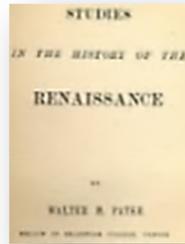


** Pater Noster **



Two Conversations

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Pater Noster

*I speak with the ghost of my
Oxford mentor, Walter Pater.*

1.

Pater noster, which art in Heaven
Do you profess, to fresh-faced angels?
At what vampiric charms, what strange ills
Do you hint, sweetly, as you scriven?



Wandering among the blessed aisles
I see you, blowing gold dust off
Old tomes of Beauty with a cough
So tactful, even St. Peter smiles.

You read out loud (no, not out loud,
Out *soft*, so that we strain to hear)
Life's Secret, which, though doubtless clear,
A certain reticence would shroud.



You eye your comely young assistant
Cherub, as he ascends the ladder,
With looks a scruple seems to scatter
Like cirrus clouds. Yet they're persistent,

For all their vagary, such looks,
And they return (it seems their place
Still knows them) to your anxious face,
Which—as the youth withdraws the books

Requested from the highest shelf
(Close to the ceiling, slightly sooty,
Boasting a splendour of pudgy putti)—
Seems to ask questions of itself

Not altogether focused on
Concern for the adventurous cherub's
Safety, but folding, like the Arab's
Mobile and lithe pavilion,

Into a fugitive, nocturnal
Luggage the nomad steals away with,
Leaving, for desert winds to play with
(In a dry jest that seems eternal),

Only the ashes of a fire
Whose momentary wasting flame
Was neither gem-like, nor quite game
Enough to burst into desire.—

The precious books, though, what about
The books? A fall from such a height
Might break their spines—O piteous sight!
It is one's duty to reach out,



To shore, to brace, to keep from tumbling
In ruinous precipitation
Arks of such frail illumination—
But then you hear the thunder rumbling:

Fear not, it is no greater threat
Than borborygmic mutiny (given
That the ambrosial fare in Heaven
Does not agree with you as yet).

2.

Dear Pater! You would not forgive
Such archness in an angel, let
Alone a man on whom they've set
Cain's mark. And yet I dared to *live*

What you discreetly preached. You picture
My life as vulgar—yet I braved them,
Love's risky gifts; you merely craved them.
That's craven. Those who cannot, lecture.

For though you taught us all to be
Artists of ourselves, my dear Pater,
You chose to be a mere spectator
Of life, in 'passionate celibacy'.

*'Poor, dear Pater has lived to dis-
prove everything he has written.'*

Was he ever alive?

Burn in these moments as they pass,
You told us. Like the Fauré Gloria
Your prose-style hymns our frail sensoria:
Your works compose a Requiem Mass

For Epicureans. But small headway
You yourself made into the strife
Of *living* your creed, even in life
A phantom of a texture midway



'Twixt life and books. (*Again you plunder
Another's words: Wordsworth's this time.*
You spoil my woodcock springe, all lime-
Bespred! *I steal your stolen thunder.*)

*Ah, but what am I, Dears? What am I?
(It's true; from The Prelude, Bk. 3.)*

Your Denis l'Auxerrois was rote
Mythology; I *lived* the rôle,
The Liberator of the soul
Whose fate is to be the Scapegoat.



Still, what strange influence, my friend,
Did your 'Conclusion' have on me!
It was, or rather proved to be
Both my beginning and my end.

To Studies in the Renaissance (orig. vers.)

Then was that clarion in the grey light
Coda or prelude, that your pages
First trumpeted? Perhaps the age is
Near when the torch is quenched in daylight.

I'll have you brought to me at slow,
Amber hours, on a golden platter.
You shall be read to me. A patter
Of raindrops on a drift of snow

Will syncopate a melting dream
Of crystal, flushed with pinks that double
The sky's, as bubbling bass-notes trouble
The frozen music of a stream.

3.
*Oscar, you tended to mistake
Vulgarity for cleverness,
And you were ruined by success.
You killed yourself for pleasure's sake.*

But wasn't I a 'martyr of style',
As well? Extended to the life.
*And martyrs, too, you made of wife
And sons. Was not that somewhat...vile?*

Pater's description of Flaubert.

*In Eden, why look for a snake?
A sensualist should have more sense.
You gave the name 'experience'
To far too many a mistake.*

*There's something of the excellent talker
About the way you've written me.
I won't be written easily,
However: the Moirai mock the mocker.*

Classical Desire

An Exchange with Epictetus and Epicurus

(With an Unsolicited Contribution from Aristippus)

I look again, and Pater has transformed himself into Epicurus. With him is his sterner brother in soul-economy, Epictetus. (My headache has suddenly grown more intense.) Bad Conscience visits me in the form of two Hellenistic philosophers—or vice-versa, I am not sure which.



Epictetus:

*You read the Greek philosophers,
Yet missed the passages about
Σοφροσυνη, that thing without
Which Eros is a fatal curse?*

Sophrosyne, 'moderation'.

*Play with a fire out of control
And you are certain to be burned.
How little, in the end, you learned
From us, damaging your own soul!*

Epicurus:

*Yes, the soul is a pleasure garden—
But you uncultivated yours,
Made it a wilderness. Of course
Pleasure is good, but let it harden*



*Into compulsion, seek excess,
Transgress the mean, and it becomes
Disease. 'We do not make our homes
In hotels,' as my good friend says.*

*I died in one, fighting a losing
Battle with ugly wallpaper.—
Souls can be even uglier.
And all this was of your own choosing?*

Better to husband than to lose.

*The βίος απολαυστικός
Turns caustic, and the pleasure gnaws
Itself away in overdose.*

Bios apolaustikos, 'Life of pleasure'.

Epictetus:

*You showed a certain stylish verve
In praising lies, masks, and illusion:
Where did they lead but to confusion?
What healthy purpose could they serve*

When what was needed was a true
Description of reality?
The calling card of Queensberry
Spelled out your destiny for you:



An exile's fate, sooner or later.
As soon as you had read that card
You could have left. Life might be hard
At times, abroad, but spirits greater

Than yours had followed where the cart
Led them, preferring that to being
Dragged. There is dignity in fleeing
To save one's spirit and one's art.

Alas, you never learned the art
Of managing desire. You fed it
Till it became a monster, and let it
Devour your reason and your heart.

[Aristippus, founder of the Cyrenaic School, appears and interrupts the conversation—Aristippus, the crude Hedonist depicted by Diogenes Laertius, one-time disciple of Socrates who scandalised his mentor by accepting fees for his teaching. Dressed in a purple robe, he seems somewhat winded, as if fresh from dancing before Dionysius the Tyrant of Syracuse.]



Aristippus:
I can instruct you how to lord it
Over the wildest lusts with my
Foolproof pleasure-philosophy.
The question is, can you afford it?

A Free Sample of his Wares:
Know what you have, and where you put it.
To each excess apply a limit.
If the light burns too brightly, dim it.
But if thine eye offend thee, shut it.

Epictetus:
From Socrates' philosophy
You managed to subtract both 'love'
And 'wisdom,' thinking it enough
To concentrate upon the 'fee'.

Epicurus:
You are, in general, quite appalling.
Your counsel's worthless; we don't need it;
We'll neither pay for it nor heed it.
Go. Dionysius is calling.

Exit Aristippus hurriedly.

Epicurus:

*Only if pleasure is cultivated
Intelligently, can it thrive.
Do you expect a rose to live,
Let alone grow, when saturated*



*With water to the point of drowning?
Drink is a good, says Aristotle.
Then must one empty every bottle?
Must revelry mean vulgar clowning?*

*You don't distinguish pain from pleasure:
All's mere intensified sensation.
Health you conceive as deprivation,
But morbid 'sins': ah, these you treasure.*

Stop! Thou hast cleft my heart in twain.
*Is this your famous literary
'Ham' acting? Hamlet acting. Very
Clever.* (True, I've too glib a brain.

Brilliance is a disease, perhaps.
I'd like to meet this Grand Guignol
Stage-manager inside my soul
Who built me all these little traps,

These oubliettes, invisible
Beneath my Palace of Desire,
My House of Lust, so that the higher
I climbed, the farther I might fall...

What caillloch's curse, what Irish hex
Left me here hanging upside-down,
The Tarot's Fool, a tragic clown
Upon his crucifix of sex?

I lost the action, and the name
Of action, in the same mad passion.
Yes, I *am* Hamlet, in my fashion,
Shifting pieces in an end-game.

Why is it I am so immune
To introspection, and the High-
Serious? I know the words, but I
Can not quite carry such a tune.

When my urbane court-jester's brain
Attempts to make that arduous climb
To the high peaks of the Sublime,
My prose turns purple with the strain.

(I have a *dream* of introspection:
'Tis night. I seek my soul. The mirror
I gaze in shows me but a mirror.
Clearly it calls for some reflection.))

Epicurus:
*My friend, you did a grave disservice
To hedonists in every quarter.
The cause requires no tawdry martyr.
And your Uranian friends: how nervous*

*You made them! Hundreds fled the land
When scurrilous press and cowardly Crown
Cornered their prey, and all the town
Seemed bent against your little band.*

The bitterest of consolations
You bring me, my dear Epicurus.
Were you so *scelerisque purus*,
Growing well-heeled on the donations

Of faithful followers? Is this
The way of a philosopher,
Or of a Simon Magus? Sir,
How much cash subsidised your bliss?

My yielding to Temptation was
A method to get rid of it,
By sheer indulgence to outwit,
Out-Proteus the Proteus.

You compare Eros to a fire
That one can quench or light at will—
Just so, no lack, no overflow.
But in those ancient times, Desire

Was so much simpler, wasn't it?
It's good to make one's soul one's own,
But lately, alas, the beast has grown
So tiresomely infinite!



Am I a vampire?

Think of the great Homeric topos,
Odysseus throttling Proteus
To solve his destiny. Mine was
That travelled mind, the *polytropos*,

The mind of many turns... *Excuse me,*
But surely you mean Menelaus?
Facts, dreadful facts... How they betray us,
Even in art-matters! You amuse me,

Epicurus, with your naïve
Empiricism. What I mean,
Of course, is that it *should* have been
Odysseus... I tried to cleave

To the poetic, that is, *higher*
Truth, that the polytropic meets
The polymorphous and defeats,
Or tames, a myriad-faced desire.

And what good is a verity
That lacks verisimilitude?
What's any given fact? The crude
First draft of an infinity

Of possibilities! *If facts*
Get in the way, so much the worse
For facts, says Hegel. What occurs,
The grist of our mere daily acts,

Is of no interest to art,
Save as the roughest raw material
Translated into realms aethereal
Where the quotidian plays no part—

Epicurus:
Brilliantly self-deceiving elf
Of a man, wittily outwitted
Sphinx of a man, hopelessly pitted
Against the riddle of himself!



*The two philosophers fuse into
one, with a portmanteau name.*

