellenization of the university, and so pervasive was the martial
ethos underlying Greek culture and its study, which Oxford graduates took
with them into the world, in the form of unconquerable imperial ambition,
that Ford Madox Ford, writing in 1938, suggested the British Empire be re-
named “Jowett-land.” While Pater was complicit to some degree in this
phenomenon, it is nonetheless fair to say that his seductiveness found, at
best, a tenuous and peripheral foothold in an Oxonian Platonism from
which eros had been all but excised, its vestiges domesticated.

IV

It is no coincidence that second-century Rome underwent, as did
nineteenth-century Oxford, an Hellenistic metamorphosis, an importation
of Greek culture and philosophy, “a voluntary archaism,” Pater calls it,
which began in the late Republic and reached its apex during the “pensive
age” of Marcus Aurelius (ME 1: 48, 154). Pater portrays Rome as a vast uni-
versity ruled by a philosopher-king, who “was himself, more or less openly, a
‘lecturer’” (ME 1: 153), whom we encounter, at one point, reading “the Re-
public of Plato,” and whose subjects visit “the lecture-room of a well-known
Greek rhetorician,” “a teacher then much in fashion among the studious
youth of Rome” (ME 2: 36, 142). Pater even pokes fun at the “frizzled heads,
then à la mode,” of foppish Roman youths, a reference to the Neronian curls
worn by dandiacal young men—including Oscar Wilde—in 1883, when Pa-
ter composed the novel (ME 1: 175). Marius the Epicurean narrates the edu-
cational journey, the ethical quest, of the highly susceptible,
“constitutionally impressible” (ME 2: 132), Marius, who, in the spirit of
Plato, experiences spiritual development not as the discovery of exterior
truth but as the recollection of a hitherto fragmentary inner knowledge,
“half-understood,” a “palimpsest” buried beneath the surface of perception,
“a lost epic” “recovered at last” (ME 2: 220, 99, 220). Marius achieves this
recovery not through meditation, not through solitary explorations of interi-
ority, but through subordination to a series of pedagogical mentors, who
take him in hand, as Socrates would say, attempt through manipulation to
inspire him: Flavian with an Heraclitean combustibility, Aurelius with a ma-
jestic yet sensually destitute Stoicism. Their hands prove too heavy: “fever-
ish” in the case of his tutor Flavian, reducing Marius to “an uneasy slave,”
cold and regal, in the emperor’s case, alienating Marius from the world of the
senses (ME 1: 234). In their respective grips, Marius becomes prosthetic
hand, a performer of intellectual handiwork, transcribing Flavian’s verses,
serving as the emperor’s trusted amanuensis.

What ultimately seduces Marius is the “discretion” and restraint, the gen-
tle hand, of the Christian soldier Cornelius: the combination of his silent
presence, “the regular beauty of his person” (ME 1: 234), and what Pater
terms his “ethical charm” (ME 2: 6), “a charm” “rather physical than moral”
(ME 1: 234). In the spirit of the Platonic dialogue, the two men meet in a
road and draw one another into discourse, “a real exchange of ideas” (ME 1:
168). Diverted from his path, Marius follows Cornelius on an errand to a
goldsmith’s shop. By the time they part company, they are friends. Marius
attains self-recovery, ethical subjectivity, through the influence of this “com-
rade who now laid his hand so brotherly on his shoulder” (ME 1: 168),
through an amorous-pedagogical relationship, what Socrates calls “spiritual
procreation”: “Identifying himself with Cornelius in so dear a friendship,
through him, Marius seemed to touch, to ally himself to, actually to become
a possessor of the coming world; even as happy parents reach out, and take
possession of it, in and through the survival of their children” (ME 2: 209-
210). Rather than its antithesis, Christian conversion constitutes the
apotheosis of Socratic seduction. Cornelius’s “overpowering charm,” his
ethical-physical magnetism, entices Marius from his path, inspires his re-
collection of self, his newfound appreciation for “those divinations of a living
and companionable spirit at work in all things, of which he had become
aware from time to time in his old philosophic readings—in Plato and oth-
ers” (ME 2: 209, 68). Marius’s conversion—if one can call it that—betray
no hint of coercion or indoctrination. Cornelius is no proselytizer. Rather,
Marius is touched by Christianity, made sensitive, susceptible to it. The
Christians inspire in him a willingness to risk his skin, to open himself to the
sensations (as opposed to the tenets) of their faith. He engages in a sensory
dialogue with Christianity, allows himself to be caressed. When the Chris-
tians with whom he has been traveling are arrested, Marius remains with
them. When the guards learn that a non-Christian is among the prisoners,
and thus exempt from persecution, Marius presents Cornelius in place of
himself. His jailhouse epiphany, his sense of ethical connectedness (as op-
posed to moral completeness), is triggered not by the religion for which he
purportedly risks—and ultimately loses—his life, but by this “heavy risk” it-
self, the mutuality it implies (ME 2: 213).

The Paterian subject is dialogic, one could say, rather than soliloquistic.
Individuation is marked not by involution, a turning-inward, introversion,
but by exchange, a passing-between, communication. For Pater, the fantasy
of an unified, autonomous subject belies the contradictory and multiplici-
tous—indeed, historicist—nature of subjectivity. Bildung, therefore, is
never experienced in Marius as soliloquy, as conversation with oneself, but
rather as dialogue, as influence by another. Marius does not take himself in
hand, mistake as his own voice the social forces shaping his “self-discovery.”

Soliloquistic heroes, however, abound in nineteenth-century Bildungsro-
mane. In Thackeray’s Pendennis, for example, the ideal of self-determination
and the demands of socialization—pleasure principle and reality prin-
iple—are reconciled, made compatible, in the hero’s confrontation with him-
self, his struggle to take himself in hand. It is an herculean task: “In a word,
Pen’s greatest enemy was himself: and as he had been pampering, and coax-
ing, and indulging that individual all his life, the rogue grew insolent, as all
spoiled servants will be; and at the slightest attempt to coerce him, or make
him do that which was unpleasant to him, became frantically rude and un-
ruly.”

The narrative trajectory is toward self-discipline, the eventual mar-
riage in Pen of individualism and responsibility. In a confrontation with
oneself—such as the one in which Pen is perpetually embroiled—expressing
oneself (laying down one’s law) and repressing oneself (succumbing to that
law) become conflated, for the subject constitutes both the repressive agent
and the repressed body, aggressor and victim. Self-discipline, therefore, tak-
ing oneself in hand, turning inward, results in aggression being directed at
oneself. The soliloquistic subject measures its vitality, its strength of charac-
ter, by how successfully it represses itself, elides the difference between ex-
pression and repression, pleasure and pain.

A dialogic model of individuation, on the other hand, measures its sub-
ject’s ethical robustness not by how aggressively it contains itself, how skill-
fully it closes its circuit, but by how susceptible that person is to influence,
how successfully the subject makes of its skin an open surface of communi-
cation. Marius participates, then, in perpetual dialogue. Bildung is a group
affair: it occurs in pairs, seductive couplings, sometimes even in larger par-
ties, pedagogical assemblages. Marius is never alone, never unitary. Even
solitude is populated by subtle touches, the caress of others: “To Marius the
whole of life seemed full of sacred presences, demanding of him a similar
collectedness” (ME 1: 17). To trust the touch of the invisible, to make loving
companion of the seemingly insubstantial, to cohabit with sacred presences,
is the lesson to be drawn, certainly, from Pater’s translation of Apuleius’s
“The Story of Cupid and Psyche,” in which Psyche incurs the displeasure of
the gods by doubting the sanctity, the sublimity, of the unseen companion at
her side. It is a lesson Marius takes to heart. “Amid the solitude,” Pater
writes, “which in spite of ardent friendship he had perhaps loved best of all
things,” Marius senses “some other companion, an unfailing companion,
ever at his side throughout,” “doubling his pleasure in the roses by the way”
(ME 2: 67), “a friendly hand laid upon him amid the shadows of the world” (ME 2: 71). The pedagogical hand of this “tutelary or genius,” as Marius calls it, induces in him both knowledge and pleasure, elicits from him a more acute, more fervent, appreciation of those roses (ME 2: 172). Enlightenment occurs in Pater’s dialogic Bildungsroman through sensitization, expansion: Marius becomes, literally, a dilated pupil, a sentient and susceptible surface, through which one sees “the light.”

If Pater’s equation of “self-discovery” with submission to “ethical charm” makes Marius the Epicurean a novel about seduction, then the dialogic manner in which Pater structures and narrates the novel makes it a text which seduces. One could argue, for instance, that Marius is dialogic in both Plato’s sense of the word and Bakhtin’s, that Pater’s novel is conspicuously heteroglot, that it unleashes against the “unifying, centralizing, centripetal forces of verbal-ideological life”—in this case the traditional Bildungsroman—a centrifugal army of subgenres, asides, professorial lectures, translations, and myriad fragments of text. Just as the unitary subject of the traditional Bildungsroman gets rebuked by Pater, opposed by his pedagogical model of dialogic subjectivity, so too does the (relatively) unitary language of the traditional Bildungsroman, opposed by Pater’s dialogized heteroglossia, the classical library he empties into Marius: lengthy passages from Apuleius, Marcus Aurelius, Eusebius, Lucian, Aristeides, to name but a few of the most glaring examples. Among Pater’s numerous parenthetical excursions from the story line, in fact, are excerpts from actual dialogues. Whereas Bakhtin’s heteroglossia emerges, of course, from the street and carnival, from the (at times, sordid) crannies of “low” culture, Paterian heteroglossia is a decidedly refined affair, an academic (and therefore “high”) assault upon a discursive tradition to which it nonetheless finds itself—for all its height—peripheral. I am not suggesting that inserting into the plot of a Bildungsroman a lengthy passage from the Pervigilium Veneris is explicitly seductive; nor am I suggesting that the presence of dialogized heteroglossia in Pater’s novel (even in abundance) represents a radical departure from tradition. According to Bakhtin, after all, the novel as a genre embodies dialogized heteroglossia, even, we can assume, traditional Bildungsromane. What I am suggesting, however, is that a Paterian counter-pedagogy is at work in Marius at the level of form as well as content, that Pater’s inherently pedagogical asides, his classical intrusions, counter the unifying motion of the European Bildungsroman, the genre’s centripetal movement toward unified subjectivity. Pater hails his youthful reader from the side, from his asides, leading him from the fabula to its margins, where he engages him in pedagogical dialogue. The progression of Marius (as well as Marius the character) is beset by sideward movement, by an orchestrated campaign of dialogue.
Pater’s numerous authorial intrusions, his insistence upon rendering himself visible, exposing his own hand, make *Marius* a seductive text. *Marius* is not simply the story of a young man’s initiation into adulthood and his quest for spiritual refinement: it is a metafictional meditation upon the act of reading, upon its own reception by a reader, upon its efforts to render its reader receptive and therefore educable. Pater’s numerous professorial asides and interpretative suggestions—whether about Italian art history, Jonathan Swift, Goethe, or the art of translating *The Golden Ass*—should not be dismissed, as is often their fate, as tedious or artless tangents, but understood as the reciprocal component of seduction, the disclosure by the lover of his need for the youth to recognize him, to affirm his worth, in order that they might attain mutual elevation. Central to Paterian pedagogy, then, to the very act of reading, is the reader’s body, the sensory receptivity of an inevitably youthful reader, upon whose ability to be inspired, infused, Pater’s future, his immortality, depends, as does the future of the inspirational text, his spiritual progeny. In *Appreciations*, Pater explains the phenomenon:

> The literary artist is of necessity a scholar, and in what he proposes to do will have in mind, first of all, the scholar and the scholarly conscience—the male conscience in this matter, as we must think it, under a system of education which still to so large an extent limits real scholarship to men. In his self-criticism, he supposes always that sort of reader who will go (full of eyes) warily, considerately, though without consideration for him, over the ground which the female conscience traverses so lightly. . . . (Ap 12)

Pater materializes his reader, endows him with corporeality, with discriminating yet expansive eyes, with legs, even, that will tread surefootedly a “ground” his female counterpart only “traverses” “lightly.” This male reader has weight, bulk, a textual presence. His eye is no mere synecdoche for readerliness, but a susceptible surface, pedagogical entrance. Because this reader-pupil is by definition turned away, “without consideration for him,” Pater must seduce him, attract his attention, earn his affection. For Pater, the act of reading is creative, procreative, and thus necessitates a seductive relationship between reader and author. Although Pater’s homosocial conception of this relationship smacks of sexism, it is nevertheless important to note that male superiority, in Pater’s eyes, is the result of historical rather than biological determinants, thereby paving the way, at least in theory, for a less masculinist—indeed, for an unisex or even polysexual—model of seduction, under, of course, different historical circumstances. Lest we prove too generous, however, in attributing to Pater a latent feminism, let us concede that Pater contributed little, if anything, toward opening the university to women; unlike some of his colleagues, in fact, Pater had a personal policy forbidding female auditors at his lectures.23
So pervasive are Pater’s authorial asides—his parenthetical tutorials on Shakespeare and Rousseau, Jonathan Edwards and Baudelaire, Swedenborg and Raphael—that, at one point, he offers an apology: “Let the reader pardon me if here and there I seem to be passing from Marius to his modern representatives—from Rome, to Paris or London” (*ME* 2: 14). Annoyed at what he deems *Marius*’ “insidious” “forms of interruption,” its “excessive allusions,” one critic, Bernard Richards, suggests that Pater sounds, at times, “like some smart and facetious don at dessert trying to catch the attention of his torpid listeners.”24 In dismissing Pater as seeking affirmation, however, as too avid in his need to charm, one loses sight of the political and ethical efficacy of this neediness, of his insistence that he outstretch his inspirational hand, disclose his dependence upon his pupil. Neither artless, nor self-indulgent, Pater’s intrusions reiterate the *reciprocal* nature of socialization, demystify the dubious process of individuation, put a face upon the disembodied authority behind the *Bildungsroman*. 