

VERNON LEE

THE HANDLING OF WORDS

A PAGE OF WALTER PATER

In 1923 Vernon Lee published a collection of studies of various famous prose-writers. In 'The Handling of Words' (now obtainable in *The Week-End Library: The Bodley Head*), she examined the syntax of De Quincey, Landor, Carlyle, and the different ways in which Meredith, Kipling, Stevenson, Hardy, Henry James and Maurice Hewlett used words, and constructed sentences. 'Style, in so far as it is individual, is a kind of gesture or gait, revealing, with the faithfulness of an unconscious habit, the essential peculiarities of the writers' temperament and modes of being'; and in her hands the study of syntax became an instrument of psychological criticism. She examined passages from each writer very closely, noting the number of adjectives or verbs he used, how close was the logical connection between his sentences or how often he changed the subject in the next sentence. Such analyses might seem dry to those uninterested in technicalities, but their results were illuminating and often surprising. One saw clearly how Hardy dawdles along (without its really mattering—for he gets his effects), how swift and compact Stevenson is in comparison, and how completely Henry James depends upon abstract logical constructions, relieved by constant metaphors, for his effects. Not a few passages of great repute from famous prose-writers—Burke's eloquent comparison of the English Constitution to Windsor Castle, for instance—emerged from her analysis in tatters. These studies were not only examples of a new and more objective method of psychological interpretation, but they were also good lessons in the art of writing itself. Part of

that art is unteachable, and we recognize this when we say 'the style is the man';—you cannot teach another to feel life so that his feelings are worth communicating. But you can teach him how to communicate such feelings as he has, and a large part of the craft of writing consists in merely preventing the reader thinking or feeling what the writer does not mean to convey. This is what we mean when we praise a book for its 'good style', and it can be taught.

One famous prose writer was absent from those examined in 'The Handling of Words', and one in whom we expected Vernon Lee to be particularly interested—Walter Pater. Here is her analysis of a famous page from 'Marius the Epicurean'; and those who are sufficiently interested in the craft of writing to follow it will find that they will learn something about the delicate art of guiding the reader's mind and avoiding even the smallest false note. 'Words are what the writer manipulates in the first instance, as the pianist manipulates in the first instance the keys of his instrument. But behind the keyboard of the piano is an arrangement of hammers and strings; and behind the words are the contents of the reader's memory; and what makes the melody and the harmony is the vibration of the strings, the awakening of impressions in the consciousness. The writer is really playing upon the contents of the reader's mind.'

D. M.

For this purpose, after devoutly saluting the *Lares*, as was customary before starting on a journey, Marius set forth one summer morning on his way to the famous temple which lay among the hills beyond the valley of the Arnus. It was his greatest adventure hitherto; and he had much pleasure in all its details, in spite of his feverishness. Starting early, under the guidance of an old serving-man who drove the mules, with his wife who took all that was needful for their refreshment on the way and for the offering at the shrine, they went, under the genial heat, halting now and then to pluck certain flowers seen

for the first time on these high places, upwards, through a long day of sunshine, while cliffs and woods sank gradually below their path. The evening came as they passed along a steep white road with many windings among the pines, and it was night when they reached the temple, the lights of which shone out upon them pausing before the gates of the sacred enclosure, while Marius became alive to a singular purity in the air. A rippling of water about the place was the only thing audible, as they waited till two priestly figures, speaking Greek to one another, admitted them into a large, white-walled and clearly lighted guest-chamber, in which, while he partook of a simple but wholesomely prepared supper, Marius still seemed to feel pleasantly the height they had attained to among the hills.

The agreeable sense of all this was spoiled by one thing only, his old fear of serpents; for it was under the form of a serpent that Aesculapius had come to Rome, and the last definite thought of his weary head before he fell asleep had been a dread either that the god might appear, as he was said sometimes to do, under this hideous aspect, or perhaps one of those great sallow-hued snakes themselves, kept in the sacred place, as he had also heard was usual.

And after an hour's feverish dreaming he awoke—with a cry, it would seem, for some one had entered the room bearing a light. The footsteps of the youthful figure which approached and sat by his bedside were certainly real. Ever afterwards, when the thought arose in his mind of some un hoped-for but entire relief from distress, like blue sky in a storm at sea, would come back the memory of that gracious countenance which, amid all the kindness of its gaze, had yet a certain air of predominance over him, so that he seemed now for the first time to have found the master of his spirit. It would have been sweet to be the servant of him who now sat beside him speaking.

The first thing I am struck with is the perfect clearness of these first sentences down to 'Arnus'. Then, that this clearness is compatible with, indeed obtained by, a considerable degree of involution. How? By the admirable

movement of the various parts of the sentences: the reader sees the meaning winding swiftly and steadily round the various items as the mountain road winds round rocks and promontories. The logic of exposition is perfect: we begin by taking up the purpose which we shall carry all through, and place behind us, as a landmark meaning *home* the preliminary 'devoutly saluting the *Lares*, as was customary before starting on a journey,' and then only start in the historic tense, 'Marius set forth, etc.' Notice how those two involutions *before starting*. 'For this purpose *after devoutly* saluting the *Lares*, as was customary before starting on a journey' seem to liberate, like an arrow from a bow, the *Marius set forth* so that the 'one summer morning' is carried along on the swiftness of the movement, and we do not even perceive that it is, after all, a parenthesis; this carrying along is so strong that Pater has, very properly, not placed it between commas.

The sense of *travel in general* is so strong in this first sentence, that one has no feeling of repetition when the third sentence tells us what we have already been told 'starting early,' for starting early is after all contained in 'set forth one summer morning.'

But this third sentence is the real narrative: the first was, as it were, a general schematic view. In this third sentence we are dealing with Marius; in the first we dealt with the road and with our spirit travelling along it. For between the two sentences has come a strictly personal and subjective one, 'It was his greatest adventure hitherto, and he had much pleasure in all its details in spite of his feverishness.' This sentence has transferred our imaginative realization, our *Einfühlung*, from the road to the traveller. And so we are ready to learn the details

of the little boy's adventures. And mark how in this third sentence the meaning, instead of flying through the landscape with the direct rapidity of the eye as in the first sentence, now moves slowly like the wayfarers and their beasts, cumbered with details, stopped by *whos* and *that* and *ares* and *thes* and *withs* and *ands* 'an old serving-man *who* drove the mules, with his wife *who* took all *that* was needful for their refreshment on the way and for the offering at the shrine'. What a lot of small bundles of words, what small shiftings about—'under the guidance of'—'who drove', etc., '*with* his wife'—'*on the way*' 'for the offering' '*at the shrine*'. This is real travelling, the slow progress, the constant stopping and readjustment of the poor human body with all its needs, as distinguished from the free, swift directness of the disembodied glance across the landscape. They go slower and slower, with more and more parentheses and commas 'under the genial heat, halting now and then to pluck certain flowers seen for the first time on these high places'. Note the change of *gearing* of the verbs 'halting, to pluck, seen'—and the changing adverbs and prepositions *under*, *on*, *first time*, *now* and *then*'; all this detail being placed between the verb 'they went' and its adverb 'upwards'—so that they are dragged along by the attraction of two words belonging to one another and then artificially separated.

After that *upwards* comes immediately another adverb 'through' in 'through a long day of sunshine'—lengthening, broadening out still further that effect of endlessness, to be broadened, lengthened still further by the other movement, meeting that of the wayfarers, the movement in 'while the cliffs and woods sank gradually below their

path'. What a sense of topography, conveyed not by 'word painting' but by adjustment of movements!

'The evening came as they passed along a steep white road with many windings among the pines'.

Here I can only wonder at the lapse represented by that word *along*, which, with its verb *to pass* gives the idea or rather sensation of flat straightness, which is surely not what Pater intended. For a mountain road flat at the top is something of a character so special, implying a long ridge and consequent expanded view, almost always a view on both sides, that anyone who had this in his mind would certainly call attention to it by some definite words. So that this 'pass along'—at the highest point of the journey, instead of 'climbed up' can only be a lapse. How completely wrong the impression is, is shown by the 'pass along' having caused me to overlook the word *steep*: those two words 'pass along' having instantly conjured up in my mind a road which so far from being steep was *flat*. I have called this a *lapse*, because it is most explicable as due to an interruption in the definite vision of the scene. But it may be due also to one of those after-thoughts which, according to my experience, are nearly always fatal to the unity and efficacy of descriptive writing. I can imagine Pater having originally written 'The evening came as they went up a steep white road, etc.,' and then, on re-reading, remarking that he had used *went* and *up* (in upwards) in the previous sentence, substituting *pass along* without remarking that, as is nearly always the case with such supposed synonymous expressions, the second version differed from the first just in the necessary essentials. Again, I can imagine that this sentence, with its *lapse*, may be the place where one day's or hour's work ended and another's began; which

barely the greatest skill can hide. Or, again, it may be the last sentence of a day's work, representing flagging attention, and thrown on the paper merely as a memorandum.

How much we should learn of the psychology of intellectual creation if only we could see a great writer's scrawl, with the alterations in handwriting revealing the different day's work, and revealing, perhaps also, the intensifications and flaggings of spontaneous attention! Be this as it may, all this about the *steep white road* is quite unnecessary; we have had quite climbing enough in the preceding sentence, and the real interest is now in the approach to the Temple.

Had Mr. Pater done me the undeserved honour of showing me this page, I think that I should have suggested this alternative: 'The evening came while they were still winding up among the pines of the steep road, and it was night when they reached the temple.'

I am confirmed in the belief that we are here in the presence of a comparatively tired writer, by the heaviness of this whole long sentence, and by a little inaccuracy of thought which it contains. This half of the sentence says, 'and it was night when they reached the temple, the lights of which shone out upon them as they paused before the gates of the sacred enclosure'. Now, unless they came upon the temple so suddenly that they had only just time to stop in front of it, a conceivable fact, but one whose singularity and impressiveness would have demanded special notice—unless, I say, this had happened these lights *would have shone out before* they stopped before the gates. Indeed the solemnity of their approach to the sanctuary would have depended in great part upon its lights having revealed it from afar. I feel sure that this

was really in Pater's mind when he spoke of those lights; but that having inadvertently begun a sentence of the closely packed kind, he was obliged to place the *shining out of the lights* in connection with the *pausing before the gates*.

The lapse of interest is further proved by the tail of the sentence, 'And Marius became alive to a singular purity in the air'. It is quite possible that this aliveness was the result of coming to a stop, and that it is therefore rightly connected with the halt before the gates. But it cannot be rightly connected with either of the half sentences to which the *and* refers it. For in writing 'And Marius became alive, etc.' means either: 'it was night when they reached the temple (parenthesis about lights) and Marius became aware' with the meaning 'it was night when they reached, etc., and *when* Marius became aware'—whereby there is no causal connexion between its being night and Marius becoming 'alive to the purity of the air'. Or else the sentence might mean 'it was night when they paused and when, in consequence of the pausing, Marius became aware.' It is quite evident that Pater meant neither of these connexions. The 'Marius became alive to a singular purity in the air' has been thus connected with the previous statements as a result of mere slovenliness. He wanted to bring in this important item, and has just tacked it on to the already overweighted and rather confused sentence containing the mistake about the road and the doubtful statement about the lights. Now, immediately after this useless connexion we get the item with which that *aliveness to the purity of the air* would really be connected: 'A rippling of water about the place was the only thing audible, as they waited till two priestly figures, speaking Greek to one another,

admitted them into a large, white walled and clearly lighted guest-chamber, in which, while he partook of a simple but wholesomely prepared supper, Marius still seemed to feel pleasantly the height they had attained to among the hills.' As this immense sentence at present stands, the *rippling of water* is, so to speak, hurried off out of the open into that guest-chamber, and the sensation connected with it, or rather the complex imaginative impression, is hidden behind a succession of details, priestly figures, Greek language, clear lights, simple supper (with an excursus on its wholesome preparation) until it joins with the cognate idea of the pleasantly felt 'height they had attained'.

I will try to re-write this sentence in such a manner as to break it up a little and to put a little order in its items. 'The evening came (I should prefer 'evening *came on*', as expressive of the gradual and enveloping nature of the phenomenon, and I should strike out the definite article: for we are speaking not of a particular evening, but of the end of the day in its general aspect) *while* they were still *winding up* among the pines of the steep white road, and it was night when they reached the temple, the lights of which shone out upon them as they paused before the gates. There was no sound about the place save the rippling of water; and as they waited for *admittance to the sacred enclosure*, Marius became alive to a singular purity in the air. Two priestly figures, speaking Greek to each other, led them into a large white-washed and clearly lighted guest-chamber, in which, as he partook of a simple but wholesomely prepared supper, Marius still seemed to feel the height they had attained to among the hills.'

My alterations consist in: Substituting for 'passed

along, which, as previously stated, runs counter to the notion of steepness, the verb *to wind*, which contains the idea hitherto expressed by 'with many windings', and I have added *up* in order to accentuate the ascent, the idea of which might be blurred a little by the *among* referring to the pines. And I have made them wind *among the pines*, which conveys, I think, the notion of these trees forming islands and promontories encircled by that road; and I have made a present of the *pin*es to the road, so as to knit the two images closer together. Also I have added *while* and *still*, and changed the past tense used by Pater (*passed along*) for a participle, *winding*, which expresses better the duration of the action and its corresponding with another action which is also gradual, that of evening coming on. Had the meaning been that, let us say, a shot was fired, or a fox crossed the road, I should have kept the past tense because it is suggestive of an action which is complete. I should have written, 'A shot was fired as they passed along the road', meaning: with the moment, or at one of the moments employed on that road, there corresponded the moment of a sudden short action, that of the shot being fired. If the whole of the sentence did not suggest, by its unwieldiness and confusion, the bare fact of momentary fatigue and slovenliness on the author's part, I should have noticed this indifference to the exact value of verbal tenses as suggestive of indifference to *action* and incapacity in narrative. And as a proof of such indifference and incapacity I shall, in fact, consider it if a similar arrangement should recur further on.

I have kept the temple lights shining out on the arrival instead, as I had previously suggested, from a distance, because it is likely that Pater may have wished to impress

us with the idea of the wayfarers halting in a broadly illuminated spot after their wanderings through the darkness. But I have cut the sentence short with 'paused before the gates'. My reasons for doing this are: first, that the idea of *pausing*, of something new happening, is furthered by the full stop in this place; second, that the 'sacred enclosure' immediately after 'temple' suggests that they did not constitute a whole: one is set thinking whether the temple was far inside the enclosure, and if so, how its lights could have shone out *upon them*. That shining *upon*, suggesting the effect of light not from a distance, as a spot, but of light in a *sheet*, as it exists only in close proximity through an open door or window. My third reason for separating those *gates* from the *sacred enclosure* is that I am very glad to use the sacred enclosure as a sanctuary to which they wait for admittance, thus giving place and time for Marius's becoming alive to the purity of the air. I have transposed the rippling of water because it prepares the reader's imagination for the fact of the purity of the air, by furnishing him with a sensation of a very cognate kind, rippling water being not only associated with pure air by reason of its frequency in high places, but associated also in the idea of purity, since impure water is nearly always stagnant, and rippling water also fans the air and makes it seem purer. I have made a separate sentence of 'rippling water', 'sacred enclosure', and 'becoming alive to the purity of the air', because these items all unite in an impression of purity and sacred seclusion, an impression essentially contemplated as a whole, not threaded casually upon a narrative. Having established this I resume Pater's sentence with the 'two priestly figures' who can now conduct the reader as well as Marius through the well-lit chamber to the supper

table, without any confusion; so that we are quite prepared at the end of this (now) orderly arrangement of sentences with sufficient pauses and demarcations, for Marius resting in the pleasant sense of altitude after his day's climbing.

I have taken great trouble in re-writing this sentence, because its contents is among Pater's most exquisite gifts to us: the final climb among the resinous trees at the end of the hot day, the lights through the darkness of the hills, lights sacred like the temple itself; the halt at the sanctuary gates, with that sound of waters and sense of mountain purity; the simple mystery of those priests speaking Greek—a subtle, more spiritual language—and the bright whitewash, the pleasure of wholesome food after a day in the open air. Finally that sense of 'height among the hills'. All this brings us the remembrance of one of those days we cherish as naturally sanctified, but broken up into separate items which enhance the sweetness and solemnity of rippling waters, of mountain sanctuaries and of the health-giving air of high places. Indeed, I am inclined to think that the value of all these suggestions, probably carried about for years in his mind, allowed Pater to be slovenly when at last he threw them rather helter-skelter on to paper; just as this suggestive charm makes the reader forgive the confusion and unwieldiness of construction; since how can we feel hurry and disorder when our mind is full of such thoughts as these?

Nevertheless, these sentences constitute a *lapse* such as the more nimble, less, if I may say so, less priestly, mind of Stevenson would probably never have been guilty of: it is the contemplative man's bad riding or driving, the proof of his absentmindedness.

'The agreeable sense of all this was spoiled by one

thing only, his old fear of serpents'; 'of all this', this way of referring to a group of impressions which has impressed the reader, and therefore, we should think, Marius, as romantic and at the same time solemn, jars on one as disrespectful: it may be the effect of modesty, it certainly shows an entire lack of ostentation on Pater's part; but, on consideration, I fear it is the indication of the kind of indolence which makes people unceremonious. My reason for thus thinking consists in a piece of slovenliness in the second part of this sentence, nay, a slovenly abandoning of the whole latter part of the sentence, a dropping of its contents out of slovenly hands. Listen: 'for it was under the form of a serpent that Aesculapius had come to Rome; and the last definite thought of his weary head before he fell asleep had been a dread either that the god might appear, as he was said sometimes to do, under this hideous aspect, or perhaps one of those great sallow-hued snakes themselves, kept in the sacred place, as he had also heard was usual.'

In strict syntax Aesculapius becomes the owner of the weary head and the nominative of going to sleep. But as readers go not exclusively by syntax, but also by common sense, this looseness of diction is not only pardonable, it is even agreeable, suitable to the discourse being, after all, about a small boy; or rather, it would be suitable were it not that Pater has attributed the same tense to Aesculapius coming to Rome, and to Marius's thinking before going to sleep, thus putting the thinker and the person thought of on the same verbal plane: for Pater has written: 'for it was under the form of a serpent that Aesculapius *had come* to Rome; and the last thought of his weary head *had been*', identity of tense actually identifying Aesculapius as the person who thought something before

going to sleep. That this is pure slovenliness is proved by the fact that the *had been* cannot apply to Marius, for as the thought of the apparition is said to have been his last one before going to sleep, the *had been* would refer the spoiling of his agreeable impressions by fear to a period subsequent to his going to sleep, i.e. to his subsequent time of being awake. Now this is excluded by the continuation which tells us what *did* happen on Marius awakening, and how all fear was then expelled from his mind. The slovenliness continues in the sequel: 'the god might appear' separated by two parentheses [as he was said sometimes to do] [under this hideous aspect] 'or perhaps one of those great fallow-hued snakes themselves'. The two parentheses separate the snake from the verb *appear* so utterly that one expects another verb to which that snake acts as nominative, instead of sharing that function with that over-distant god; moreover, the two plurals 'those great . . . snakes themselves' overwhelm the singular *one of*, after which there is a rapid alteration to the passive, and a passive 'themselves, kept in the sacred place' plural, the snakes instead of *one of the snakes*; followed by an active form of which the nominative is the more vague *be*. The symmetry between 'as he was said sometimes to do' and 'as he had also heard was usual', suggesting that the thing referred to as usual was the apparition of the snake instead of the ('as he was said sometimes to do') apparition of the god. Whereas it is also possible, and even probable, that what Marius *had also heard was usual*, was not the apparition of one of the snakes, but the *keeping of snakes* in the sacred place. The great length of this disorderly sentence strikes me also as a proof of indolence: it would cost an effort to break off and begin again, so the whole contents are dragged along and

allowed to get hopelessly entangled, like a bundle of puppets in the hands of a lazy child. 'And after an hour's feverish dreaming he awoke—with a cry, it would seem, for some one had entered the room bearing a light. The footsteps of the youthful figure which approached and sat by his bedside were certainly real.'

Slovenliness continues.

The *and* with which this sentence begins refers, and can only refer, to Marius's painful expectancy; it means *and so*, or *and therefore* or *and for this reason*; not merely *and*. What we are to connect with Marius's previously described fears, what is going to bear out their existence, is therefore not merely his waking up, which he would have done anyhow, fear or no fears, but his waking *with a cry*, which he would presumably have done only in case of a bad dream. The meaning of the sentence is 'How afraid he had been is shown by his waking up with a cry'; the verb is, so to speak not *waking* but *waking with a cry*. Hence the cry must be kept close to the waking, otherwise the phrase loses its connexion with the previous sentence. But Pater has actually separated the cry from the waking by a dash, so that the phrase gets to mean 'and in consequence of those fears, etc., he . . .' guess what? He *awoke*, that is to say he did exactly what he would have done under any circumstances.

The *cry* is not merely relegated into parenthetical meaning by that dash before it, but it is actually made to depend, its existence made probable by the next phrase, '*it would seem*, for someone had entered the room bearing a light.' I have taken the meaning to be that somebody entering the room was a *consequence* of Marius's waking with a cry, for it is otherwise impossible to account

for the parenthesis *it would seem*. I do not see the possibility of connecting that *it would seem* with *someone entering bearing a light*; it cannot mean that *it seemed as if someone had entered the room with a light*, for no one in his senses would put such a proviso to the person entering with a light. Therefore the *it would seem* must qualify Marius's awaking, and the person entering with a light must be the result and not the cause, of Marius's cry. The meaning of the sentence is thus confused, and the reader left with a vague feeling that the *it would seem* belongs equally to the *awaking with a cry* and to the *person entering with a light*; as if the author said: 'Just think what you like about the matter; it seemed to be so and so, but I can't be bored to ascertain'. How little Pater has realized his own thought is, moreover, shown by his using the plusquam-perfect: *had entered*, where the meaning was simply 'someone entered'. He seems to have been misled by that *for* and that *it would seem*, into supposing that the entrance of the priest, being the explanation of the awaking, must have taken place *before*. Now we have seen that the sentence really can mean only that the priest entered *after* the awaking of Marius, so that the sense is: 'And it would seem that, after an hour's feverish sleep, Marius awoke with a cry, for someone entered with a light.' The *for* being the correlative of the *it would seem*; and the fact which seems probable being Marius's awaking with a cry; a fact which, as the narrative focuses Marius as central actor, could be known only by inference, Marius being unaware of his awaking and crying, and becoming aware only of the entrance of the priest.

'The footsteps of the youthful figure which approached and sat by his bedside were certainly real.' This *certainly real* refers us back to Marius's fear of an apparition.

It shows, like another foregoing item (I think the same verb doing duty for Aesculapius and the snakes despite the length of intervening phrases) *how long Pater carries an item in consciousness* by showing how long he expects his reader to carry it. This kind of memory, rather similar to that of a composer dealing in long modulations, is probably what explains Pater's quite astonishing clinging to the pronoun; for so far the noun *Marius* has occurred only three times, and there has been a repetition of he-he-he-his—despite the fact that Aesculapius came in as a nominative and made the reference of the *he* less certain. In the light of this remark that phrase 'the agreeable sense of *all this*' may be explained, or rather the 'all this' as the result of Pater's certainty of his reader bearing all the foregoing items, or at least their gist, thoroughly in mind; it is like the etc., etc., we put instead of titles, like C.B. or F.R.S., about which there can be no doubt. This retentiveness may also explain in part Pater's conspicuous preference for semicolons where other folk would put full stops, and for tying a lot of phrases into one endless sentence, instead of separating and isolating them.

Pater strikes me, so far, as a person who insists on carrying too much mental luggage; and, not being at all acrobatic, trailing some of it and getting it all mixed.

But perhaps this retentiveness is itself a mark of insufficient locomotion, of a tendency to circle round the same items and weave them closer together rather than to string them clearly in rows or dispose them in definite logical patterns. Perhaps Pater's singularly *essential*, or if you prefer *saturated quality*, is connected with this. That much I cannot at present determine. But while it occurs I will note down a query: Does not every work of art

determine us to *forgive or overlook certain faults* in consequence of the particular synthesis of its good qualities? It is certainly extraordinary that I have read and re-read these pages of *Marius* without being in the least worried by these slovenlinesses of expression, and that the absolute certainty of them, acquired by this analysis, does not in the least affect my sense of being in the presence of one of the most enchanting and valuable minds that I know. Similarly I seem to remember that the killing of Denys l'Auxerrois, of Hyacinth in *Apollo in Picardy*, and the marriage and death of Gaston de Latour affected me as almost humorously inadequate whenever I read these tales, but that this inadequacy never jarred on me or diminished the charm of the whole. There is evidently in a work of art a *synthesis of expectations*, and certain faults and lapses are thereby removed from the centre of vision and of sensibility; except probably to persons who (like J. Sargent and Symonds towards Pater) are so little in sympathy with the *synthesis of achievements* that all their attention goes to the synthesis of *lapses and failures*, even as a person who does not care for colour will condemn the imperfect drawing of Brabazon; or as, perhaps, my imperfect sense for harmony and timbre makes me ruthless towards Wagner's rhythmic deficiency and melodic crudeness.

But to resume:

'the footsteps of the youthful figure which approached and sat by his bedside were certainly real.'

In the course of re-reading I have been constantly worried by the *footsteps* being real instead of the *youthful figure*. The reality of *footsteps* is so much less important, footsteps are, in a way, so much less *real*, being sounds, that the attribution of reality to them suggests that though the

footsteps were real (whatever a real footstep may be, I suppose *really* heard, not dreamed of) the figure was a phantom. This roundabout and inaccurate mode of representation is due to the habit of long sentences: if Pater had been satisfied to put the figure's subsequent proceedings into a separate sentence, he might have written quite simply 'Someone entered the room with a light. The youthful figure which approached and sat, etc., was certainly real.' If the footsteps were needed to complete the effect, Pater might have written: 'And when, after an hour's feverish dreaming, Marius awoke, it must have been with a cry; for there came footsteps outside and someone entered the room with a light. But the youthful figure, etc., was certainly real.'

By the addition of *when* and *it must have been* I have brought into relief the fact that Marius *was not aware of having cried out*, and the inference of his having done so depending on the entrance of the priest; now Marius waking as a result of his own cry paints his condition of nightmare; and this waking as a result of crying out depends upon Marius not having known about his crying out; and this ignorance on Marius's part is suggested to the reader by the 'it would seem', because the inference is that the priest would not have come unless Marius *had* cried out in his dreams.

All the items of this passage are perfectly correct—the dreams, the cry, the consequent coming of the priest, the light (correctly brought by *someone*, i.e. the light seen before the figure which brought it) and the footsteps; but the thinking of the relations between these items has been lax; they have been languidly dropped before the reader in a heap.

I have placed these items in a way that one leads to

the other. And I have done this by determining the succession of the events by that *when* and that *must have been* instead of Pater's 'it would seem'. I have, moreover, indicated that the figure came from *outside* and that the footfall preceded the light. In all probability Marius would never have noticed the footsteps at all, the impression of the light being needed to waken him completely and that impression of the light swamping the possible impression of the footsteps. But the footsteps, although not perceivable by Marius, act upon the reader, making the entrance of the figure gradual, mysterious, giving the impression of the size of the place and its sonority and, what is always important in literature, adding *existence for the ear to existence for the eye*, and thus completing the little world of imaginary sensations in which the writer encloses his reader; every kind of sensation adding, as it were, an additional dimension of experience in which the imagination can dwell.

The slackness of this sentence confirms me in my suspicion that Pater was constitutionally incapable of realizing vividly how exterior events take place and the successions and co-existences implied in all action, events being retained in his memory only as emotional or sensorial effects; Pater's kind of thinking being of *coexistence in his own mind*, not of sequence in the world outside it: a mind, Pater's, which distilled the essences, the results, out of human actions, which was interested in motives and effects, in physical and particularly in spiritual conditions and powers, not in the external changes which revealed them. A thinker in terms of *value*, essentially, of saintliness, strength, beauty; a mind contemplative of eternal characteristics, and insofar a philosopher, a moralist, and one who lived in union with

the qualities he realized; in short, a mind of the religious order, and separated from the mystic only by the clearness and orderliness of his vision.

And now that the tiresome narrative of *how and why* it all happened is over, now that these necessary but to Pater, uninteresting, explanations are done with, now we shall see (if I am not greatly mistaken) what Pater can do as no other writer has ever done. Listen to this account of the enduring spiritual results of that adventure:

'Ever afterwards, when the thought arose in his mind of some unhopèd-for but entire relief from distress, like blue sky in a storm at sea, would come back the memory of that gracious countenance which, amid all the kindness of its gaze, had yet a certain air of predominance over him, so that he seemed now for the first time to have found the master of his spirit.'

This sentence is as perfect as the preceding ones have been the reverse. What strikes me about it is the boldness and ease with which Pater's thought moves in these concentric circles of ideas, without even a *reversing*—without an involution. I should have written:

'Whenever afterwards *there* arose in his mind the thought of some unexpected relief (and I should have been tempted to put *the blue sky in a storm at sea* in a parenthesis) there arose in his mind (like the blue sky in a storm at sea) the thought of some unexpected but entire relief from distress, the memory of that gracious countenance which, amid all the kindness of its gaze, had yet a certain air of predominance over him, so that he seemed now for the first time to have found the master of his spirit. It would have been sweet to be the servant of him who now sat beside him speaking.' How inferior is my version!

The narration being at an end, we are in presence of Pater's extraordinary mastery in the reconstruction of mood. The many items of this long sentence all fall into place like the stones at Amphion's fiddling: past and future, particular and general. The question arose in my mind why Pater should have massed *the blue sky in a storm at sea* against the *relief from distress*, when things resembling *blue sky, etc.*, could not be the *entire relief from distress*, since the blue is not *after* but *IN* a storm at sea, but must be what comes afterwards, viz., the *memory of that gracious countenance*, etc. But on re-reading I find that if Pater had accordingly (and correctly) written: . . . 'the thought arose in his mind of some unexpected but entire relief from distress, there would come back the memory (like blue sky, etc.), i.e. *which had acted* like, etc., of that gracious countenance'; if he had written this, he would not only have increased the parenthetical nature of the sentence, but he would have lost the beautiful effect of the two images, that of the *blue sky* and that of the *gracious countenance* being separated (with an agreeable sense of space) and each dominating one half of the sentence; the *blue sky*, moreover, preparing one for the coming radiance of the 'gracious countenance' and 'kindness of gaze', which, thus prepared, have a kind of superhuman quality (the blue sky giving an elemental note) making one ready to accept the 'dominance' and the finding the 'master of his spirit'. Note the clear directness of this end of the sentence, peremptory in its close. This peremptory quality, this isolation of the impression of the priest's face and of the blue sky, is brought out by the remark being detached as a new sentence. 'It would have been sweet to be the servant of him who now sat beside him speaking.' The surprise

is over; the charm is seen acting. Also, after that complicated statement of summed-up remembered feelings and impressions, we are taken back for a last time to the narration, which ends with the image of the priest seated by the boy's bedside.

'He caught a lesson from what was then said, still somewhat beyond his years'.

Parenthetically: how the use of the pronoun shows that Pater conceived the whole not as a story in which Marius and the priest would have been equally important and present in the reader's mind, and therefore required calling each by his name, but as an experience in *Marius's mind*, which mind must always remain first and foremost in the reader's thoughts. 'He caught a lesson', etc., here we have the reason for the whole narrative and description: the journey, the temple, the dream, the night fear, the priest's apparition and his words are there merely to explain Marius's subsequent possession of a particular way of viewing things, and to explain, by telling its genesis, how that intellectual system was conditioned and coloured by certain images (the journey in the pure sunny weather, the sound of water, the temple lights, the priests, the dream, the snake and fright and the somewhat supernatural relief and the God-like sweetness and dominance of the priest).

'He caught a lesson from what was then said, still somewhat beyond his years, a lesson in the skilled cultivation of life, of experience, of opportunity, which seemed to be the aim of the young priest's recommendations. The sum of them,' etc.

We have come to what is really important to such a nature as Pater's; the lesson implicit in all his descriptions: that we should gather like scanty delicate flowers

wherewith to deck an altar, and use respectfully as a precious incense everything which can minister to that living sanctuary which we have made for ourselves out of the callous realities and fleeting shows of external life, even as we know that Marius would keep among his sacred treasures, among his healing simples, the memory of that summer journey to the temple, of that night in the sanctuary, with the sound of its waters and the sense of its aromatic mountain air.