



## The Point of Vanishing: Pater's Loss of Perspective

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This article addresses the importance of perspective in the work of Walter Pater by putting his treatment of the topic in *Plato and Platonism* and *The Renaissance* in relation to its place in art history and to the work of some of Pater's immediate Victorian predecessors. The classic formulations of Erwin Panofsky prove useful in identifying the gains and losses to the perceiving self entailed in the evocation of perspective in relation to a mutable world.

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Surface, we say; but was there really anything beneath it?<sup>1</sup>

### 'The measure of all things'

'Perspective' is the word we use to describe the illusion of depth, the careful creation of an impression that we can see through things. 'Point of view', on the other hand, while a related turn of phrase, can seem to describe the opposite of illusion, in the sense that it brings to the attention the real limits bound to come into view as we identify the fact that individuals will always perceive things from specific locations. Still, the concepts are clearly allied; while the illusion of depth requires the creation of a point of view, it is only the existence of depth that gives location meaning. If there were no depth, we would all have the same point of view, or all points of view would be the same, as in the fourteenth-century fresco at the Campo Santo in Pisa that I have reproduced in two figures: a contemporary photograph of the faded original (*Fig. 1*) and a painting of the work in context from 1858 by the architect Leo von Klenze (*Fig. 2*).



Fig. 1: Piero di Puccio, Frescos, Campo Santo, Pisa. Photo: Miguel Hermoso Cuesta. CC BY-SA 4.0.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures* (London: Macmillan, 1893), p. 9.



Fig. 2: Leo von Klenze, *The Campo Santo, Pisa*, 1858, oil on canvas, 103.5 × 130.5 cm, Munich, Neue Pinakothek. © Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen <<https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/en/artwork/XR4MJV1xQ1>> CC BY-SA 4.0.

Who is looking in this vision of everything currently attributed to Piero di Puccio? What is the point of view that allows us to see our world as the centre of the universe, held calmly and statically in the hands of an almighty deity? These questions come to mind because the artist has created a view *without* perspective, which is why I called it a vision, a fantasy illustrating the impossible hope for a human centrality that would not require perspective, and in fact could not find it. The absence of an angle from which we would be able to see this anthropomorphic God holding the universe motivates the compensatory emphasis on sight, certainty, and hierarchical clarity in the poem that Giorgio Vasari tells us was at one time to be read under the image:

Ye, who God's image here depicted see —  
 The High — the Merciful — who by His love  
 All things created, and perfected all —  
 Giving to each due weight and order due:

Who to the choirs angelic their true grades  
 Hath meted; whom the splendid heavens obey —  
 Sun, moon, and stars; who moves and governs all  
 His fair pure world — Himself immoveable.

To Him, ye who here gaze, lift up your hearts,  
 Adoring: — offer praise to Him whose hand  
 Formed all, and all sustains. Raise, too, your thoughts  
 To those blest regions, where, with angel bands,  
 Ye, too, shall find a home; ye, too, shall rest  
 Where life is joy unmixed for each and all.

Here, too, is this world's glory — full pourtrayed  
 In all its ranks — midmost, beneath, above.<sup>2</sup>

The poem describes a view without perspective: ordered, clear, comforting, total (including all ranks: 'midmost, beneath, above'), that is only available to the eyes of the beholder imagining the vision of he who does not move ('Himself immoveable').

Perspective in the general parlance — as in 'put it in perspective' or 'that's your perspective; I'm sure she has her own' — describes a limited point of view that recognizes itself as such. In the process of such recognition is enfolded the necessity of acknowledging other points of view. The inescapable particularity written into the term makes clear the limits of every individual perspective and leads us to buy the possibility of equanimity or of behaving as though we shared horizons, at the cost of admitting the limits of sight (or insight) that in fact provokes the desire for both equality and shared horizons. Our sense of the whole, we believe, will be more accurate when particularity is taken into account. God alone has perfect insight, which is to say, no point of view.

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<sup>2</sup> When the work is mentioned in Giorgio Vasari's life of the painter he called Buonamico Buffalmacco, to whom it was ascribed in his day, it is already presented as an evidence of superannuated knowledge needing the supplement of words — and interesting for both reasons: 'In this work is represented the Father of Creation, supporting the heavens and the earth — nay, the whole universe — by the force of his hand, and Buonamico, willing to explain the picture in verses similar to the paintings of that time, wrote a sonnet with his own hand, in capital letters, beneath the pictures. I add these verses here, for the sake of their antiquity, and also that the reader may be made acquainted with the simple modes of speech proper to those days; otherwise I do not think them likely to give much pleasure, although they may perhaps be welcome, as shewing of what the men of those times were capable' (Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. by Mrs Jonathan Foster, 5 vols (London: Bohn, 1850), I, 167–68). On Buffalmacco, see Norman E. Land, 'Vasari's Buffalmacco and the Transubstantiation of Paint', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 58 (2005), 881–95 (p. 893). On Vasari's reception, see Hilary Fraser, 'Vasari's *Lives* and the Victorians', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Giorgio Vasari*, ed. by David J. Cast (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 277–93; as well as the broader context presented in Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).



This article is intended to illustrate the force of perspective in the nineteenth century and its complicated relationship to point of view, with particular attention to Walter Pater and his antecedents. I will address Pater's evocative citation of the image on the wall of the Campo Santo later in this article, but I would like to put that discussion in a larger context. To start with, it will be useful for me to clarify the issues that inevitably arise when perspective is understood as more than a mere technical innovation, as it is in a still classic formulation by Erwin Panofsky. In spite of the way perspective appears to consolidate the role of the perceiving self in knowing or illustrating the world, art history reminds us that at the furthest end of the experience of depth is the vanishing point. The most important part of perspective might be the power it ascribes to the viewer, the force it discovers in the viewing self to organize the world, but it might also be the space at the edge of the visible that tantalizes with a sublime evanescence. The question Panofsky raises, if we allow his formulations the affective force they warrant, is whether it makes more sense to fear the vanishing point as a location at which the self is lost in the depths of what it sees, or to welcome it as an indication of the triumph of the individual perspective that point organizes?

'This perspectival achievement', Panofsky declares in *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927), linking the emergence of techniques for representing the volume of everyday life on a two-dimensional surface to other important developments in culture, 'is nothing other than a concrete expression of a contemporary advance in epistemology or natural philosophy.'<sup>3</sup> The sophistication of Panofsky's insight resides not in identifying the desire and the ability to represent bodies in realistic space as a cultural development (rather than simply a technical one), however, but in recognizing the fundamentally contradictory choices that ramify from the innovation:

The history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distance and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control; it is as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self. (pp. 67–68)

Triumph of distance, denial of distance, 'objectifying sense of the real' or 'human struggle for control' — this would seem to cover all the options, and yet, as I hope to demonstrate, in Walter Pater we find a refusal to choose between the options presented by Panofsky. Unlikely to be satisfied with the triumph of 'the distance and objectifying

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<sup>3</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. by Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 65. On the ongoing relevance of Panofsky's contested but seminal account, see Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. by John Goodman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 3–19.

sense of the real', Pater was also not liable to rest easy in the claim of victory in the 'human struggle for control'.

Among Pater's immediate predecessors the textual evocation of depth may be said to oscillate between provoking fear and relief: relief, on the one hand, from more parochial constrained views of the sort readers of Amanda Anderson will recognize as the opposite of what 'the powers of distance' may make it possible to experience; and fear, on the other hand, of a loss of significance in a vast and decentred universe.<sup>4</sup> As Panofsky suggests, perspective raises a kind of struggle for primacy between self and object, a fundamental question with incompatible answers: is the depth of the canvas organized around the vanishing point of an individual's perception indicative of the inescapable force of the actual world, or of the defining power of self that manages to transcribe one particular view of a complex boundless world onto a two-dimensional surface? In Pater the question is not resolved but further complicated by the ways in which perspective is immediately introjected.

My discussion in this article will draw on a relatively understudied lecture by Pater, 'Plato and the Doctrine of Motion', and some other elements of *Plato and Platonism* (1893).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, any reader of the critic will readily see that his argument in this late work is reprising or developing themes central to his most famous and influential texts, notably the 'Conclusion' to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), where Pater asks, 'How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always

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<sup>4</sup> Amanda Anderson, *Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), especially pp. 3–33.

<sup>5</sup> While not read anywhere nearly as often as parts of *The Renaissance*, these lectures have an important place in the criticism. They are culminating points of analyses of Pater's development and its broader intellectual context in Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 258–81; William F. Shuter, *Rereading Walter Pater*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 61–91; and Giles Whiteley, *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death: Walter Pater and Post-Hegelianism*, Studies in Comparative Literature, 20 (London: Legenda, 2010). Other important work on *Plato and Platonism* includes Lesley Higgins, 'Jowett and Pater: Trafficking in Platonic Wares', *Victorian Studies*, 37 (1993), 43–72; as well as two essays in *Pater the Classicist: Classical Scholarship, Reception, and Aestheticism*, ed. by Charles Martindale, Stefano Evangelista, and Elizabeth Prettejohn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): Daniel Orrells, 'Pater and Nettleship: A Platonic Education and the Politics of Disciplinarity', pp. 293–308; and Giles Whiteley, 'Pater's Heraclitus: Irony and the Historical Method', pp. 261–74. For an ambitious engagement with the place of Plato in the *oeuvre*, see Adam Lee, *The Platonism of Walter Pater: Embodied Equity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). On the concepts of classical heritage that Pater helped shape, see Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). On the erotic elements of Platonism in the period, see also Evangelista, "'Lovers and philosophers at once": Aesthetic Platonism in the Victorian *Fin de Siècle*', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 36 (2006), 230–44. Lene Østermark-Johansen's pioneering piece, 'On the Motion of Great Waters: Walter Pater, Leonardo and Heraclitus', in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, ed. by John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 87–103, anticipates the links between the treatment of art in *The Renaissance* and the philosophy in *Plato and Platonism* addressed in the present article.

at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?’<sup>6</sup> I will return to this question, which is at the heart of what we might call, with more reason than usual, Pater’s world view, but for the moment I will just suggest that being at the focus of vital forces is one way of thinking of perspective.

In ‘Plato and the Doctrine of Motion’ Pater reflects on the well-known Heraclitean observation that it is impossible to enter the same stream twice, contrasting this maxim to a Platonic desire for more stable insights. Unsurprisingly for readers of the ‘Conclusion’ to *The Renaissance* (which may be said to open with a splash, following its epigraph from the same Presocratic philosopher), the mutability Pater finds in Heraclitus is not limited to that characteristic of any body of water.<sup>7</sup> The self that enters and attempts to re-enter is itself fluid. If we cannot step into the same stream twice, that is because we have never left the water:

Upon the same stream at the same moment we do, and do not, embark: for we are, and are not: [...] And this rapid change, if it did not make all knowledge impossible, made it wholly relative, of a kind, that is to say, valueless in the judgment of Plato. Man, the individual, at this particular vanishing-point of time and place, becomes ‘the measure of all things.’ (*Plato*, p. 10)

The relativism of the notorious formulation of the sophist Protagoras, wherein ‘all things’ come down to the measure of the perceiving self, clearly presents a problem for Plato, who aspires to identify through his philosophy some state more permanent and fixed, and so a measure more absolute than that of the individual. Pater’s position, however, is different from that of either sophist or philosopher. In order to address what it might mean for the vanishing point not to be placed in the deepest part of a painting, but inside the individual, it will be useful to touch on some antecedents to Pater, before returning to this very text. To begin with I will illustrate the antipathy towards depth that has been a tendency of surprisingly long standing among lovers of the visual arts, before turning to the use of dramatic shifts of perspective to generate depth in Victorian literary culture. To triangulate on the topic this way, by looking at the long art historical tradition as well as the response to the more recent one of Victorian prose, is to demonstrate the importance of both later developments even when Pater is writing on classical subjects.

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. by Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 188.

<sup>7</sup> On the loss of identity in water, see Jonah Siegel, *Overlooking Damage: Art, Display, and Loss in Times of Crisis* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2022), pp. 198–248. See also Østermark-Johansen’s evocative treatment of the dialectic of surface and depth in ‘On the Motion of Great Waters’.

### Perspective and human limits

In practice perspective has been consistently admired by amateurs for its illusionistic powers and the technical achievements on which it is built, but frequently denigrated in the higher reaches of art criticism. Possibly the most surprising treatment of an excessive interest in representing the depth of the world is to be found in one of the earliest discussions of the topic, in Vasari's life of Uccello (1397–1475), where that master of perspective is made to seem a peculiarly self-defeating foolish obsessive:

Paolo Uccello would have proved himself the most original and inventive genius ever devoted to the art of painting, from the time of Giotto downwards, had he bestowed but half the labour on the delineation of men and animals that he lost and threw away over the minutiae of perspective. For, although these studies are meritorious and good in their way, yet he who is addicted to them beyond measure, wastes his time, exhausts his intellect, and weakens the force of his conceptions, insomuch that he frequently diminishes the fertility and readiness of his resources, which he renders ineffectual and sterile. [...] There is, moreover, the highest probability that one so disposed will become unsocial, melancholy, and poor, as did Paolo Uccello, who, being endowed by nature with a subtle and inquiring spirit, knew no greater pleasure than that of undertaking over-difficult, or, rather, impossible problems of perspective. (Vasari, I, 348–49)

If we detect a masturbatory quality in the terms associated with Uccello's obsessive study of perspective in this opening passage of the account of his life in Vasari ('exhausts his intellect', 'weakens the force of his conceptions', 'diminishes the fertility and readiness', 'renders ineffectual and sterile'), that sense is confirmed at the close of Vasari's narrative, when we find the painter abandoning even the pleasures of the matrimonial bed in order to focus 'beyond measure' on the endless field that so fascinated him. The final paragraph of Vasari's account concludes with the claim that Uccello's wife used to say that

Paolo would stand the whole night through, beside his writing table, seeking new terms for the expression of his rules in perspective; and when entreated by herself to take rest and sleep, he would reply, 'Oh, what a delightful thing is this perspective!'. (I, 360)

So it is, that in the account given of the chief exponent of perspective in Vasari, the foundational art historical text, study of its mysteries is presented as a useful but sterile exercise, an intellectualism ultimately damaging to the individual who wields it and to the engagement with life we might associate with going to bed with one's spouse.



Here is Ruskin developing this sense of the failings of the painter into a characteristic critique of Renaissance aspirations in a letter to Kate Greenaway from 1887:

I believe the perfection of perspective is only recent. It was first applied to Italian Art by Paul Uccello (Paul the Bird — because he drew birds so well and many). He went off his head with his love of perspective, and Leonardo and Raphael spoiled a lot of pictures with it, to show they knew it.<sup>8</sup>

In 1859 Ruskin had published a book on perspective, but it is characteristic of his relationship to the topic that it should have been so fully addressed to beginning students, *The Elements of perspective arranged for the use of schools and intended to be read in connection with the first three books of Euclid*. Schools, Euclid, elementary work: Ruskin consistently limited the value of perspective when it came to the painters he admired. Like Vasari, he saw the preoccupation with its technical features as a misguided tendency towards over-intellectualization, which for him was indicative of the sort of self-regarding individualism he always deprecated in Renaissance culture. On the other hand, the textual control of perspective is a characteristic technique of Ruskin's writing. Speaking of birds and the love of perspective, here is just one well-known instance in Ruskin — one with a depth and scope that makes his more technical writings on the topic seem quite thin:

The charts of the world which have been drawn up by modern science have thrown into a narrow space the expression of a vast amount of knowledge, but I have never yet seen any one pictorial enough to enable the spectator to imagine the kind of contrast in physical character which exists between Northern and Southern countries. We know the differences in detail, but we have not that broad glance and grasp which would enable us to feel them in their fulness.<sup>9</sup>

The passage from 'The Nature of Gothic' chapter of the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853) then opens up to a beautiful fantasy of rising to a perspective on the whole world in order to give the reader an opportunity to 'feel' the 'fulness' of a fact. Ruskin's extraordinary prose is designed to illustrate the basis of the geographically determined cultural relativism that will ultimately help his readers not just to make sense of the nature of the Northern Gothic craftsman, but to allow them to feel something of the plenitude of the world that knowledge tells them about, but that no human point of view can reveal:

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<sup>8</sup> *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library Edition, 39 vols (London: Allen; New York: Longmans, Green, 1903–12), XXXVII: *The Letters of John Ruskin, 1870–1889* (1909), p. 585.

<sup>9</sup> *Works*, X: *The Stones of Venice, volume II* (1904), pp. 185–86.

We know that gentians grow on the Alps, and olives on the Apennines; but we do not enough conceive for ourselves that variegated mosaic of the world's surface which a bird sees in its migration, that difference between the district of the gentian and of the olive which the stork and the swallow see far off, as they lean upon the sirocco wind. Let us, for a moment, try to raise ourselves even above the level of their flight, and imagine the Mediterranean lying beneath us like an irregular lake, and all its ancient promontories sleeping in the sun: here and there an angry spot of thunder, a grey stain of storm, moving upon the burning field; and here and there a fixed wreath of white volcano smoke, surrounded by its circle of ashes; but for the most part a great peacefulness of light, Syria and Greece, Italy and Spain, laid like pieces of a golden pavement into the sea-blue, chased, as we stoop nearer to them, with bossy beaten work of mountain chains, and glowing softly with terraced gardens, and flowers [...]. Then let us pass farther towards the north, until we see the orient colours change gradually into a vast belt of rainy green [...]; and then, farther north still, to see the earth heave into mighty masses of leaden rock and heathy moor, bordering with a broad waste of gloomy purple that belt of field and wood, and splintering into irregular and grisly islands amidst the northern seas, beaten by storm, and chilled by ice-drift, and tormented by furious pulses of contending tide, until the roots of the last forests fail from among the hill ravines, and the hunger of the north wind bites their peaks into barrenness; and, at last, the wall of ice, durable like iron, sets, deathlike, its white teeth against us out of the polar twilight. And, having once traversed in thought this gradation of the zoned iris of the earth in all its material vastness, let us go down nearer to it. (X, 186–87)

Reaching earth after a perspective-fantasia in which both space and time become visible, and even affectively comprehensible, the reader of 'The Nature of Gothic' will find the Gothic worker improbably throwing up the walls of cathedrals in the bracing and threatening cold that challenges and shapes the labourer's imagination as it does his existence. The imagined point of view of the high-flying bird allows a recognition of the weakness of our preconceptions, and the possibility of an opening up of our taste, our mode of affective perception. This, we may take as the positive hope for the powers of distance, the possibility that those powers will allow us to draw up an imaginative map that does more than any actual map could.

Still, it is a mistake — or perhaps just the expression of a hope of the sort we sometimes call an act of faith — to hold that the imagined view of the whole will cohere into stable insight of the kind Ruskin seeks. Panofsky reminds us that the emergence of the vanishing point is a material realization of a conceptual development that has at its heart a new vision of the self and its place in the world, one which ultimately may well trouble a fantasy

such as the one created in Ruskin's passage. 'This perspectival achievement', Panofsky notes in a passage I have already cited, 'is nothing other than a concrete expression of a contemporary advance in epistemology or natural philosophy.' If the emergence of perspective is a technical advance, however, it is one that brings profound losses in its wake. As he presents the intellectual sources shaping concern with the topic, Panofsky indicates a shift from the limited universe of classical philosophy and Christian theology to something the reality of which is indicated by the absence of clear limits:

This entailed abandoning the idea of a cosmos with the middle of the earth as its absolute center and with the outermost celestial sphere as its absolute limit; the result was the concept of an infinity, [...] not only prefigured in God, but indeed actually embodied in empirical reality [...]. The vision of the universe is, so to speak, dethologized, and space, whose priority over individual objects was already so vividly expressed by Gauricus, now becomes 'a continuous quantity, consisting of three physical dimensions, existing by nature before all bodies and beyond all bodies, indifferently receiving everything'. (pp. 65–66)

When space is understood as 'indifferently receiving everything', as in the formulation of the Renaissance theorist Pomponius Gauricus which Panofsky cites, it might be found to offer lessons far more upsetting to the individual than the bracing clarity afforded by Ruskin's bird's-eye view.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, we might see the nineteenth-century critic's carefully modulated control of perception as a reaction to the indifferent nature of the world revealed by perspective.

The troubling force of what is opened up by a recognition of the potential vastness of space is clear to Thomas Carlyle, Ruskin's great teacher. Thus, in 'Signs of the Times' (1829), when he wants to mock the short-sightedness of the sense of crisis that characterizes public responses to transient events, Carlyle evokes a dramatic change of perspective opening out onto infinity. Locating topics of concern against the cosmic backdrop in which they take place shrinks them to nothing more than vanishingly small and brief points of little significance in a vast eternity. Indeed, in Carlyle's telling, it is not the loss of particular privileges that causes the sense of unease in conservative circles in the early nineteenth century, but the rebuke their disappearance presents to a misguided sense of permanence on which the public had relied:

All men are aware that the present is a crisis of this sort; and why it has become so. The repeal of the Test Acts, and then of the Catholic disabilities, has struck many of their admirers with an indescribable astonishment. Those things seemed fixed and

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<sup>10</sup> On Gauricus, see Robert Klein, 'Pomponius Gauricus on Perspective', *Art Bulletin*, 43 (1961), 211–30.

immovable; deep as the foundations of the world; and lo, in a moment they have vanished, and their place knows them no more! Our worthy friends mistook the slumbering Leviathan for an island; often as they had been assured, that Intolerance was, and could be nothing but a Monster; and so, mooring under the lee, they had anchored comfortably in his scaly rind, thinking to take good cheer; as for some space they did. But now their Leviathan has suddenly dived under; and they can no longer be fastened in the stream of time; but must drift forward on it, even like the rest of the world: no very appalling fate, we think, could they but understand it; which, however, they will not yet, for a season. Their little island is gone; sunk deep amid confused eddies; and what is left worth caring for in the universe? What is it to them that the great continents of the earth are still standing; and the polestar and all our loadstars, in the heavens, still shining and eternal? Their cherished little haven is gone, and they will not be comforted!<sup>11</sup>

We may want to identify with Carlyle's confident deployment of perspective to ironize the historical self-importance that will be forever seeing its local crises as the end of the world, but perhaps we should not be so hasty in finding comfort in infinite time and space. And certainly the century's expert in not being comforted offers a contrary point of view. In 'The Two Voices' Tennyson calls for a revision of our sources of insight: 'Self-blinded are you by your pride: | Look up through night: the world is wide.'<sup>12</sup> 'Pride' rhymes with 'wide', but not because the visual or conceptual experience of the night sky validates our perspective on our selves. Indeed, Tennyson glosses for us what we should see but keep missing: 'This truth within thy mind rehearse, | That in a boundless universe | Is boundless better, boundless worse' (p. 103). The key issue in this triplet is not what is better or worse, but what is *boundless* (hence the repetition of the term as many times as there are lines). The perspective offered by the dark voice of the poem is on an expansiveness that renders impossible any sense of individual value:

'Think you this mould of hopes and fears  
 Could find no statelier than his peers  
 In yonder hundred million spheres?'

It spake, moreover, in my mind:  
 'Though thou wert scattered to the wind,  
 Yet is there plenty of the kind.' (pp. 103–04)

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<sup>11</sup> 'Signs of the Times', in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. by H. D. Traill, Centenary Edition, 30 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896–99), XXVII: *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, II* (1899), pp. 56–82 (pp. 57–58).

<sup>12</sup> 'Two Voices', in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, rev. edn (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), pp. 101–23 (p. 103).

‘The history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distance and objectifying sense of the real’, Panofsky pointed out in a sophisticated passage I cited earlier, ‘and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control.’ The art historian’s helpfully schematic account will allow us to recognize the ways in which Ruskin, Carlyle, and Tennyson might be placed in a binary that Panofsky tends to describe in terms suggesting balance, but that is evidently liable to two quite distinct emphases, given that it entails ‘as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self’. Although Panofsky finds the two options reconciled — the truth of the world triumphing as the real is objectified in paint; the human triumphing as distance is brought under the control of the subject — all of the authors I have been discussing might convincingly be placed on the side of the objectifying sense of the real, whether deploying it to ironize the inevitable historical provincialism of human interests, or to identify the tragic dimension of existence in a universe too vast to care about the self. We could say that Pater combines the ironizing sensibility of the magisterial gaze across time and space of Carlyle and the melancholy response of the individual recognizing that there is cold comfort in that irony of Tennyson. But that would be to stay on the surface of the critic’s analyses of perspective.

Turning to the passage on Heraclitus from which I drew the epigraph to this article, we find Pater working to establish a contrast between Plato’s desire for absolutes and the more fluid drives of his great predecessor:

Surface, we say; but was there really anything beneath it? That was what to the majority of his hearers, his readers, Heraclitus, with an eye perhaps on practice, seemed to deny. Perpetual motion, alike in things and in men’s thoughts about them [...]. Was not the very essence of thought itself also such perpetual motion? a baffling transition from the dead past, alive one moment since, to a present, itself deceased in turn ere we can say, It is here? (*Plato*, pp. 9–10)

In the ‘Conclusion’ to *The Renaissance*, what Panofsky calls ‘the external world’ is identified as a place of constant change from the outset, as it is here. But what of the ‘the inward world of thought and feeling’ of which the critic declared ‘the whirlpool is still more rapid, the flame more eager and devouring’ (*Renaissance*, p. 187)? Unsurprisingly, in the discussion of Heraclitus in *Plato and Platonism*, the experience of fundamental instability is as powerful as in the earlier text. Indeed, his gloss of the philosopher’s argument might as well be Pater thinking about the first words of the ‘Conclusion’, which opens, we will recall, with the tendency to regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions. In his account of the Presocratic philosopher the inevitable intersection between knowledge and change, at first a limited and individual



experience, soon opens on to insights both general and deep in which the perceiving self is no longer just a subject of experience, but an analyst of that experience:

A keen analyst of the facts of nature and mind, a master presumably of all the knowledge that then there was, a vigorous definer of thoughts, he does but refer the superficial movement of all persons and things around him to deeper and still more masterful currents of universal change, stealthily withdrawing the apparently solid earth itself from beneath one's feet. The principle of disintegration, the incoherency of fire or flood [...] are inherent in the primary elements alike of matter and of the soul [...]. But the principle of lapse, of waste, was, in fact, in one's self. (*Plato*, p. 10)

While Pater had identified the widespread diffusion of a sense of the fundamental transience of existence with modernity (what he calls at the opening of the 'Conclusion', 'the tendency of modern thought'), the condition itself is evidently not of recent vintage. The movement he tracks in *Plato and Platonism* from 'the facts of nature and mind' to deeper and still more fundamental currents of change recapitulates the process in the 'Conclusion' wherein a delicious leap into cool water on a summer's day becomes an occasion for recognizing the permeability of the boundaries of a self as fluid as the medium it enters. As analysis reveals in the relatively simple encounter with a mutable world a yet deeper instability, we find ourselves immersed in a situation in which the imagination of depth leads to a dissolution that cannot be understood, in the words of Panofsky, as 'an extension of the domain of the self'. Or rather, extension in Pater's Heraclitean mode becomes not expansion so much as attenuation. Hence Pater's astonishing treatment of the philosopher's most well-known formulation in the course of his discussion of the fundamental differences between Plato and precursors such as Heraclitus and Protagoras, a passage that I cited earlier in this article:

'No one has ever passed twice over the same stream.' Nay, the passenger himself is without identity. Upon the same stream at the same moment we do, and do not, embark: for we are, and are not: [...] And this rapid change, if it did not make all knowledge impossible, made it wholly relative, of a kind, that is to say, valueless in the judgment of Plato. Man, the individual, at this particular vanishing-point of time and place, becomes 'the measure of all things.' (*Plato*, p. 10)

Man as the vertex of a vanishing point, without identity and yet the measure of all things, as the figure around which space is organized: it is nothing new to discover the importance of flux and of the fraying of the boundaries of the individual in Pater. To put the critic in perspective, however, allows us to recognize the particular poignancy of his

engagement with these topics. For example, when he deals with the necessary failure of Neoplatonism manifested in Pico della Mirandola's attempt to ground the dignity of man in a grand analogy to the universe, we hear a suggestive melancholy in his terms:

For Pico the earth is the centre of the universe; and around it, as a fixed and motionless point, the sun and moon and stars revolve, like diligent servants or ministers. And in the midst of all is placed man, *nodus et vinculum mundi*, the bond or copula of the world, and the 'interpreter of nature': that famous expression of Bacon's really belongs to Pico. (*Renaissance*, pp. 30–31)

Pico's anachronistic nature is overdetermined in Pater's telling. Harkening back to the texts of classical antiquity with passionate intensity, but without the modern conceptual tools to reconcile his religious faith with the pagan authors he admires, Pico is out of place in the sense that his spirit lives in a classical era his mind cannot fully comprehend, but also because that displacedness makes him a characteristic figure for later Renaissance aspirations *and* for a dislocation that approaches while not yet being quite modern. The absence of perspective that makes man 'the measure of all things' — the interpreter of nature, even — takes on a concrete form as Pater's argument shifts from the Middle Ages to something much later and moves from a general argument (about shared modern concepts) to something far more personal. The fear that motivates the fantasy of human centrality finds open expression in an important passage that moves unsteadily from the early Renaissance to our own day with an important stop at that great thinker about perspective, Blaise Pascal (though the confessional first-person singular is hidden in plain sight between inverted commas):

That whole conception of nature is so different from our own. For Pico the world is a limited place, bounded by actual crystal walls, and a material firmament; it is like a painted toy, like that map or system of the world, held, as a great target or shield, in the hands of the greyheaded father of all things, in one of the earlier frescoes of the *Campo Santo* at Pisa. How different from this childish dream is our own conception of nature, with its unlimited space, its innumerable suns, and the earth but a mote in the beam; how different the strange new awe and superstition with which it fills our minds! 'The silence of those infinite spaces,' says Pascal, contemplating a starlight night, 'the silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me.' — *Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Renaissance*, p. 32. I have quoted the more descriptive original version of this passage. In 1893 Pater changed 'the greyheaded father of all things' to the more abstract 'the creative *Logos*, by whom the Father made all things'. See Hill's note, pp. 328–29.

'Me' contemplating infinity: as Pater brings his argument home, he outsources to Pascal a confession that is inevitably his own in a quotation in which repetition makes a kind of futile echo in the spaces it identifies. Perspective leads Pater not to celebrate a triumph, but to illuminate a version of perception in which the depth of the outside world is terrifying, not least because of the ways in which that quality quickly turns inwards.<sup>14</sup> As Panofsky suggests, perspective will always raise a fundamental question: is the depth of the canvas indicative of the force of the actual world, or of the self that sees it? In short, perspective is immediately introjected, adding a depth to the individual that is in no way comforting as a matter of course, hence Pater's formulation: 'the principle of lapse, of waste, was, in fact, in one's self.'

For Pater, perspective reveals the self to be a part of things that extend towards an unreachable horizon, precisely what the universe imaged in the Campo Santo painting closes off, does *not* allow one to see. Judging in relation to a 'vision of all time and all existence' is the aspiration in *The Republic*. In that sense the philosopher's values are of a piece with those painted on the wall by Piero di Puccio. And yet Pater finds in Plato's method a sensibility at odds with the apparently constrained aims of his arguments. William Shuter's insistence on the need to distinguish 'between the substance and the mode of Plato's thought' (p. 75) involves an issue of more than technical importance because the distinction allows us to recognize the significance of the mode or form of expression in Pater's account of the philosopher. It is in Plato's characteristic form, the dialectic, that Pater discovers two elements apparently antithetical to the idealism of Platonism, not only the inescapable nature of the mutability of the world so central to the thought of Heraclitus, but even the bold subjectivism of Protagoras.<sup>15</sup>

Focusing on the intellectual implications of the dialectic, Pater identifies in its aspiration for a view of the whole a relationship to perspective that, paradoxically, yields an asymptotic relationship to totality. 'It is a life,' he writes about dialectic, 'a systematised, but comprehensive and far-reaching, intellectual life, in which the reason, nay, the whole nature of man, realises all it was designed to be, by the beatific "vision of all time and all existence"' (*Plato*, p. 166). Pater takes the totalizing quotation in the passage I cite from an exchange between Socrates and Glaucon on the disinterested perspective of the philosopher in *The Republic*: 'Then how can he who has magnificence of mind and is the spectator of all time and all existence, think much

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<sup>14</sup> On perspective in Pascal, see Damisch, in whose book that philosopher is a presiding influence (e.g., pp. 47–55, 384–88).

<sup>15</sup> Critics have consistently identified a Heraclitean element in Pater's account of Socratic exchange ultimately traceable to the critic's response to the nineteenth century's great thinker on dialectical development and the history of philosophy, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. On this topic, see Shuter, pp. 61–77; Whiteley, *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death*, pp. 64–71; and, especially, Williams, pp. 258–81.

of human life?', Socrates asks. 'He cannot', comes the inevitable reply.<sup>16</sup> A life spent realizing a vision of everything will be a life of endless process, hence Pater's emphasis on the processual and relational nature of the dialectic.

Carolyn Williams has described the necessity of exchange uncovered in Pater's response to Plato's dialectic. While 'motion directed toward rest rather than rest itself' is Williams's striking description of what Pater finds in the Presocratic philosophers, what he discovers in Socrates himself is not ultimately so different, at least once method and outcome are taken as seriously as aspiration: 'A sequence of conversational exchanges', Williams notes, 'represents the necessarily tentative, skeptical approach to knowledge [...] the never-concluding aspiration toward a view more complete than anyone's "separate" human perspective could ever achieve' (pp. 271, 262). Although the tendency of Plato's argument is to stress the disinterestedness of the philosophic temperament, the possibility of reaching an absolute point of view, Pater highlights the *process* of seeking out the higher ground, rather than the ultimate view that that process is intended to achieve. What the dialectic will always discover is another rise waiting to be climbed, one vista opening on to others — perspective on perspective:

You are forced on, perhaps by your companion, a step further, and the view has already changed. 'Persevere,' Plato might say, 'and a step may be made, upon which, again, the whole world around may change, the entire horizon and its relation to the point you stand on — a change from the half-light of conjecture to the full light of indefectible certitude.['] That, of course, can only happen by a *summary* act of intuition upon the entire perspective, wherein all those partial apprehensions, which one by one may have seemed inconsistent with each other, find their due place.<sup>17</sup>

Lacking the divine point of view on which an image such as that of the God of the Campo Santo is based, 'the entire perspective' is just what is unavailable to human sight. 'Such', Pater tells us in his preliminary remarks to the passage from 'The Doctrine of Plato' I have been citing, 'in its full scope, is the journey or pilgrimage, the method [...] of the Socratic, of the perfected Platonic dialectic, towards the truth, the true knowledge, of Bravery or Friendship, for instance; of Space or Motion' (p. 164). The search for clarity about fundamental issues is a process (a 'journey' or 'pilgrimage') that involves reaching heights, but not stopping at any of them: 'You are going about Justice, for example — that great complex elevation on the level surface of life, whose

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<sup>16</sup> *The Republic of Plato*, trans. by B. Jowett, 3rd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), p. 182.

<sup>17</sup> *Plato*, pp. 164–65, emphasis in original. I have added a missing quotation mark to close off the bit of encouraging dialogue Pater puts in Plato's mouth.

top, it may be, reaches to heaven. You fancy you have grasped its outline [...]. You are forced on' (p. 164).

'You are forced on.' It is not impossible wholes or 'entire perspectives' that interest Pater, but an ongoing extension, the scope of which reaches beyond the individual life, hence the Pythagorean concept of metempsychosis evoked towards the end of the passage:

We see already why Platonic dialectic — the ladder, as Plato thinks, by which alone we can ascend into the entirely reasonable world [...] is a process which may go on, at least with those gifted by nature and opportunity, as in the Perfect City, — may go on to the close of life, and, as Pythagorean theory suggests, perhaps does not end even then. (*Plato*, p. 165)

This identification of an intellectual practice that will bring one to a significant vantage point that is nevertheless only provisional is characteristic of the critic and allows him to discover the inescapably Heraclitean process hiding in Plato's more apparently stable aspirations.

As the gesture towards Pythagorean ideas of reincarnation ultimately reveals the process of dialectic to be endless — certainly beyond the scope of one life — it may provoke us to reflect on what Pater did with depth even when perspective is not openly at issue. Pater's most extraordinary revenant, for example, the *Mona Lisa*, instantiates a kind of resistance to perspective, or perhaps an inversion of the processes it entails, by taking the 'extension of the domain of the self' to the furthest possible point (*Fig. 3*). The lines in the image Pater identifies in the portrait do not vanish, but keep coming back to the Gioconda as the depth of the image is created from the inside; it is a fullness that is the opposite of completeness:

The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all 'the ends of the world are come,' and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions [...]. All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and,



as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea. (*Renaissance*, pp. 98–99)



Fig. 3: Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503–c. 1519, oil on poplar panel, 76.8 × 53 cm, Paris, Louvre Museum. Wikimedia Commons.

I will only suggest here what I recognize to be a peculiar idea: that the ends which come together, and the depth that arises from within serve to make the *Mona Lisa* a figure for a kind of fullness that is not boundless only because, insofar as it closes, it does so on an individual self. If the painting becomes a fantasy vision of finality, it is one that serves to indicate the impossibility of actually encountering an end in the world at all.

The hyperbole of ‘All the thoughts and experience of the world’ and ‘all modes of thought and life’ makes those formulations identical to Plato’s ‘vision of all time and all existence’, and of course, to the ‘Conclusion’s ‘all things and principles of things’ (Renaissance, p. 186). For Pater, the forceful evocation of totality is an occasion for the imagination of extension, not resolution. I have proposed a few times already that it is helpful to understand the ‘Conclusion’ of *The Renaissance* as a rewriting — an expansion or perhaps a slowing down through the retarding properties of language — of the events described in Heraclitus’s evocative aphorism about crossing a river. The loss of perspective in key passages of that important text is related to Panofsky’s double sense of the implication of the phenomenon — the play of line and point is an indication of the introjection of perspective, but also of its diffusion even beyond the visible, beyond the self:

To regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought. Let us begin with that which is without — our physical life. Fix upon it in one of its more exquisite intervals, the moment, for instance, of delicious recoil from the flood of water in summer heat. What is the whole physical life in that moment but a combination of natural elements to which science gives their names? But those elements, phosphorus and lime and delicate fibres, are present not in the human body alone: we detect them in places most remote from it [...]. Like the elements of which we are composed, the action of these forces extends beyond us; it rusts iron and ripens corn. Far out on every side of us those elements are broadcast, driven in many currents; and birth and gesture and death and the springing of violets from the grave are but a few out of ten thousand resultant combinations. That clear, perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours, under which we group them — a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it. This at least of flame-like our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways. (*Renaissance*, pp. 186–87)

In claims such as these from the ‘Conclusion’ to *The Renaissance*, with those elements ‘broadcast’ beyond the point of human perception, perspective reaches into our deepest places even as it expands ever outwards (in what Panofsky called ‘a

consolidation and systematization of the external world'). While the phenomenon presents an opportunity for consciousness to imagine itself as a centre — 'as an extension of the domain of the self' — the experience of that extension is in no wise liable to be comfortable or stabilizing:

Or if we begin with the inward world of thought and feeling, the whirlpool is still more rapid, the flame more eager and devouring. There it is no longer the gradual darkening of the eye, the gradual fading of colour from the wall, — movements of the shore-side, where the water flows down indeed, though in apparent rest — but the race of the midstream, a drift of momentary acts of sight and passion and thought. At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves. (*Renaissance*, p. 187)

In the 'Conclusion' reaching the vertex that allows a sense of perspective is not a matter of simple perception so much as a question of agency, of arriving at the self-conscious experience of extension. What Pater describes as always transient and always compound events — as 'momentary acts of sight and passion and thought' — reach their fullest manifestation when the self who is seeing, feeling, and thinking all at once places itself at the vertex of things that extend far beyond what the eye can see: 'How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?' (*Renaissance*, p. 188). The web that is so important to Pater's writing, here as in the passage on the *Gioconda*, has many sources, and I do not want to translate it into anything so simple as the intersection of the lines radiating to the vanishing point at the depth of so many possible pictures. I merely want to suggest in a provisional way that we recognize the profound fears shaping Pater's need to remain on the surface. His anxious relationship to lines, points, and vanishing, are part of a network of anxiety that is bound to arise in anyone truly putting the self in relation to the infinite.

'It's not a point that perspective designates', explains the art historian Hubert Damisch, an insight that allows him to expand his argument well beyond geometry,

but rather a line, one corresponding in projection to the plane marked as that of the eye, or the subject. A line of approach, an Ariadne's thread, if you will, but one that's indistinguishable from the labyrinth in which it traps the subject. (p. 389)

Ariadne's thread, we will remember, binds death at one end and freedom at the other, but between those two points it offers recapitulation of the labyrinth and fear of being lost.

I suggested in my discussion of the article on Pico that Pater's argument is designed to allow him to declare, with Pascal, the terrifying character of 'the silence of [...] infinite spaces'. We may recognize in his accounts of the lines of perception that flow from the perceiving self to a vanishing point so many confessions of that same fear. Or (and these are not really exclusive alternatives), we may find in Pater's returns to this topic so many attempts to mitigate the silence that opens up around the losses entailed in perspective. While the critic's words attempt to follow as far as they can the lines along which sight vanishes, like a thread held by an anxious lover fearing we may be lost, those words can never overcome the spaces they help us navigate but can never fill.

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