

## CHAPTER 13

# Pater's Mythic Fiction: Gods in a Gilded Age

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**THE DISCUSSION** of Pater's mythological fiction has been governed by two predominant strains in Paterian criticism. One is the autobiographical and psychoanalytic perspective; critics employing this approach have focused on the hidden selves obliquely embedded and disguised in Paterian texts. Among recent analyses of "Denys L'Auxerrois" (1886) and "Apollo in Picardy" (1893) have been readings of these short stories as coded references to Pater's homosexuality and, as in Gerald Monsman's sophisticated *Walter Pater's Art of Autobiography*, an oedipal drama linked to "the theme of artistic self-consciousness."<sup>1</sup>

Alternatively, these tales have been considered from a thematic and structural viewpoint which emphasizes Pater's concern with opposing abstract philosophical positions. In an important 1961 essay, for example, R. T. Lenaghan identifies a Hegelian dialectic permeating Pater's fiction. The pattern he detects is based on an essential opposition between two human tendencies: the spiritual Apollonian "ideal human development" signifying order, sanity, and balance, and the Dionysian power of "massive vitality external to man" which emphasizes the physical, sensuous, and freely mobile.<sup>2</sup> For Lenaghan, Pater's fiction explores the continued recurrence of these impulses, suggesting "the possibility of synthesis" at certain cultural moments, or division at others. Thus, "an enduring symbolic significance" may be attributed to the old gods who are refashioned in Pater's two stories.<sup>3</sup>

Other critics have followed this lead. Sloane Frazier, for instance, examines the oppositions inherent in Pater's Denys and Apollyon; he suggests these godlike characters have a "timelessness" in their "spiritual isolation" so that readers are carried "above and outside of history" to investigate conflicting spiritual impulses.<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Iser, more simply, sees the tales as presenting both Pater's "longing for unity" and its disappointment, while Steven Connor's recent investigations reveal an elusive temporary synthesis of the contradictions of myth.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, from time to time, critics have also seen Pater's transformations and displacements of myth as strategies for cultural analysis. Pater adopts diachronic as well as synchronic approaches to myth, but both indicate his concern with relationships between myth and culture. His chronological study of myth's development through time and his reincorporation of

mythic elements in a range of fictions have prompted readers to interpret the stories "almost as a series of essays examining different *Zeitgeists*."<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the displacement of gods to an alien medieval environment provides an ahistorical base for the construction and interpretation of mythic narrative. In so far as essential characteristics of the gods remain embedded in their human counterparts, Pater is able "not just to show how the world has changed, but to show also, in the continued vitality of the old myths, how it has not changed."<sup>7</sup> From both perspectives, however, there is an underlying assumption that Pater's treatment of myth is closely tied to a belief that mythology expresses the experience of a culture past or contemporary.

Certainly, the study of Victorian theories of mythology suggests that this view of myth as expressive of a society was well-established and widespread in the period. James Kissane, for example, highlights the pervasive influence of George Grote, who argued that myth was based on the "prevalent emotions of the public."<sup>8</sup> In *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873), Edward Tylor made the same connection between myth and self-expression of a community or society: "'myth is the history of its authors, not of its subjects; it records the lives, not of superhuman heroes, but of poetic nations'."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Janet Burstein has demonstrated that the Victorians saw myth as a symbolic discourse revealing ideas and feelings about the external world as it related to the self. She convincingly links Pater particularly to the work of Grote and Tylor, and the folklorist Edward Clodd, all of whom shared a view of myth "as a dense and highly complex mode of thought and expression."<sup>10</sup>

It lies beyond the scope of this essay to explore in depth the ways in which Pater's myth-making can be translated into his experience of the culture of the Victorian age. However, a study of Pater's own reworkings of mythic characters in the light of his views on the cultural significance of mythology lends further support to current critical interest in Pater's definition of the modern sensibility emerging in his period. "Denys L'Auxerrois" and "Apollo in Picardy" dramatize the development of a modern spirit resistant to the imaginative syntheses which classical myths traditionally offered: syntheses of life and death, of flux and stability, even of the earthly and transcendent, the material and the unseen. Focus on Pater's mythography and transformations confirms his interest in a modern consciousness divided against itself: a theory of personality which Paterian scholars have deemed a "commonplace in Modernist literature."<sup>11</sup> But more radically, the mythic fiction highlights a particular manifestation of this divided modern spirit located in

critical practice itself. At the same time as the tales express a "reading" of the modern cultural dilemma, their form and narrative strategies call into question traditional concepts of "reading," of the process of ascribing meaning, of the practice and nature of interpretation.

Pater's view of myth-making as an interpretive act can be traced in his essays on the development of Greek mythology. He suggests, for example, that the imaginative and creative process underpinning all stages of a myth's transformations is intimately bound to a community's attempt to understand and articulate its experience. In "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone" (1875) Pater attributes the origins of the myth to "no single person, but the whole consciousness of an age," suggesting myth expresses shared cultural perceptions, however "faintly-felt."<sup>12</sup> Again, in the 1876 essay "A Study of Dionysus: The Spiritual Form of Fire and Dew," Pater describes the "thought of Dionysus and his circle" (for the Greeks) as "a sacred representation or interpretation of the whole human experience, modified by the special limitations, the special privileges of insight or suggestion, incident to their peculiar mode of existence."<sup>13</sup> This view of the expressive and culture-specific nature of myth also lies behind his discussion of the evolution of Dionysian myth from its first primitive form as generalized "tree-worship" to its poetical humanization and eventual connection "to ethical culture, to the perfecting of the moral nature."<sup>14</sup> Pater focuses on the ways in which the changing events and characters of the myth attempt to explain a society's view of itself and its relationship to forces which are not wholly comprehensible in terms of other available discourses, nor even clearly identified. While Pater asserts that the "element of natural fact . . . is the original essence of all mythology," the myth of Dionysus which gradually takes shape in Greek art and poetry is rather more than crude natural history, becoming instead "the projected expression of the ways and dreams of this primitive people, brooded over and harmonised by the energetic Greek imagination."<sup>15</sup>

Like many Victorian mythographers, Pater views myth in broad terms as subjective in origin, expressive of the changing perceptions of a culture and gradually transformed as the world is re-structured or reinterpreted by a culture's changing consciousness. The figure of the god becomes a single form "comprehending, as its animating soul, a whole world of thoughts, surmises, greater and less experiences."<sup>16</sup> Pater embraces the idealist view of myth as a symbolic process, part of in Viconian terms "the story of man making himself, man recreating his own spirit and subjective being"; it is a "language of the imagination," a "communal expression."<sup>17</sup> In manner and matter myth for Pater has a "cognitive function . . . as the representation of the inner vision of a people."<sup>18</sup> It is itself an act and art of interpretation, ascribing shape, explanation, or meaning to diverse, inchoate experiences, intuitions, and feelings. It is not thus surprising that Pater's re-inventions of myths for his own age deal explicitly and implicitly with the art of interpretation: not only do they construct a new reading of the modern temper but they deconstruct the "myth" of interpretation and deny the possibility of a stable, identifiable

meaning.

Pater's treatment of the modern sensibility in both "Denys L'Auxerrois" and "Apollo in Picardy" is particularly revealing when considered in the light of his earlier analysis of the temper and imagination responsible for the classical manifestations of Dionysus and Demeter. In the first place, Pater foregrounds the ways in which all stages of these myths reveal a cultural consciousness capable of accepting and fusing experience of both physical phenomena and "unseen powers beyond the material veil of things."<sup>19</sup> The early phase of the Demeter myth, for example, which Pater likens metaphorically to childhood with its undifferentiating grasp of the external world, is one of unconscious instinct and empathy, a spontaneously affective response to both realms: "[T]he mental starting point . . . [is] some such feeling as most of us have on the first warmer days in spring, when we seem to feel the genial processes of nature actually at work; as if just below the mould . . . there were really circulating some spirit of life, akin to that which makes its energies felt within ourselves."<sup>20</sup> Pater's stylistic qualifications "some such feeling," "most of us," "seem to feel," "as if . . . there were really circulating" emphasize the subjectivity of this representation of the external world, which presents a community's feelings about its environment, not an objective empirical analysis of it.

Similarly, his assertion that at the root of Dionysus's characterization lies a "world of vision unchecked by positive knowledge"<sup>21</sup> confirms his view of the imaginative structuring of experience offered in myth. But the comment points to a further belief in myth as an embodiment of the transcendent or numinous intuitions of its creators. By referring variously to the "unseen forces," "visionary places," "hidden ordinances"<sup>22</sup> which underpin the conception of Dionysus, together with the more homely and physical culture of the vine, Pater presents the classical temper as one open to the Numen, that "*wholly other*" non-rational, non-moral "Presence uniting mystery and transcendence with energy, vitality, force."<sup>23</sup> And, as the physical beauty of the god comes to represent the "*spiritual form* of fire and dew,"<sup>24</sup> so the act of forging and developing a mythic narrative becomes a way of externalizing and accommodating a human sense of difference, an awareness of the co-existence of both the self and the unfamiliar Other: "a certain mystical apprehension . . . of unseen powers beyond the material veil of things."<sup>25</sup>

Even his treatment of the malign or demonic forces of Dionysian myth its blood-lust and insanity or of the sorrowing mother figure of Demeter, conveys something of Pater's sympathy for the Greek ability to embrace "certain shadowy places" of foreboding and corruption in life, at least in the context of a mythic narrative.<sup>26</sup> The Other may seem evil and threatening; but the Greek imagination which can creatively respond to such difference is saluted as "a unifying or identifying power, bringing together things naturally asunder."<sup>27</sup> The growth of self-consciousness in Greek culture results not in an exclusion of difference, but in its acceptance and incorporation into a re-creation of the myth "made by and for sorrowful, wistful, anxious people."<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, the extent to which Dionysus, like Demeter, is typified by Pater as a dual god, reflecting "a certain darker side" of nature<sup>29</sup> demonstrates Pater's interest in ancient myth as a conciliatory language which momentarily holds in suspension the complex polarities and contraries in human experience. Poised between the finite perfection of the human form and intuitions of a fluid and free natural life-force, myth expresses a mediation between transcendent and mortal, expansion and regulation, between a centrifugal dynamic ("teeming, still fluid") and a centripetal impulse to intelligent order and discipline, a manifestation of the definite and concrete, the "perfectly conceivable human forms."<sup>30</sup> Myth for Pater unites these two seemingly irreconcilable perspectives; beneath the concrete sensuous form still lies that "restless idealism, inward vision"<sup>31</sup> which is constantly re-expressed as the conscious and unconscious perceptions of a culture change.

Indeed fluidity itself becomes a dominant characteristic of each myth which Pater considers in *Greek Studies*. Myth may capture and represent, in a coded way, a society's idealized and internalized dreams of itself. But the idealized "reading" of human nature and potentiality encoded in myth remains an expression of desire only, the resolution offered indefinite and elusive: "the visible embodiments of the *susceptibilities* and *intuitions* of the nobler kind of souls."<sup>32</sup> And the insights thus expressed remain vision or dream only; as an interpretation of a community's sense of itself, it will be continually re-created in keeping with changing cultural needs and perceptions.

Recently, Pater's similarity to other Victorian mythographers who identify a clear three-stage evolutionary process within mythologies has been called into question. Pater's revisions of his essays on myth might, as Steven Connor effectively argues, indicate his growing preference for a dynamic of development based on the dialectical oscillation of "instinctive within conscious ways of knowing."<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, what is clear is that Pater relates the process of myth-making to the history of a culture and its changing conception of its own experience. His theoretical writings also indicate that he finds myth a creative and interpretative narrative art.<sup>34</sup> The many transformations of a given mythos chart a society's attempts to "make" itself, to construct an identity (moral, spiritual, emotional, even national), to offer a reading of the connection between objective and subjective phenomena, between conscious perceptions and unconscious intuitions.<sup>35</sup> But in his emphasis on the constant refashioning, refining, and re-creating of myths to accommodate new versions of the ideal, Pater also implicitly suggests something of the relative and unstable nature of the process of interpretation itself. A myth is never static. Each "interpretation" of experience which a myth expresses will become outmoded and unrelated to the new vision which a society has of itself and must be re-interpreted in turn. There is no single, permanent ideal vision or myth with one, single, and stable meaning.

Pater's own refashionings of mythological narratives to represent the new sensibilities and values of a modern culture seem in subject-matter alone to highlight this very fluidity. The

pagan gods of antiquity are displaced to the alien environment of the "spiritualized" Middle Ages. They are caught in a period of transition and cultural instability,<sup>36</sup> when an earlier sensuous and passionate temper closely bound to the movement of nature has not yet been wholly supplanted by a new rigorous rationality and asceticism. Nevertheless, Pater's mythological fictions resist any easy appropriation of classical values by the modern spirit; the interaction of the exiled figures with their new environment proposes no nostalgic return to a Golden Age.

In the first place, Pater's definition of the modern spirit is wholly at odds with the cultural ambience which he links to the production and reception of those old myths. Dionysus and Apollo are products of a worldview which acknowledges the individual's connection to the physical environment and which holds in awe a powerful, transcendent Other, the cosmic source of energy and vitality. But the worlds of Denys and Apollyon, characterized by a curious single-mindedness and inflexibility, are presented as directly opposed to this classical sensibility. In the medieval societies of both "Denys L'Auxerrois" and "Apollo in Picardy" there is a marked emphasis on a coldly reasonable and ordered relationship between the individual and the world beyond. Rigid discipline rather than creative energy generates the products of this culture. The eleven volumes of Prior Saint-Jean's "dry" treatise on mathematics seek to pinpoint exact and precise truths through the application of "strict method" and "long and intricate argument."<sup>37</sup> The religious rituals of Auxerre ludicrously celebrate the spiritual freedom of redemption through a game of ball played on Easter Day like a funeral rite by pompous self-important canons who act "solemnly," "gravely," with "decorum."<sup>38</sup> Analytical scientific or scholastic discourse, like that of the Prior, or the mechanized, superstitious rituals of the people of Auxerre, become ways of structuring the disorderly, irrational, and individualistic element of experience to keep it under conscious control. Indeed the repression of difference which Pater explores in the texts might be read as another important feature of the modern (not just medieval) temper. Tactics of authoritarian control and the irrepressible drive of the unconscious form important themes in both stories, and might well signal the potential clash between "order" and "anarchy" in Victorian capitalist England, entering in its late phase an uneasy transitional stage not unlike the worlds of Denys and Apollyon.<sup>39</sup>

Pater's own suspicion of these techniques of repression can be seen in his narrative description of such approaches. All reek of death; the Prior's privileging of intellect and logic is connected to a life which is rigidly compartmentalized and suffocating, whatever its material rewards. He is literally incarcerated by the monastic walls with little "breathing-space." His massive scientific treatise is designed to conclude the rigidly organized progress of his career, "by drawing tight together the threads" of the argument.<sup>40</sup> The exhumation of the saint in Auxerre is an attempt to control the malevolent forces which the townsfolk fear are at large. But the rite quite literally reveals a stagnant culture in love with death, as the unprepossessing mummified shrunken body is placed in an elaborately jewelled shrine amidst the stench of "mouldering human

remains."<sup>41</sup>

Such rituals suggest a world which can scarcely accommodate mythic vision, as Pater conceived it in *Greek Studies*. This world lacks a sense of vital and sympathetic connection to a living, external environment. Moreover, the societies which Pater depicts are marked by a secularized consciousness. Despite the grand churches and elaborate religious liturgy of Auxerre, there is little sense of the transcendent in the ceremonies. Monks like Hermes "study and experiment," not in order to reaffirm mankind's participation in the vital cosmic life-force, but to wrest nature's secrets from her, even, as in the case of the Prior in "Apollo in Picardy," to gain material reward in the form of promotion.

This emphasis on a self-centred and intellectualized perspective is coupled with a further privileging of authority and hierarchy as tools of power and control. The monastic communities and feudal system as presented in the stories marginalize the common people. The laity are usually simply passive onlookers at religious ceremonies; for most of the narrative they are silent, and their resentment at the luxury and power of those above them only obliquely suggested. The monastic pigeon-house in "Apollo in Picardy" is a striking example of the deathly nature of the feudal structure.<sup>42</sup> Described as "a feathered brotherhood" the pigeons are likened metaphorically to the monastic system itself. The tower's white exterior excludes the dangerously different and unacceptable (the never-named "creeping things"), and the "common people" are forbidden "so much as [to] ruffle" a single bird. The birds, though ostensibly a "community," are compartmentalized, "each in its little chamber," so that the term "brotherhood" becomes an ironic misnomer for both birds and the monastic order they exemplify. The entire group is given to preening "self-content"; though, indulgent as this may seem, the birds themselves seem to the narrator as pampered "inmates" bred and cosseted to form "the daintiest fare" at the monastic table. In miniature, then, the pigeon-house reveals the ultimate danger of the stagnant self-satisfaction of a corrupt society. In protecting itself through mental structures of control, it renders itself prisoner. It is a community divided and fragmented and, as such, self-destructive; the feathered brotherhood are (somewhat cannibalistically given the metaphor) devoured by their human counterparts.

While the modern spirit which Pater represents in these stories seems far from the consciousness which developed the myth of Dionysus, his views on the function of myth as a mediating vehicle which accommodates opposed readings of experience seem initially to be dramatized in the narratives. Denys and Apollyon each provide a positive image of that Other which the modern sensibility has repressed rather than accommodated. Both are associated with nature, not culture. Apollyon the shepherd inhabits a grassy, fertile valley, an idyllic pastoral world where even thunder resembles music and lightning a "soft aurora." Denys is similarly associated with the vitality and fertility of the natural world, as can be seen in his market stall with its succulent melons

and pomegranates. The sensuality of both characters is also allied to a definition of freedom which opposes the control and rationality seen as characteristic of the modern environment. Denys's transformation of the Easter ball game into a carnivalesque experience overturning the solemn and disciplined hierarchy is a good example. The clergy's collectively grave demeanour is replaced by "the delightful glee" of both ecclesiastical and lay persons who are all inspired and released from repressive self-consciousness to participate in what is suddenly "really a game." Similarly, Apollyon's association with games and play is defined explicitly by the narrator as "the power of untutored natural impulse, of natural inspiration"<sup>43</sup> set against the rules and regulations which govern the lives of the Prior and Hyacinthus.

The principles of artistic freedom are also re-defined through the characterization of Apollyon and Denys. They privilege not reason and logical structures but imagination and the fanciful individuality associated with unconscious intuition. The artistic products which they inspire are marked by unique inventiveness, the expression of a self intimately bound to the physical order of sense, underpinned by an awe for the transcendent and intangible. Apollyon's unearthly, fascinating music inspires the builders and stonemasons so that a new temper modifies their work. Architectural structures take on organic form; they "blossomed gracefully."<sup>44</sup> Large, potentially dehumanizing buildings become domesticated and cosy. Denys too inspires "by kind of visible sympathy," enabling artists to draw on unconscious and previously suppressed intuitions to produce work "in many an enduring form of exquisite fancy."<sup>45</sup> Indeed the stages of artistic composition inspired by him are akin to Pater's stages of cultural development identified in his examination of the evolution of particular myths in *Greek Studies*. Undifferentiating empathy with nature and the unseen gives way to self-conscious acknowledgement of the dark places of experience and hence ethical insights:

There was first wild gaiety, exuberant in a wreathing of life-like imageries . . . [then it passed] into obscure regions of the satiric, the grotesque and coarse . . . [then] a well-assured seriousness . . . as if the gay old pagan world had been *blessed* in some way. . . .<sup>46</sup>

Pater's narratives seem not so much fanciful tales about the return of the gods themselves, but new myths to posit the return of those powers of thought, feeling and imagination which found their expression in the creation and transformation of classical mythology and which might, it would seem, have a role to fulfill in the modern age once again.

Pater's tales proposing the return of mythic modes of thought, intuition and their expression thus serve to highlight two opposing ways by which the human consciousness structures or interprets its experience: the synthesizing approach of the classical myth-makers who fuse conscious and unconscious, physical and spiritual experience; and the modern "scientific" spirit of rational and materialistic segregation, exclusion and control.

The polarization between protagonist and society signifies a split in the human consciousness which can so differently make sense of itself and its environment. And this division is further developed by an analogous division within the central protagonists themselves. Employing a strategy similar to that of doubling or mythic "decomposition,"<sup>47</sup> Pater identifies even his gods as beings of divided consciousness, caught between death and life, guilt and joy, the sensual and the spiritual. For all Denys's fresh youthfulness and association with the fertility of the vine, he is, like his counterpart Dionysus, coupled with a darker Otherness, exotic, even sinister. Returning from the east where he "trafficks" with strange civilizations, he "ate flesh for the first time, tearing the hot red morsels with his delicate fingers in a kind of wild greed."<sup>48</sup> Even the lexical opposition here "tearing . . . wild greed" and "delicate fingers" establishes a disjunction within the character. Moreover, Denys the hunter is also the hunted, suffering scapegoat. But this is not the simple opposition established in the classical "splitting" of Dionysus; Denys suffers the guilt of a self-conscious modern, reduced to a "subdued, silent, melancholy creature" with a morbid taste for relics and a self-destructive desire to "restore his popularity."<sup>49</sup>

The treatment of Apollyon even more forcefully indicates Pater's reading of the modern spirit as a divided one, incapable of recovering its previous capacities of insight and imagination. The Hyperborean Apollo's healing and orderly nature is modified in response to the rigid and sterile environment. He offers a refreshing alternative to the Prior's theoretical abstractions for he conveys a liberating sense of the physical. But his impulsive cruelty is foregrounded as in his torturing games with the wild creatures that flock to him and in his savage destruction of the pigeon-house. And he too admits to guilt for his misdeeds. His meek appearance at the church "like any other penitent" reveals a new spiritual consciousness which modifies his character.

In some ways this double nature of Apollyon and Denys enables them to be read as the mediating term between the oppositions Pater identifies. Like Lévi-Strauss's "trickster" figure they occupy a "position halfway between two polar terms [retaining] . . . something of that duality namely an ambiguous and equivocal character."<sup>50</sup> Insofar as they promise synthesis, they represent the culture's idealized aspiration towards cosmic order and psychic unity. Certainly, on one level such harmony is provided by the interaction of Pater's protagonists with their societies. These re-creations of the pagan gods with their liberating commitment to sensuousness, imagination, and individuality become the visible embodiment of all that the modern environment would repress or rigorously curtail. Their return heralds a reassessment of perspectives and qualities previously deemed evil, if acknowledged at all. And as the community comes to tolerate the difference of Denys or Apollyon, so its members are brought to self-knowledge and maturity, expressed in personal, social, and artistic terms.<sup>51</sup>

The Prior, Hyacinthus, and the people of Auxerre seem initially to experience an

enlargement of heart and mind. Such growth is likened to a rite of passage or rebirth. The Prior physically journeys out of darkness into a golden, summery world; his fading health is restored. Hyacinthus discovers "his true self for the first time" as if previously trapped by a false vision or assessment of his nature, place, and value. Denys too seems to encourage restoration and renewal: "the sight of him made old people feel young again." He is also associated with communal disruption and renewal which seems to unite opposing social poles the excluded and the powerful. Suddenly in the community youth gains precedence "yet as if with the consent of their elders, who would themselves sometimes lose their balance, a little comically."<sup>52</sup> The feudal structure is temporarily eroded so that the mute and marginalized common man is given voice and place: "one man engaged with another in talk in the market-place; a new influence came forth at the contact . . . a new spirit was abroad everywhere."<sup>53</sup> Even works of art produced under the auspices of Apollyon and Denys demonstrate a fusion of contraries or the accommodation of what was formerly denied, as in the Cathedral of Auxerre with its "broad masses" and "delicate lines," its individualistic irregularities encompassed in a traditional form; the Prior's twelfth volume is like "a violent beam, a blaze of new light, revealing, as it glanced here and there, a hundred truths unguessed at before."<sup>54</sup>

Yet such cultural rejuvenation is neither continuous nor unambiguous in these fictions. If classical myth stems from and dramatizes visionary capacity to accommodate and synthesize difference, Pater's mythic fictions suggest such fusion is no longer possible for the modern mind. His god-surrogates remain divided and guilty. Denys, unlike Dionysus, is not reborn. The return of the repressed ultimately creates discord and, paradoxically, its own defeat, given the twisted and distorted modern sensibility. Denys's inspired townsfolk soon pass from liberated joy to riotous frenzy and uncontrollable passion indiscriminately indulged. While the inspiration of the god releases natural passions, it is the old falsely spiritualized and superstitious desire for controlling rites to exclude the inexplicable, that reasserts itself and results in Denys's death. The final episode begins as a superstitious folk-custom, a remnant of some primitive pagan rite designed to ensure the renewal of the natural order "a somewhat rude popular pageant, in which the person of Winter would be hunted blindfold through the streets."<sup>55</sup> But the ritual and relic-seeking become intensified to actual sacrifice and dismemberment. The irony underlines Pater's reading of the modern temper. Rather than accommodate difference, that which is excluded is momentarily released to serve the desire for repression and control, to banish strangeness and destroy what is thought "unholy." And the brutality of such suppression reinforces a belief that the idiosyncratic Other deserves nothing better than extinction.

Similar ironies underpin "Apollo in Picardy," and again suggest Pater's view of the disabling and self-defeating modern spirit. Apollyon ultimately thwarts creativity and causes destruction. The death of Hyacinthus in the very act of the play which signals his youthful renewal seems ironically cruel; but even more disturbing is the way in which only this sacrifice restores that "half-extinguished" deity's "proper immensity, its old

greatness and power."<sup>56</sup> The divided nature of the god is itself healed solely by the destruction of the very beings his power would restore. Perhaps even more significantly, the apparently liberating vision which he inspires can be neither understood nor articulated by the community he has affected. No sense is made of the "mazy borders," the "long spaces of hieroglyph," "winged flowers, or stars with human limbs and faces" which form the Prior's final volume symbolizing how his vision divided "hopelessly against itself the well-ordered kingdom of his thought."<sup>57</sup>

In this subversion of the mediating terms within the narratives, Pater's tales of the gods' return offer a new myth for modern man, suggesting a further stage in "the history of the dynamics and evolution of the mind."<sup>58</sup> Unlike the classical myths of Dionysus and Demeter with their reconciliation of polarities, their emphasis on a continual cycle of growth-death-rebirth, and their celebration of natural and transcendent spheres of experience, Pater's mythic transformations seem to assert the inevitability of division, destruction, and repression in the modern world. The culture which can produce and read these "myths" is one marked by duality. Such mythic narratives speak of a world where individuals are thwarted in their attempt to reconcile opposing tendencies, fragmented in consciousness, haunted by powerful forces they would repress but which they cannot control. Clinging to intellect and reason as a means of structuring experience, the culture's analytical, authoritarian, and hierarchical procedures stifle creative synthesis and eventually overwhelm the idealized mediation of polarities traditionally proffered in myth.

Yet the very processes and strategies by which this reading of the modern sensibility is presented in the short stories signify a further paradoxical element in Pater's personal myth-making. These tales ultimately undermine confidence in their own sure expressiveness, their own mythic status as part of "a system of communication . . . a message."<sup>59</sup> On the one hand, they seem to signify a bleak interpretation of the modern individual as a creature of divided consciousness; but on the other, their equivocal and evasive methods of signification establish that meanings are always absent, interpretation itself never a secure process. Interpretation and mythic narratives as a metalanguage of interpretation can be no more than a self-conscious hovering between polarized signs: and it is this postmodern belief that Pater's mythic fictions ultimately enact.

Certainly, much of the interest and significance of these mythic tales stems from the ways in which the societies depicted read themselves, their world, their products. To this end these narratives might be considered to be explicitly about the practice of interpretation and the extent to which the "meanings" attributed to experience are culturally determined. The very ambiguity of the protagonists central to their potential mediating function depends upon equally plausible but conflicting interpretations of their nature and actions. Denys's instinctive sympathy for the alien or outcast, "for [the] oddly grown or even misshapen" might be read as a liberating and mature acceptance of difference: "He taught the people not to be afraid of the strange, ugly creatures . . . nor think it a bad omen that they

approached."<sup>60</sup> But this very ability to attract and defend the "unacceptable" arouses "a deep suspicion and hatred" from the spiritualized and repressed community. While this evaluation of Denys may serve initially to reveal simply the restricted vision of medieval Auxerre, it is called back into play when the town descends into "coarseness" and "satiety," into suicide and murder. Embracing the excluded becomes a morally equivocal act, resistant to evaluation in a single way.

Interpretation of the characters is also seen to be a problematic enterprise in the tales. Rumours abound, but are rarely conclusively supported by fact. Apollyon's association with murder and other illicit actions, with disease and destruction, is based on the Janitor's surly gossip and suppositions, not on any experienced truth. Satisfying "meaning" even evades Pater's sophisticated contemporary, for the Victorian tourist misreads the relief of Apollyon on the gable: "King David, or an angel?"<sup>61</sup> Such ironic and unanswered questions are another way in which the rhetoric of the text self-consciously dramatizes Pater's rejection of certainty.

The ambiguous or open endings of these fictions also deny the fixing of meaning associated with closure. Denys's death seems to preclude possibilities of renewal; but even more provocatively, Hermes, by burying his friend in the church beneath a cross falsely Christianizes him. What is excluded by this poignant "blessing" are the pagan qualities which the tale foregrounds as vital to a renewal of a corrupt society whose Christianity is dry, mechanical, and superstitious. The action suggests something of Denys's effect on members of his community, stirring the affection and loyalty of a few sympathetic and noble souls; but simultaneously it points to the extinction and ineffectiveness of the vital pagan energy which should regenerate. Similarly, the circularity of "Apollo in Picardy," with the Prior once again in his cell, deprives the reader of the consolation of completion for this Prior is confused and impotent, dying without decisive understanding or action. His affection for the dead Hyacinthus might suggest an element of growth, of loss of selfishness, and hence of the value of the introduction of a "pagan" perspective into his experience. Yet even this certainty is undercut. The Prior weeps not for his companion, but for a vague muddle of hazy "blue distance," "blue flowers" and the "colour of Holy Mary's gown . . . the colour of hope."<sup>62</sup>

The destabilizing of any fixed and recoverable certainties within the tales is increased by the way in which both evade generic classification. The close identification of both protagonists with supernatural deities, the suggestion of inexplicable and marvelous events, the polarization of characters and settings: all are standard conventions of the romance. But the framing devices of each tale the discovered manuscripts, the sophisticated traveller's interest in the "discriminate collection of real curiosities," even the assertion that Denys "seemed to have been a real resident at Auxerre"<sup>63</sup> are all strategies of formal realism, devices used to insist on the empirical truth of the fiction which follows.

Such oscillation between rumour and fact, between closure and ambiguous irresolution, between modes of realism and romance, is also paralleled by the process of narration and the treatment of technical point of view. In "Denys L'Auxerrois," for example, the experienced wanderer who opens the tale and assesses the architectural splendours of France with a practised eye, who begins to piece together the artistic relics of Denys's return with the finesse of the connoisseur, might well be relied on as an author-surrogate, an authoritative interpreter capable of establishing truth, of guiding the reader confidently through the ambiguities of the narrative with the objectivity of historical distance. But in a matter of pages the narrator loses both detachment from and control over his story. He asserts the tale "shaped itself" based only on "a fancy in my mind," as if rising unbidden from his unconscious. From initial detachment he becomes a curious participant in the events of the tale itself; when gazing at the transported tapestry figures in the priest's house, he hears "some of them shouting rapturously to the organ music." And the critical distance which supports authoritative, clear judgment is further eroded by the sympathetic shifts to the focalization of the protagonist though even these give rise to no single, exclusive interpretation of the events of the story. Denys "could but wonder" if he was indeed guilty of the vineyard murder, for example.<sup>64</sup>

The collapse of the chronology and narrative levels within the stories frustrates attempts to identify a single, secure moral standpoint. Sympathy for the protagonists is gained by immersing the reader in the chronological present of both tales, and in the narrator's identification of the positive and lasting effects of the protagonists; but almost immediately this seeming validation of the character is qualified. Apollyon is typified as a competent herdsman; such literal details seem to slide effortlessly into a Christ-like metaphor. He is a good or "affectionate shepherd" who "seemingly loved his sheep." Yet immediately the narrator slips silently into an alternative and contradictory evaluation of the character: "if Apollyon looked like the great carved figure over the low doorway of their place of penitence at home, that could be but an accident, or perhaps a deceit."<sup>65</sup> The authoritative narrator's assessment and that of the nervous and confused Prior become indistinguishable, and the reader is left with only a continuous, irresolvable oscillation between Apollyon's healing qualities and his duplicitous nature. In "Denys L'Auxerrois" the character's "sad ending" is juxtaposed with his "pleasant" stimulation of his society and his sponsorship of "a *sort of* golden age."<sup>66</sup> As the narrative proceeds, the efficacy of Denys's regeneration of the modern world is constantly called into question: "The golden age had indeed come back for a while: golden was it, or gilded only, after all?"<sup>67</sup> Not only is the effect of Denys's intervention transitory; the use of "gilded" points to the equivocal worth of this renewal, as if the community has been seduced by the showy trappings of a plausible but dangerous trickster. But the use of the rhetorical question mockingly undercuts *any* attempt to fix on a decisive understanding of Denys's role. The tale resists all efforts to fix meaning. It continually evades and destabilizes the process of its own interpretation.

Even Pater's treatment of symbolic details and imagery deconstructs fixed categories and renders any moral evaluation of attributes unstable and ambivalent. Those terms or perspectives set against each other—pagan and Christian, sacred and profane, order and chaos—are revealed as interchangeable and in effect self-cancelling. The Christian communities with their rigid discipline and superstitious, ungodly rituals lack all the compassion, charity, and transcendent vision which one expects. Those qualities are, ironically, the property of the "unholy" pagan protagonists whose reverence for and delight in the vital plenitude of the natural world contrast strikingly with the profane neglect and fear of God's creation which marks the often materialistic monks. Yet the imagery which would support this inversion turns in on itself on many occasions as if to destroy any certainties. In particular metaphors drawn from the natural world seem initially to validate the pagan perspective. Under Apollyon, for example, buildings "blossom gracefully," but the same image of fecund nature is also used to describe the self-destructive and sinister mental confusion of the Prior under Apollyon's tutelage: "Somewhat later they [flowers] and the like of them seemed to have grown into and over his brain."<sup>68</sup>

With such continual doubling back of the tales on themselves, Pater's mythic fictions become doubly suited as new myths for a modern age. They dramatize a new version of man divided within and against himself, no longer capable of mythic consolations. But the fractured consciousness is not the only division which these narratives explore and "mythologize." They are equally myths about the process of interpretation itself. In terms of narrative structure and strategies these short stories explore the gap between the desire for meaning and certainty and its unattainability. By deconstructing fixed terms of identity and definition, by subverting mediation, resolution, and synthesis, by denying authoritative viewpoints and control, Pater's tales explode the false myth of interpretation as the recovery of a stable, fixed meaning accepted by consensus. At the best interpretation is revealed as a process of provisional negotiation, a series of oblique attempts by myth and metaphor, by constant re-creation to name the gap, but never to bridge it.