Effectively Equivalent: Walter Pater, "Sebastian van Storck," and the Ethics of Metaphor

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> All that we can say only veils the sole assertion: that
>   everything must fade and that the only thing we can
>   remain faithful to is the impulse that erases, to which
>   something in us that rejects all memory already belongs
>   --Maurice Blanchot, L'amitié (1971)

If `the style is the man' it is also the age, declares
Walter Pater in the Postscript to his Appreciations (1889), a
volume that ends with the critic's reflections on the opposition
between the classicists and the romanticists.[1] In this closing
essay Pater considers the extent to which such terms still apply
to his current cultural context, and, as he ponders the scope of
romantic and classical at the close of the nineteenth century, he
concludes [page 164] that in due course our curious, complex,
aspiring age will be found to have its own distinctive style
(Postscript, p. 260). This will be an eclectic one that combines
the excellences of the diverse elements to be found in a variety

of schools (p. 261). Pater's engagement with the need to discriminate schools, of art, of literature (p. 260) has relevance today, as we embark on a new century and conduct the obligatory autopsy on the preceding one. Even if modern scholarship has shifted considerably away from Pater's own discriminations (as well as misgivings) about the uses of classical and romantic, Pater's preoccupation with the usefulness of these categories still resonates in the twists and turns of contemporary critical theory, as one theoretical paradigm reaches ascendancy only to be supplanted by another.

The current turn in critical theory, however, is not so much toward the ongoing reassessments of Romanticism's position with respect to Classicism, but instead it is focused more on the question of ethics--a question, as I will show later in this essay through a close analysis of Pater's imaginary portrait Sebastian Van Storck (1887), that underlies Pater's distinctive aestheticism. The recent turn to the ethical was heralded in the 1990s as a much-needed antidote to the excesses of the two most immediately preceding paradigms. First, ethics stood against the cheerlessness of an idealizing deconstruction dedicated to hunting down the occasions of unreadability in a literary work (i.e., those moments of aporia revealed by a conceptual sleight-of-hand that every work inevitably betrays). Second, and no less refreshing, ethics was to release us from the ironies attending the empiricist bias of the new historicism, a bias that attempts

to put us back in touch with real issues of politics and history but the practice of which seems to lead only to increasingly reductive abstractions. If style is indeed the age, as Pater asserts, then the textual phenomena that the paradigms of deconstruction and the new historicism share in the same stylistic era (or, to recall Hayden White's influential formulation, tropic of discourse)[2] are their mutual suspicion of [page 165] the trope of metaphor and their consequent privileging of metonymy.

The explicitly rhetorical focus of deconstruction makes it easy to appreciate how, for its theorists, metaphor has long been the linguistic repository of much that is deemed ethically suspect. For Paul de Man and his followers metaphor's principal offense lies in what theorists of metaphor call its protocol of identity:[3] its ability to find likenesses among different objects or conceptual ideas. Yet this identity, seemingly naturally and innocently discovered in the copula of metaphor's statement this is that, invariably turns out to depend upon a hidden, prior positing and, hence, is the result of a violent imposition. For de Man metaphor's claims of similitude therefore amount to a totalization, a term for which the critic reserves his highest censure. By comparison, deconstructivists regard metonymy as a non-totalizing trope, based as it is not on a necessary or natural likeness but on non-necessary associations based on accidental contiguity or habitual association (as in the metonymy

the White House, for example). Thus, if for deconstruction
metaphor is the paradigmatic trope of identity (with all of the
negative connotations this term has since acquired--i.e., as
involving the violent subjugation of otherness to the tyranny of
the Same), then metonymy is accordingly a syntagmatic trope. As a
consequence, in the eyes of deconstruction metonymy appears to be
the trope of difference, capable of engaging with otherness in a
more ethically attractive fashion.

Such an ethical privileging of metonymy accordingly
underwrites the new historicism's concern to recover repressed
elements of particularity. As the study of literature has
distanced itself from canonical understandings of great books
with universal appeal and has discovered rich new conceptions of
literary value in subaltern groups, it has imbibed the
deconstructive critique of metaphor, which it applies as a sort
of rhetorical imperialism whose virulence matches the actual
imperialism of the humanist civilizing mission. Asserting the
political and [page 166] ethical rights of oppressed cultures,
sexual preferences, classes, and so forth has typically gone
hand-in-hand with a valorization of metonymically inflected
relations. Such relations are based on heterogeneity rather than
homogeneity, incompletion rather than totalization, contingency
rather than necessity--as the catchphrase ethics of metonymy (the
title of an important essay in this genre) attests.[4]

It is in this context that I would like to propose two

avenues for examination. One is my sense that this privileging of metonymy in contemporary critical theory, and the concomitant dismissal of metaphor as the arch-villain insistent on subsuming all expressions of difference and otherness beneath an autocratic identity, is in danger of losing something fundamental to ethics. Such a sense, at the level of rhetoric, is of a piece with a growing recognition among critical theorists of ethics that a reconsideration of the concept of universality remains one of the most vital intellectual tasks today.[5] The philosopher Alain Badiou has been one of the most important resources for this slowly changing tide in ethical criticism away from the relativism that has characterized much of postmodern theory. As Badiou stirringly puts it in his small but influential book Ethics (2001): It is only through a genuine perversion, for which we will pay a terrible historical price, that we have sought to elaborate an `ethics' on the basis of cultural relativism. For this is to pretend that a merely contingent state of things can found a Law.[6] What Badiou calls for--most explicitly in Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism (2003)--is recognition of the ethical requirement for a universal address, a speaking position from which everyone is addressed equally. And for this to be possible, we need to retain some workable conception of sameness beyond the infinite play of differences.

[page 167] As I have suggested, the trope of metaphor has historically carried this burden of similitude at the rhetorical

level. It is metaphor's protocol of identity that, at least since the Romantics, has enabled us to bridge Kant's immeasurable gulf between the self and the world.[7] We need only recall Wordsworth's image of the mighty Mind at the end of <u>The Prelude</u> (1805)[8] to recognize how powerfully metaphor (or, in its Romantic guise, Imagination) stakes out its primary epistemological claim: the gulf separating the self from the world can be spanned by way of a reflection that discloses a hidden identity between two seemingly opposing realms. This is a claim that seems to have lost none of its ideological persuasion in the intervening centuries. We are not yet ready, it seems, to give up this reflective bridge, and neither should we be, I will argue. My principal claim here is that metaphor must continue to act as the rhetorical figure for an ethical sameness that undergirds any possible passage between the realms of theoretical and practical reason that Kant kept rigorously apart. Hence, metaphor must continue to occupy the central place that it has always held in more traditional, humanist ethical rhetorics as a trope that expresses human creativity and, hence, freedom.[9]

My claim, however, requires us to revise our understanding of metaphor as a relation of similitude that is based not on identity, as is traditionally held, but on the distinct mathematical concept of equivalence. The difference between these two relations of similitude is that, in an equivalence, for two things to be said to be equal to one another does not necessarily

mean they are identical (which holds if and only if every predicate true of one is also true of the other). While this may seem like a trivial distinction, it nevertheless carries significant import for ethics. For what it will mean is a way of retaining the notion of [page 168] sameness (universality) that Badiou insists that ethics demands, while at the same time heeding the warnings contained in the deconstructive critique. It will enable, in other words, a way of recovering metaphor as a trope of likeness that is not dismissive of difference. In fact, I contend, metaphorical equivalence, far from foreclosing difference (as deconstruction holds), will be discovered as the primary producer of new differences in the world.

Directly related to this contention is my second concern, which is to indicate through Sebastian van Storck--the third study in Pater's Imaginary Portraits (1887)--the ways in which deconstruction and the new historicism might possess more in common at the ethical level than perhaps they would like to think. The link between these two critical schools of thought has to do with how both of them, in their joint haste to foreground metonymy as the principal trope of an ethics of difference, have dedicated themselves to what may be called a mutual forgetting of metaphor. Nevertheless, I will propose that this forgetting itself may contain a function that is (potentially) in the service of such an ethics.

Walter Pater offers himself as a ripe candidate for these

reflections, not least because the critical tradition continues to remain divided between the two main approaches to his work--a division that ought not to surprise J. Hillis Miller, one of the core group of early deconstructive critics that gathered around Yale University in the 1980s.[10] In his important essay Walter [page 169] Pater: A Partial Portrait (1976) Miller traces a number of alternative genetic lines for Pater's critical influence in the twentieth century. Miller identifies two main traditions: on the one hand, the phenomenological criticism of consciousness of Georges Poulet and his associates at the Nouvelle Revue Française, who took inspiration from Pater's subjectivist, impressionistic phenomenological criticism; and on the other hand, the allegorical criticism (as Miller styles it), whose genealogy he traces from Pater's influence on Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, and Walter Benjamin before arriving at the rhetorical criticism of Miller's own deconstructive persuasion and historical moment.[11] For Miller, as well as for subsequent deconstructive critics such as Jonathan Loesberg, of the four most influential literary critics of the nineteenth century-- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and Pater-- what makes Pater the most alive today (i.e., in the early days of deconstruction) is precisely the open-ended or metonymic impulse of his work, its tendency to produce multiple, overlapping [page 170] readings that are at once open to interpretation and ultimately indecipherable, unreadable.[12] In what amounts to a

classic manifesto for the deconstructive reading practice--the
ethics of which Miller has devoted a considerable proportion of
his career to developing--he claims the following:

[Pater's] texts lead the critic deeper and deeper into a
labyrinth until he confronts a final aporia. This does not
mean, however, that the reader must give up from the
beginning the attempt to understand Pater. Only by going all
the way into the labyrinth, following the thread of a given
clue, can the critic reach the blind alley, vacant of any
Minotaur, that impasse which is the end point of
interpretation. (Walter Pater: A Partial Portrait, p. 112)

On the other side of the fence, for all of its claims to have
corrected deconstruction's obsessive focus on textuality at the
expense of lived experience, the new historicism has demonstrably
been influenced by deconstruction, particularly in its analogous
resolve to evacuate all claims of absolutism--a trait that for
Michael Sprinker reveals their shared antihumanist bias.[13] The
new historicism has not found it difficult to convert certain
deconstructive insights into an energetic, politically engaged
practice, as is revealed by its core convictions: first, that
reality is a matter of discursive productions or representations
(as the title of one of the major journals in this field has it);
second, that perception is inherently subjective and, hence,

there can be no point outside history from which to observe it;
which leads to the third insight, that our understandings of the
past thus inevitably betray our own contemporary blindnesses (to
use one of deconstruction's own privileged terms). Each of these
starting points can equally claim a precedent in Pater, as
Carolyn Williams has shown in her magnificent 1989 study [page
171] <u>Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism</u>.[14]
What primarily divides the new historicism from deconstruction
(at least in what we might term its pure form), however, is its
ultimate reluctance to follow its critical predecessor all the
way into the labyrinth, as it were. Precisely because of its
political (and ethical) commitment to the material histories that
it sets out to uncover, the new historicism inevitably baulks at
what deconstruction insists we must (ethically) embrace: the
impossibility of occupying even the most provisional ground from
which to begin our critique. Precisely on account of its
(political, ethical) convictions, the new historicism must, at
some point, stop deconstructing and begin the process of
reconstruction. It must repress, as it were, knowledge of the
impossibility of its own speaking position in order to begin to
talk about its object: the empirical world and the multiple
ideological negotiations that it demands from its subjects.[15] As
Peter Uwe Hohendahl sums it up, the new historicist agenda is
primarily a hermeneutic project, in which the critic is seen as
locally situated, without absolute access to the truth, but at

the same time motivated by his or her social and political concerns.[16]

[page 172] While it is rare to find a writer such as Pater claimed so thoroughly by both theoretical camps, it is remarkable to witness how both of these critical approaches have more or less overlooked what remains Pater's major contribution to a distinctive literary genre: imaginary portraiture. Pater's beautiful, evocative Imaginary Portraits have so far received only passing reference in the critical archive, which has more often focused on his aesthetic criticism in the various editions of The Renaissance (1873) and his historical novel set in second-century Rome, Marius the Epicurean (1885).[17] Yet the imaginary portrait Sebastian van Storck offers a particularly rich site for exploring the contours of this critical opposition, not least because in its own unassuming way this portrait already stages the wider philosophical debate that underpins the tenacious critical antagonisms of today. It therefore reveals not only what is really at stake in that antagonism but also, perhaps, what shape a revised ethic of both forms of criticism might take. In this imaginary portrait, as in the other three portraits collected in the 1887 volume, Pater takes up the question of the relation between individual action and impersonal historical processes that occupies much of his aesthetic-historical criticism. In Sebastian van Storck, however, this dialectic poses an unusually [page 173] explicit philosophical question: how can

we translate our theoretical principles into ethical action--
action that is capable of spanning the gap that representation
installs between the self and the world?

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Sebastian van Storck is set during the nationalist and
artistic glow of self-discovery in the Golden Age of seventeenth-
century Holland, following the defeat of Spain in the Thirty
Years' (or, from the Dutch perspective, the Eighty Years') War.
Sebastian, the only son of a wealthy merchant, is a brilliant
young man whose sole vice, it seems, is an unhealthy attachment
to his own idealist philosophy, which is discovered in his diary
after his death. The principal thesis of this philosophy is the
duty to hinder as little as possible . . . the restoration of
equilibrium to the absolute mind.[18]

With Sebastian, Pater is of course gently parodying an
entire tradition of philosophical idealism. Indeed, critics
remain divided over which philosophical system Sebastian's
philosophy is supposed to represent: whether it is that of the
Spinoza named in the narrative who appears on the sidelines as a
character within the story, or the more explicitly mathematically
informed philosophy of a Leibniz. More anachronistically, given
the historical setting of this imaginary portrait, Pater may be
suggesting an early Fichte, a Hegel, a Schopenhauer or even the

characteristically negative rendering of Kant that Pater was familiar with from the Cambridge School.[19] Regardless of which historical figure he may or may not have been intended to represent, however, Sebastian would seem to be a vivid depiction of what can go wrong with idealist philosophy if it is not grounded, Pater implies, in the recognition of the specifically ethical significance of the finite interests embodied in the world around us. This is not a new theme for Pater, whose entire [page 174] literary-historical project, as Linda Dowling has argued, is an attempt to effect reconciliation with earth; she cites from Pater's 1865 essay on Coleridge his abiding belief that the moral world is ever in contact with the physical.[20] What Pater in his much later essay The Genius of Plato (1893) calls the redemption of matter characteristically describes what has been his own rather than the ancient philosopher's enterprise all along, which he sums up as the vindication of the dignity of the body.[21] But in Sebastian's philosophical system such contact with the physical world has been severed, leading him to regard all objects and actions in the world around him as mere temporary accidents and interruptions of the infinite mind on its slow, entropic path back toward equilibrium:

The most vivid of finite objects, the dramatic episodes of Dutch
    history, the brilliant personalities which had found their
    parts to play in them, that golden art, surrounding us with

an ideal world, beyond which the real world is discernible
indeed, but etherealised by the medium through which it
comes to one: all this, for most men so powerful a link to
existence, only set him on the thought of escape--means of
escape--into a formless and nameless infinite world, quite
evenly grey. (Sebastian van Storck, p. 110)

The practical outcome of such a philosophy--its effective
equivalent, as Sebastian's tutor puts it--is renunciation of
life, of the world of action, and, above all, of love's
affections, embodied in the unfortunate figure of the fresh-
faced, ruddy beauty Mademoiselle van Westrheene, recipient of a
cruel letter from Sebastian and catalyst of his final retreat
from his home and his subsequent mysterious death among the
flooded dunes of the Helder.

The principal trope of Sebastian's philosophy is reflection,
the governing metaphor of the idealism I mentioned earlier that
enables the external world to serve as the manifestation of [page
175] a deeper interiority and representation of the mighty Mind.
In Sebastian's idealism, as in Wordsworth's, the rich
multiplicity and vivid texture of life is but a stand-in for
thought, pale simulacra of the sole true reality. Hence our young
man's theorem: <u>There can be only one substance</u>: (corollary) it is
the greatest of errors to think that the non-existent, the world
of finite things seen and felt, really is (p. 106). But without

Wordsworth's flawless temperament, which shielded the poet from the nihilistic extremes of such idealism (as Pater claims in the essay on Coleridge), for Sebastian the cut of reflection is total, thus aligning him more closely with Coleridge, whose sadder, more purely intellectual, cast of genius our writer explores there at some length.[22] Like Coleridge in those grey volumes of the <u>Biographia Literaria</u> (1817) trying to `apprehend the absolute' (Coleridge, pp. 69, 103), a similar philosophical formula (Coleridge, p. 87) splits our young hero from all of life's warmth and activity so that he inhabits a cold, motionless world, geometrically fixed on an abstract being that, as a pallid Arctic sun, disclos[ed] itself over the dead level of a glacial, a barren and absolutely lonely sea (ASebastian van Storck, p. 108).

Nevertheless, like Pater's Coleridge, Sebastian possesses a deep, instinctive poetic and aesthetic sense; but, also like the author of the <u>Rime</u> in Pater's account, Sebastian has allowed this sympathy to be frozen out by his attachment to the Infinite. The young philosopher is first introduced to us skating in the winter-scene of the opening image, confessedly the most graceful performer in all that skating multitude, moving in endless maze over the vast surface of the frozen water-meadow (Sebastian van Storck, p. 81), while a few pages later Pater confides how the fine organisation and acute intelligence of Sebastian would have made him an effective connoisseur of the arts (p. 88). Through,

however, some force of lassitude comparable to Coleridgean
dejection (some inherited satiety or fatigue in his nature [p.
108]), this aesthetic receptivity has been channeled to the
opposite issue of the practical dilemma, leading Sebastian to
conclude that what he must admire, and love if he could, was
`equilibrium,' the void, the <u>tabula rasa</u>, into [page 176] which,
through all those apparent energies of man and nature, that in
truth are but forces of disintegration, the world was really
settling (p. 108).

True to his rationalist forebears, Sebastian's hard,
systematic, well-concatenated train of thought possesses a
theoretic strain that the narrator thinks would have been found
mathematically continuous had it been freed from the accidents of
[the journal's] particular literary form (p. 104). Thus, in a nod
to the Euclid named in the narrative, the principal theoretical
concept of Sebastian's system is equation. Recalling the first of
Euclid's Common Notions in the <u>Elements</u>--that Things which are
equal to the same thing are also equal to one another[23]--thought
similarly makes equation among the infinite multiplicity and
diversity of accidental being through their mutual equality in
Mind:

Things that have nothing in common with each other, said the
    axiomatic reason, cannot be understood or explained by means
    of each other. But to pure reason things discovered

themselves as being, in their essence, thoughts:--all
things, even the most opposite things, mere transmutations
of a single power, the power of thought. (Sebastian van
Storck, p. 105)

Such a disclosure is a subtractive procedure, a sort of
epistemological epoché or bracketing that sees the gradual,
progressive erasing away of differences under the frigid,
penetrating beam of heliotropic identity.

Let us pause for a moment here to observe how, by reducing
the object world to a mirror-image of the self, Sebastian's
idealizing gesture shares the same fundamental structure as that
of metaphor--at least in its characterization by Paul de Man. For
de Man metaphor remains an incorrigibly idealist trope whose
purported ability to identify one thing as another in the
metaphorical equation invariably implies a coercive and
exclusionary gesture. And since, as I suggested above, de Man's
[page 177] critique has provided many of the rhetorical footholds
for more recent developments in critical theory, most of which
share an underlying suspicion of what Theodor W. Adorno would
call identarian thinking (thinking based on the concept of
identity and expressed rhetorically through the trope of
metaphor),[24] it is worth revisiting the basic contours of de
Man's position as formulated in his famous essay The Epistemology
of Metaphor. Accordingly, in the section of his essay where he

analyzes Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's Essai sur l'origine des
conaissances humaines (1746), de Man discusses the philosopher's
use of the broad linguistic category, conceptual abstractions.
Abstractions come into being, de Man quotes Condillac, by ceasing
to think . . . of the properties by which things are
distinguished in order to think only of those in which they agree
. . . with each other.[25] This act of arbitrarily dropping
individual differences[26] so closely replicates the structure of
what occurs in metaphor in its classical definition that de Man
can write: It is entirely legitimate to conclude that when
Condillac uses the term `abstraction,' it can be `translated' as
metaphor (Epistemology of Metaphor, p. 43).

Having established Condillac's abstractions as really
metaphors, de Man's next step is to follow the philosopher to the
origins of these abstractions in the first ideas of the mind. De
Man notes how Condillac makes a distinction between things in
themselves and what de Man observes to be, somewhat
tautologically, a true reality (p. 44), which is found in the
mind. This true reality is derived through an operation the mind
performs upon entities--namely, understanding. But noting the
potentially violent and authoritarian language with which
Condillac describes the understanding's lock[ing] up of
perceptual impressions, de Man explains how this is the only way
in which it [the subject] can constitute its own [page 178], its
own ground (Epistemology of Metaphor, p. 44). He writes:

Entities, in themselves, are neither distinct nor defined; no one
could say where one entity ends and where another begins.
They are mere flux, modifications. By considering itself as
the place where this flux occurs, the mind stabilizes itself
as the ground of the flux, the <u>lieu de passage</u> through which
all reality has to pass. (pp. 44-45)

This commentary gives rise to a pressing question: what provides
the subject with this stabilizing function? De Man traces the
self's act of positing and reflection back to an internal paradox
in Condillac's thought: because of the subject's dependence on
the external world for its own self-positing (as being different
from it), both the world and the subject are united in the mutual
identity of an essential non-being. De Man writes: The mind `is'
to the extent that it `is like' its other in its inability to be
(p. 45). But, crucially, this likeness--this mutual identity in
non-being--is itself the product of mind and, hence, is illusory:
it operates at a stage that precedes the constitution of entities
(p. 45). De Man triumphantly cites Condillac's admission of this
contradiction:

On the one hand, [the mind] considers these experiences without
any relation to its own being, and then they are nothing at
all; on the other hand, because nothingness cannot be

comprehended, it considers them as if they were something, and persists in giving them the same reality with which it at first perceived them, although this reality can no longer correspond to them.[27]

The result for de Man is clear: Being and identity are the result of a resemblance which is not in things but posited by an act of the mind which, as such, can only be verbal. And since to be verbal, in this context, means to allow substitutions based on illusory resemblances (the determining illusion being that of a shared negativity), then mind, or subject, is the central [page 179] metaphor, the metaphor of metaphors (Epistemology of Metaphor, p. 45).

Being and identity acquired through reflection, in other words, can be had only through a hidden sleight of hand: the mind's first, original positing of an identity between itself and the world. The self's--and, by extension, metaphor's--seemingly dispassionate act of self-generation through the neutral positing and negating procedure of reflection disingenuously rests upon a prior act of positing that must subsequently be repressed in order for the resulting system of reflection to appear to function independently. This a priori act of identification--the primordial decision or contraction of the self, as Slavoj Zizek would call it[28]--effectively stabilizes the ensuing system of differentiation while appearing to be a product of it. The

upshot, for de Man, is the tautologous metaphor: the tropic organization of resemblances and differences around a principle of exchange, in which any term is infinitely reversible and interchangeable with another precisely because they are all bound together through an a priori identity.

For de Man, then, the openly theist foundation of Sebastian van Storck's idealism would thus, ironically, be <u>less</u> mystified about the source of its positing power than would the empirical tradition represented by Locke and Condillac. This idea helps us to see with greater clarity what lies at the heart of the contemporary ethical privileging of metonymy over metaphor: epistemologically speaking, metaphor is fundamentally--whether implicitly as in Condillac or explicitly as in Sebastian--a theological trope. Like Sebastian's One and Condillac's self, metaphorical resemblance is posited a priori in a primordial Identity that forms the stable center around which the flux of language, as an infinite system of differences, can converge. Note that this is essentially the same charge that the new historicism levels at the old historicism: the old historicism, too, is seen as being entrained on an Absolute that drives its teleological narrative of progress when it posits an ahistorical moment (in either direction) when all contradictions will finally be resolved.

[page 180] The predominantly negative charge of the metaphors associated with Sebastian's philosophy (ice, cold,

gray, etc.), along with the narrator's harsh judgments of Sebastian's dark fanaticism and black melancholy (Sebastian van Storck, p. 111), would seem to indicate Pater's similarly negative assessment of Sebastian's Absolutism.[29] Nevertheless, the portrait also seems to caution against an overly hasty moralism that would merely condemn Sebastian's absolutist drive and see in his final act an ethically charged turn that dictates a greater receptivity and care for the finite interests around us, water snakes and small children among them. As one of the original Imaginary Portraits, and therefore implicitly describing one of Pater's celebrated diaphanous characters, Sebastian's portrait represents something more like the via negativa of the exemplary type that Pater sees in Coleridge than it does the Victorian cautionary tale that critics frequently take it to be. As Pater puts it in his famous 1864 essay Diaphaneité, such a diaphanous type crosses rather than follows the main current of the world's life. The world has no sense fine enough for those evanescent shades, which fill up the blanks between contrasted types of character.[30] At the end of his essay on Coleridge, Pater muses:

One day, perhaps, we may come to forget the distant horizon, with full knowledge of the situation, to be content with what is here and now. . . . But by us of the present moment, certainly--by us [page 181] for whom the Greek spirit . . .

is itself the Sangrail of an endless pilgrimage, Coleridge,
with his passion for the absolute, for something fixed where
all is moving, his faintness, his broken memory, his
intellectual disquiet, may still be ranked among the
interpreters of one of the constituent elements of our life.
(Coleridge, p. 104)

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The thematic heart of Sebastian van Storck lies in the
earlier stated question: what action would be adequate--or
equivalent--to one's theoretical precepts? Sebastian's tutor
notes of the young man: the rigidly logical tendency of his mind
always leads him out upon the practical (Sebastian van Storck, p.
83). But the question that the portrait implicitly asks is in
what such a practical extension or effective equivalent of
idealist principles would consist. Sebastian's answer to this
question is evidently a negative one--death. He explains:

one's wisdom . . . consists in hastening, so far as may be, the
action of those forces which tend to the restoration of
equilibrium, the calm surface of the absolute, untroubled
mind, to tabula rasa, by the extinction in one's self of all
that is but correlative to the finite illusion--by the
suppression of ourselves. (pp. 106-7)

[page 182] The narrator then sets this idea against the opposite, positive answer seemingly expressed in the poetical or artistic sympathy (p. 108) that is prominently represented in the tale by the seventeenth-century Dutch painters and paintings that act as a counterpoint to Sebastian's theoretical idealism. Contrasting favorably with the cold, abstract, inhuman logic of Sebastian's philosophy, the artistic sympathy seems to offer all of the promise of life and regeneration that the young man has renounced in favor of the universal One. Thus images of light and heat (Pater's customary metaphors for the Hellenic ideal) dominate references to the paintings. We hear of the warm sandbanks of Wynants (p. 88), of the painter Albert Cuyp's pleasantly russet and yellow palette (pp. 81-82) and his extraction of the latent gold in Rembrandt that brings into his native Dordrecht a heavy wealth of sunshine (p. 91). The achievement of these artists is in uncovering the hidden wealth of colour (p. 87) in Holland's pale interior, which stands out positively against the black-and-white palette of Sebastian's world, with its cold, hard light (p. 102), its evenly grey surface (p. 110) heralding the freezing influence (p. 109) of the young philosopher's theoretic energy and mortal coldness (p. 98).

Such associations are then continued into a wider opposition of art/action versus philosophy/stasis that sees the painters depicting active scenes from contemporary life, both in the

historical works of art such as Terburgh's painting of the democratic assembly at the Congress of Münster (in which Sebastian's father is said to figure conspicuously [p. 85]),[31] and in the more unassuming yet no less minute and busy (p. 86) images of homely life in the Dutch genre-painting interiors. Opposed to the painterly world's immersion in the time's reverberation, and great movement (p. 85) is Sebastian's love of the tranquillising influence that the thought of the Absolute elicits, feeding his desire slowly to fade out of the world like a breath (Sebastian van Storck, pp. 98, 100). Since he sees himself, further, as the sworn chevalier (p. 102) not of love's torrid passions but of a calm intellectual indifference (p. 101), it is [page 183] inanimate nature that Sebastian loves (p. 88), not the healthy freshness of mien, the warm ruddy beauty of the women in the domestic picturesque (p. 87).

Yet Pater's imaginary portrait persistently undercuts this vivid contrast between the active world of life depicted by Dutch painting (whether national or domestic) and the static, deathly world of thought, making any easy opposition between art/life and philosophy/death difficult to secure. For all of Sebastian's nostalgic preference, for example, for the old fixedness of the ancient Dutch world over the tetchy, feverish, unworthy agitation of his contemporaries (p. 95), it is around the constant movement of the tides that the old Hollander's life after all revolves, while the restless ingenuity (p. 95) of Dutch industry is aimed

precisely at stopping the sea in its onrushing path. And while disdaining art as an addition by a forced and artificial production, to the monotonous tide of competing, fleeting existence, Sebastian nevertheless is obliged to acknowledge something in it that might even carry forward a little, his own characteristic tendencies (p. 88), which are persistently described in such energetic terms as an eager pressure forward (p. 108), a vigorous act (p. 109), and a soaring flight from all that was positive (p. 98).

This mutual imbrication of artistic and philosophical reflection becomes clearer upon closer examination of the opening image where Sebastian, skating with the townsfolk, is first introduced to us:

It was a winter scene, by Adrian van de Velde, or by Isaac van Ostade. All the delicate poetry together with all the delicate comfort of the frosty season was in the leafless branches turned to silver, the furred dresses of the skaters, the warmth of the red-brick house-fronts under the gauze of white fog, the gleams of pale sunlight on the cuirasses of the mounted soldiers as they receded into the distance. (p. 81)

Regardless of its delightfulness of interest (p. 87), what this verbal picture describes after all can only be described as a

<u>frozen scene</u>, its wintry setting prefiguring Sebastian's own metaphor for his idealism, the Arctic sun hung motionless above a barren, [page 184] icy, and frozen sea. Thus the opening passage already directs us to recognize the way that art performs a form of alienation comparable to that of philosophical reflection, freezing the very life that it would portray. For all of the rich, animated images of life that art is capable of depicting, a diremption occurs that splits the subject no less effectively and completely from the world than Sebastian's own metaphor does. From the outset of the story, then, Pater seems to be urging not so much the idea of art as philosophy's opposite in any straightforward opposition of life (art) and death (philosophy), but rather art as a sort of corresponding manifestation of the alienating process of philosophical reflection. Both art and philosophy equally cut the subject off from the worlds of experience and of action.

Despite its outward expressiveness, then, art seems more silent and silencing than communicative: The portrait of a certain Carthusian prior, . . . could it have spoken, the narrator muses, would have said, `Silence!' (p. 97). This unexpected affiliation of artistic representation with the quiet and stasis of Sebastian's theoretical world becomes clearest in the description of William the Silent's tomb, at whose unveiling at the Nieuwe Kerk in Delft Sebastian was evidently present. The narrator relates how Sebastian relished much the cold and

abstract simplicity of the monument, so conformable to the great, abstract, and unuttered force of the hero who slept beneath (p. 86). The opposition is thus not so much between philosophy and art but more broadly between a cold, voiceless, abstract reflection (whether philosophic or aesthetic) and expressive, concrete action represented by the whole talkative Dutch world (p. 89). Directly following the description of William the Silent's tomb, we learn: In complete contrast to all that is abstract or cold in art, the home of Sebastian, the family mansion of the Storcks . . . was, in its minute and busy wellbeing, like an epitome of Holland itself (p. 86). Home, here standing in as a synecdoche for Holland more generally, is to embody everything that Sebastian rejects. What, then, is the Holland of Sebastian's moment in time?

Pater sets the portrait of Sebastian van Storck in the period known as the True Freedom, a twenty-four-year interlude of peace between the 1648 Peace of Westphalia and the [page 185] Crisis of 1672. By this time the United Provinces had finally liberated themselves both from the Hapsburgh monarch the King of Spain and their own quasi-kings (the Princes of Orange) following William II's death in 1650, and had formed the Dutch Republic. As we saw, Sebastian's father himself was apparently one of the democratic assembly who signed the Peace of 1648 at Münster, which had finally established Holland as a first-rate power and the first modern democratic republic. One of the age's great

energetic personalities, he seeks a similarly active career for
his son: The age was still fitted to evoke a generous ambition;
and this son, from whose natural gifts there was so much to hope
for, might play his part, at least as a diplomatist, if the
present quiet continued. Had not the learned man said that his
natural disposition would lead him out always upon practice? (p.
85). Yet it is striking how even this world of action--
revolutionary action no less--remains under the grip of a
persistent representational consciousness. Advising Sebastian to
be stimulated to action (p. 95), the father desires that his son
become an important actor in history--a desire that is inevitably
couched in representational terms: Admiral-general of Holland, as
painted by Van der Helst, with a marine background by
Backhuizen:--at times his father could fancy him so (pp. 96-97).

    Home, the font of the busy industrious activity that leads
out into the broader sphere of political and historical events,
is not spared this representationalism either. Here domesticity
is expressed as an ideal in the Low Country interiors famously
emerging at this same historical moment: Those innumerable <u>genre</u>
pieces--conversation, music, play. . . . it was the ideal of that
life which these artists depicted; the ideal of home in a country
where the preponderant interest of life, after all, could not
well be out of doors (p. 87). Thus philosophy, art, and even
history itself--that golden art, as the narrator calls it--
surrounded them with an ideal world, beyond which the real world

is discernible indeed, but etherealised by the medium through which it comes to one (p. 110). Nothing, it seems, is beyond the grasp of the representational consciousness.

Critiques of Sebastian that emphasize his nihilism thus miss the real point when they focus on the negative content [page 186] of his philosophical system. For what Pater elegantly portrays through the metaphorical dialectic of this portrait is the formal nihilism of the representational consciousness itself as it goes about its endless task of positing similarities and differences in the process of reflection.[32] But in order for these abstractions (to use Condillac's term) to pass into the realm of action, the original act by which the world and the subject were first united must be forgotten so as to make good the claims of praxis itself--namely, that it is its own autonomous realm, with its own sets of laws. The ethical claims of the world of action require a free subject capable of bridging the gulf between the theoretical and the practical realms that reflection has torn asunder. Hence, while each of the three discourses above purportedly act in the service of memory--ontology's recollection of the origin of Being, art's memorializing of the dead, and history's remembering of the past--such memories in fact serve to erase a deeper memory of the original positing of the One. Each method is a different discursive means for forgetting that first metaphorizing act of mind (as we might as well now call it) that supplied the original likeness and made the entire subsequent

series of reciprocal oppositions possible.

Consequently, the real opposition in Sebastian van Storck is not between practical action and theoretical reflection but between memory and forgetting--or, even more broadly, as Sebastian's central figure of the tabula rasa suggests, between writing (inscription) and erasure. This final opposition comes to us neatly figured through the land/sea dynamic of Holland. At first glance the land, as the product of industry, motive, and representation--civilization, in short--appears to be on the side of memory: its principal task is to maintain itself against the tide of forgetting that threatens to wipe it out. The products of civilization, beginning with the first writing that delimits historical from prehistoric peoples, are designed as embodiments of memory, tombs of permanence across the sea of time and change.

[page 187] But these memories, in truth, are only of a deeper forgetting, with each new layer serving to erase the memory of the last, as the little vignette about the ancient relic found on the coast of Vleeland illustrates:

To some antiquarians it told the story of the overwhelming of one
    of the chiefs of the old primeval people of Holland, amid
    all his gala array, in a great storm. But it was another
    view which Sebastian preferred; that this object was
    sepulchral, namely, in its motive--the one surviving relic
    of a grand burial, in the ancient manner, of a king or hero,

whose very tomb was wasted away.--<u>Sunt metis metae</u>!
(Sebastian van Storck, p. 94)[33]

In this vignette the stream of metaphorical oppositions I have
been tracing debouche into the wider sea of forgetfulness. An
initial erasure is found in the tomb itself. Designed as a
monument to remember the king, the tomb really memorializes the
community's forgetting of the king's death: the tomb is intended
to allow the king to live on in the minds of his subjects. But
the memory encapsulated in the tomb itself has long since been
lost. People no longer remember what the relic was supposed to
represent, with the result that the very memory that was designed
in order to forget death has itself been forgotten. Rather than
being opposed to the erasing action of the forgetful sea, then,
the dyke of civilization's memory (i.e., representation) seems,
counterintuitively, to consist of an equivalently effacing
action, a slow wasting-away of successive memorializing
inscriptions that are themselves nothing but the forgettings of
an even more profound forgetting of death. Pater's Latin <u>Sunt
metis metae</u> makes this action clear: representation is made up of
a series of ever-widening ripples that each time draw the ensuing
limit of the limit before slowly dissipating.

    Hence the narrator tells us:

In his passion for <u>Schwindsucht</u>--we haven't the word--[Sebastian]

found it pleasant to think of the resistless element which
left one hardly a foot-space amidst the yielding sand; of
[page 188] the old beds of lost rivers, surviving now only
as deeper channels in the sea; of the remains of a certain
ancient town, which within men's memory had lost its few
remaining inhabitants, and, with its already empty tombs,
dissolved and disappeared in the flood. (p. 93)

As the physical embodiment of this erasing or wasting process of
representation, Sebastian's Schwindsucht neatly encapsulates what
is at stake here. By the late nineteenth century, phthisis, or
tuberculosis, had long been established as the major disease of
civilization, as Pater acknowledges when he closes the portrait
with the comment of the learned physician that it was a disease
begotten by the fogs of that country . . . on people grown
somewhat over-delicate in their nature by the effects of modern
luxury (pp. 114-15).[34]

Since tuberculosis was the principal illness of lovers and
artists, the various contemporary physical attempts at curing it
were frequently accompanied by the idea that a successful removal
of its cause would result in the patient's recovery. For
afflicted lovers this would mean the consummation of unrequited
love, while, for the artist, health could be sought through the
art that one could create from the experience of the disease.
Both the eighteenth century and particularly the nineteenth

century are littered with consumptive artists whose disease came to be regarded as the enabling condition for their art, the creative and euphoric state known as spes phthisica. Here, for example, is one of Pater's contemporaries, Robert Louis Stevenson, writing about own imminent death by consumption in his 1887 poem Requiem:

Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
   And I laid me down with a will.

[page 189] This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
   And the hunter home from the hill.[35]

This short poem gives a very tangible expression of the terms of the representational wager--namely, that the very thing that causes the disease will also cure it. In a remarkably unself-conscious way, the poet here enlists representation's powers of recovery in the service of a regeneration untouched and untouchable by the very thing that was its cause. The poet's death and burial become the occasion for an inscription--of the most material kind, no less: burial, the turning over, or

inscribing, of the earth--that successfully denies its own
ground.

In a series of reversals similar to those we saw in the
vignette above, the speaker of Stevenson's Requiem first
addresses the reader, requesting him or her to dig a grave and
inscribe the following lines upon it: <u>Here he lies</u>. . . . But the
double reference of the pronoun This in line 5, which can refer
either to the ensuing epitaph or to the poem as a whole, offers a
supplementary reading that sees the poem itself become the
epitaph that the writer is referring to, which ought to be
inscribed in toto upon the grave. In the first reading the
exhortation is fairly straightforward: the writer requests the
reader to dig a grave and to inscribe a few sentimental lines on
it describing how happy the writer is to have returned home to
death. But in the second case (an interpretation that,
interestingly enough, was ultimately acted on when the poem was
inscribed on Stevenson's actual gravestone in Western Samoa), the
whole poem is regarded as the epitaph it refers to--and this
effects a strange and cunning reversal of positions. For if the
poem itself is the epitaph, on what medium can it be said to be
inscribed?

In the first reading, the medium of the inscription is
clear: we are asked to dig a physical grave and inscribe the
lines upon a tombstone. In the second case, however, the answer
seems to be that it is inscribed upon the mind of the reader--

that is, [page 190] the reader has now effectively become the poet's tombstone. This reading gains credence from Stevenson's strange verb to grave: to read the poem is to have it dug into one's mind, inscribed into one's psyche. Hence, from a physical inscription, the epitaph has become a metaphysical inscription whose effect is <u>to pass the poet's death onto us</u>: we have implicitly become the grave of the author, through the simple act of reading (and understanding in this way) the poem. All that remains for us, then, is to take up the poet's challenge and pass our own death onto a new reader. The implicit challenge of Requiem, in other words, is for the reader to write a new epitaphic verse encrypting the original Stevenson poem (which itself encrypts the original epitaph), and in this way force a new reader to serve as the new poem's grave (who will then do the same, ad infinitum). An infinite series such as this becomes possible only through the initial short-circuiting that first allowed the pronoun of the second stanza, This, to refer simultaneously to both the object and the subject: the poem-within-the-poem (the first epitaph) and the poem itself (the second epitaph).

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As the outcome of this metaphorical dialectic has shown, both representational systems--Sebastian's negative subtraction

and the Dutch genre painting's positive addition--ultimately add up to the same zero sum in the working out of life's equation. In Sebastian van Storck Pater implies that all action, particularly ethical action, results from a necessary forgetting of this original nothing from which the cycle of positing and reflection started out. While Sebastian only derives a further negative result from this discovery, which leads him ultimately to decide upon suicide, the poetic and artistic sympathy responds with a sense of the renewed value for the finite interests around and within us (Sebastian van Storck, pp. 107-8). Such temperaments feel challenged to acquaint [themselves] with and explore the various forms of finite existence all the more intimately, just because of that sense of one lively spirit circulating through all things--a tiny particle of the one soul, in the sunbeam, or the leaf (p. 108).

[page 191] Yet it seems clear that this is not where Pater intends to leave us with his portrait of Sebastian--that is, in representation's bleak either/or, bequeathed to us most recently, as I suggested, in the opposition between deconstruction and the new historicism. If Pater had meant to leave us here, then there would be two possible outcomes. In the first one, we would be left with the spiraling deconstructive suppression of all positive ground, whose ultimate resting-place lies in the negation of negation that is Sebastian's (apparent) suicide. Or, in the second possibility, we would remain with the artistic

sympathy's breezy repression of the first forgotten act of self-positing that, disguising itself as merely one pole of the reflective opposition, allows us to continue to historicize the infinitely fascinating forms of our finite existence--at least for as long as we can keep the waves of memory of that original erasure at bay.

If Sebastian van Storck does indeed do more than simply rehearse thought's age-old centripetal/centrifugal dance, then we must look again at the sole event of the portrait. After delivering his `cruel' letter to the unhappy girl whose ministrations he has rejected, Sebastian disappears from the house. Searching for him in his room the following morning, his mother finds the philosophical diary in which the letter's first draft is meticulously recorded and that serves, the narrator tells us, as the last step in the rigid process of theoretical deduction (Sebastian van Storck, pp. 112-13). The narrative focuses here on the young philosopher's actions:

. . . as Sebastian escaped to the sea under the long, monotonous
    line of wind-mills, in comparative calm of mind--reaction of
    that pleasant morning from the madness of the night before--
    he was making light, or trying to make light, with some
    success, of his late distress. . . . Here he could make
    equation between himself and what was not himself, and set
    things in order, in preparation towards such deliberate and

> final change in his manner of living as circumstances so
> clearly necessitated. (pp. 113-14)

As I read this passage, the implication seems to be that
Sebastian is determined now to commit suicide, the deliberate and
final change in his manner of living. Death will be his way of
[page 192] restoring the blessed equilibrium that the accident of
his life has disturbed. By choosing death, Sebastian will short-
circuit the already short-circuited logic of reflection and
return mind to its true, purely theoretical state: mind silently
reflecting on mind in its perfectly enclosed and self-enclosing
circle, finally removed from the irritations of the ever-widening
circle of representations stemming from the first Big Bang of
metaphorical positing. And indeed, the next we hear of Sebastian
is that he is dead, his body discovered after a storm of
Shakespearean proportions.

Am I suggesting, then, that this truly radical event is
suicide? Is suicide an act that breaks out of the short circuit
of representation, embodying something of a momentary coincidence
of practical and theoretical realms that rests on completely
other grounds than the consumptive logic of reflection and its
necessary forgetting of death? My answer is that I do not know--
<u>because one can never know if another's choice will have been a
genuine act for them</u>. But my instincts say no. For suicide is the
most purely representational act there is, stemming from what is

perhaps the most fatal and radical misreading of the relation between theoretical and practical realms. What taking one's own life attempts to do is to represent the death that representation must repress, by making it the object of a will. It is therefore, and most paradoxically, the act of forgetting death par excellence: suicide attempts to take what is most radically other about oneself--one's death--and make it one's own. It aims to convert the sheer and utter accident of our individual lives--we cannot know when we are going to die--into necessary substance.

If I am not claiming that it is in his suicide that the ethics of Sebastian's act lie, then where does it lie? Here is what Sebastian's parents found when they came to search for him:

The strong wind changed not again for fourteen days. . . . Only, when the body of Sebastian was found, apparently not long after death, a child lay asleep, swaddled warmly in his heavy furs, in an upper room of the old tower. . . . And it was in the saving of this child, with a great effort, as certain circumstances seemed to indicate, that Sebastian had lost his life. (p. 114)

[page 193] What cannot be ignored here is the way in which Pater leaves us with a major gap in our knowledge of what happened. The central event remains unrepresented, and it is only by supposition--and not even necessarily the most trustworthy

supposition, as it seems to generate from Sebastian's parents,
neither of whom really understand their son--that we are led to
believe that Sebastian sacrificed himself for the child. Hence,
if we are to resist the temptation to attribute to our cold young
man a sudden change of heart or unexpected surfacing of the
sympathetic temperament, then the only other implication we can
draw is this: Sebastian does indeed act in accordance with his
original, theoretical principles. There is no pedagogical lesson,
no reversal or sacrifice. Nevertheless, his death winds up with
an additional result, a supplementary product that could not have
been foreseen and calculated by or from within his theoretical
system. The suggestion would thus be that, while all we are
capable of are fully representational acts, there are some acts
that have effects in excess of the structure that produced them.
Pace the Lear invoked by the storm, something can indeed come
from nothing.

What would be the mathematical basis for such a result? Here
we must recall equivalence, the central relation of Sebastian's
system. Mathematics teaches that one typically makes a
distinction between equivalence and identity. While, as we saw,
Euclidean equivalence means that things which equal the same
thing also equal each other, identity, according to Leibnitz's
law, asserts that to be fully identical two things have to be
fully interchangeable. To equate two things thus does not
necessarily imply their identity, which holds if and only if

every predicate true of one is also true of the other. While
identity, therefore, is indeed such a closed tautologous system
as Paul de Man finds in metaphor (0 equals 0), equivalence
implies no such thing, since 2 minus 2 can equal 0, just as
easily as B1 plus 1.

When Pater writes that Sebastian is said to make `equation'
between himself and the world, he makes it quite clear that the
sameness discovered in this reflection is to be regarded as an
equivalence rather than an identity--and, as such, it is to be
regarded as an open sentence, as equations are called in
mathematics. While each subsequent new series of oppositions
[page 194] (or metaphors) generated by reflection is inevitably
subject to the slow decaying process of representation that sees
both poles gradually worn back down to the zero of equilibrium,
the equating process of metaphor itself nevertheless remains open
rather than closed, and therefore capable of producing unexpected
results (i.e., non-identical relations) that interfere with and
break up representation's slow entropic movement toward stasis. A
concept from recent evolutionary theory perhaps describes it
best: Niles Eldredge and Steven Jay Gould have theorized a
punctuated equilibrium, a self-replicating system that alternates
between long periods of equilibrium and sudden catastrophic
breaks that occur periodically once a sufficient threshold of
neutral mutations has been achieved.[36] Occurring at weak spots
inside the system (i.e., spots that are invisible to the equating

eye/I for whom the result is the same zero, whether it is produced by 2 minus 2 or B1 plus 1), these catastrophic breaks result from the buildup of such indifferent differences and are therefore, in a very strong sense, internally generated by the system itself rather than by an intentional (representational) act of positing.

While it may seem like a minor distinction, conceiving of metaphor in terms of equivalence rather than identity nevertheless possesses certain significant implications. First, it suggests a productive alternative to de Man's conception of metaphor as a tautology and enables us to begin to recover this trope for a post-deconstructive ethical project. In this case, metaphor offers itself as a reflective trope that is nevertheless capable of producing the internal differences necessary to open out a seemingly closed system to genuine change (or rebirths, in Pater's terms). As a series of equivalences, the metaphorical dialectic of thought need revolve no longer in a frozen, stultifying circle that gains its illusion of movement only through a series of forgettings, each of which leads inexorably back to the primary forgetting of the original short-circuit that [page 195] gave the reflective cycle its first electrifying jolt and set it in motion. For, as Sebastian's (purely representational) act seems to imply, each new forgetting of difference that constitutes the metaphorical equivalence may build up minimal disparities in the system in such a way that

they make that representational system capable of non-illusory movement or change.

Second, such a conceptualization enables us to conceive of ethical action in a way that is neither a naive expectation of a continuity between practical and theoretical reason nor a radical, unpredictable (and a-theoretical) break or rupture with reason--the position that critics have implicitly taken when they have read Sebastian's portrait as a lesson in corrective ethics. As Pater has painstakingly shown in Sebastian's metaphorical dialectic, to the extent that an act is initiated by mind it can never escape the reflective circle--there is no direct path between the theoretical and practical realms that Sebastian's tutor envisages. Nevertheless, because reflection is generated through the resemblances of equivalences rather than identities, acts can occur that produce results that escape the icy grip of the representational consciousness and take place in the world. The ethical lesson of Sebastian van Storck, in other words, is rather different from the one that critics have traditionally taken. Rather than a lesson in reversal, Pater's portrait of Sebastian suggests a need to persevere in our theoretical endeavors and, in so doing, to continue to equate principle and action or <u>metaphorize</u> it (in this now non-tautologous sense), even while we--including moderns equally as tragic as Sebastian and Coleridge--cannot escape the knowledge that such a relation will only ever be purely representational, a product of mind.

Nevertheless, although we can never know in advance what the effects of our actions will be (whether or not they will generate such an excessive result and, hence, be ethical), such a metaphorically driven act is no leap into the faith of an absolute unknown, since it is guided by an equivalence that enables us to act as if the bridge between the mind and world were real.

This last point then raises the issue that I mentioned earlier, one that has recently been doing the rounds in ethical criticism, namely, the possibility and desirability of resurrecting a [page 196] so-called universalist ethic.[37] Insofar as theoretical philosophy and the poetic sympathy derive opposing positive and negative products from the zero sum of life's equation, their positions appear radically divergent. Yet, as we have seen, each remains equally dedicated to an originary forgetting, and it is precisely in their mutual fidelity to this forgetting that both forms of representation appear to enjoy a relation of equivalence. What Sebastian's portrait might therefore help us to see is an unexpected continuity between what one typically regards as the two divergent theoretical approaches of deconstruction and the new historicism, a continuity that is found in their mutual remembering to forget. The stakes of their principal theoretical differences lie, that is, not in one's remembering and the other's forgetting of what we might now call history (the charge long leveled at deconstruction); rather, the

differences lie in the two divergent but equivalent modes in which both of these theoretical approaches agree to forget. The way in which the new historicism forgets is through its repression of the first moment of positing that originally equated the two incompatible realms of theory and action, while the deconstructive forgetting is of a different kind, one that straddles the point of passage between the two uncomplimentary systems through the strange form of (double) vision that psychoanalysis calls perversion. As my use of psychoanalytic terminology implies, these two modes of forgetting are themselves implicitly ethical stances, two equivalently ethical modalities by which one can be faithful to forgetting.

But this continuity or equivalence also enables me to assert that both theoretical approaches in fact could, if they wished, lay claim to a non-relativist or universalist ethics. To the extent that for neither theoretical approach is there a possibility of stepping outside our representational system-- i.e., there is no ultimate way of bridging the immeasurable gulf between our theoretical and practical realms--both deconstruction and the new historicism remain resolutely materialist in their concerns. [page 197] Yet in their mutual, even militant, refusal not to forget to forget, each demonstrates a fidelity to something that cannot be represented within our representational system. What we call history remains perpetually lost to us: we can never literally remember (in the sense of re-member) it, but

in our critical remembering not to forget the past we glimpse what Étienne Balibar has called the double inscription of causes.[38] Thus we are neither fully inside nor outside representation, and it is this fact that enables us to perform acts that touch the Real, as a Lacanian would say--acts that break out of the idealist circle.

My closing suggestion, therefore, is that it is metaphor, not deconstruction's favored metonymy, that must be (re-)activated as the foundational trope of an ethical forgetting. Erasing the difference between dissimilar objects, metaphor purports to bridge the Kantian divide. Yet while this must always, as we have seen, remain an illusory bridge, metaphor's equivalences nevertheless permit miniscule changes and differences to build up inside our representational system. Given a sufficient number, these imperceptible differences can mount up to produce the unexpected, epoch-changing shifts in representational structures that Pater again and again documents through his privileged historical figures.[39] But it is perhaps in the Imaginary Portraits that these figures fully assume their true form as the metaphors of history that they are.

NOTES

[1] Walter Pater, APostscript, in his <u>Appreciations, with an Essay on Style</u> (London: Macmillan and Co., 1922), pp. 261, 244.

[2] See White, <u>Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism</u> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978).

[3] See for example de Man's extended discussion of metaphorical identity in The Epistemology of Metaphor, in Paul de Man, <u>Aesthetic Ideology</u>, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 34-50.

[4] See Gert Buelens, The Ethics of Metonymy, in <u>Fiction and Ethics</u>, special issue of <u>Studia Germanica Gandensia</u>, ed. Benjamin Biebuyck, Jürgen Pieters, and Alexander Roose (Gent: Academia, 2002), pp. 18-27.

[5] See for example the recent issue of <u>Diacritics</u>, 32, no. 2 (2002), dedicated to universalism.

[6] Alain Badiou, <u>Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil</u>, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001), p. 28. See also Alain Badiou, <u>Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism</u>, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford Univ.

Press, 2003).

[7] See Immanuel Kant, <u>Critique of Judgment</u>, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), p. 12.

[8] See William Wordsworth, <u>The Prelude</u> (1805), in his <u>The Thirteen-Book APrelude</u>, ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991), I, 315 (Book XIII, l. 69).

[9] The most influential theorist of metaphor as a trope of freedom is Paul Ricoeur; see especially his <u>The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language</u>, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1977).

[10] The 1980s in particular saw a burst of publication in Pater studies. Important works include Perry Meisel, <u>The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Water Pater</u> (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1980); F. C. McGrath, <u>The Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm</u> (Tampa: Univ. of South Florida Press, 1986); and Robert Keefe and Janice A. Keefe, <u>Walter Pater and the Gods of Disorder</u> (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1988). In the 1990s, in addition to Jonathan Loesberg, <u>Aestheticism and Deconstruction: Pater, Derrida, and de Man</u> (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991), significant contributions to Pater studies by way of sexuality were made by Linda Dowling and Richard Dellamora. See, for example, Linda Dowling, <u>Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford</u> (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994); and Richard Dellamora, <u>Masculine Desire: The Sexual</u>

<u>Politics of Victorian Aestheticism</u> (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1990). See also Herbert Sussman, <u>Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 1995); and James Eli Adams, <u>Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity</u> (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995). The recent collection <u>Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire</u>, ed. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins, and Carolyn Williams (Greensboro, N.C.: ELT Press, 2002), has encouraged critical attention to focus on Pater's prose as what one critic calls a poetics of obliquity (see James Eli Adams, Transparencies of Desire: An Introduction, in <u>Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire</u>, p. 3). As a self-styled Epicurean, Pater should also be regarded as a nodal (if largely overlooked) point in a contemporary reevaluation of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century materialism inspired by Gilles Deleuze's alternative histories of thought. Such an alternative history would give pride of place to Spinoza and Leibniz rather than Descartes, and Kierkegaard rather than Hegel, as well as tracing an alternative representational paradigm through Stoic and Epicurean rather than Aristotelian concepts. In his portraits of Sebastian van Storck, Duke Carl of Rosenmold, Denys l'Auxerrois, and `Antony' Watteau of A Prince of Court Painters, Pater appears to be similarly concerned with tracing the alternative philosophical and aesthetic history of a specifically modern materialism.

[11] Laurel Brake and Ian Small update this line-up in their essay Pater in the 1990s when they outline a division in the critical tradition between, on the one hand, emphases on language as a system, by attention to discourses other than simply the `literary,' and by the tolerance of disruption, plurality, and self-consciousness within texts, and, on the other hand an interest in the production and reception of works which in its turn has led to a reassessment of the importance of Pater's career as a teacher, and a renewed interest in his transactions with publishers and late nineteenth-century publishing institutions, particularly the periodical press (Laurel Brake and Ian Small, Pater in the 1990s, in Pater in the 1990s, ed. Brake and Small [Greensboro, N.C.: ELT Press, 1991], p. xv). It is not difficult to recognize this division as the same division that I am exploring here in the opposition between the deconstructive and the new historicist embraces of Pater.

[12] J. Hillis Miller, Walter Pater: A Partial Portrait, Daedalus, 105, no. 1 (1976), 97, 112.

[13] See Sprinker, The Current Conjuncture in Theory, College English, 51 (1989), 825-31. Sprinker argues for a joint deconstructive and Marxist paternity for the new historicism.

[14] Williams argues that for Pater the simplest act of perception is an aesthetic act, and that history itself is in part the result of an aesthetic reconstruction (Carolyn Williams, Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism [Ithaca:

Cornell Univ. Press, 1989], pp. 3-4). Implicitly following
Pater's lead, she describes how she is concerned . . . with the
figurative construction of retrospection (<u>Transfigured World</u>, p.
10).

[15] Deconstruction must of course do this too if it is to
avoid the new historicist and Marxist and feminist charge--i.e.,
that it is an a-political, idealist form of textual navel gazing.
To state it simply, the principal difference in the way in which
the new historicism and deconstruction perform the necessary act
of self-doubling that enables them to assume a speaking position
lies in their vastly different notions of what constitutes
materiality. For all of the new historicism's sophistication
about the discursive construction of reality, my sense of the new
historicism is that it remains at some level committed to a
really existing (i.e., phenomenal) reality out there that can be
grasped by our cognitive processes. For deconstruction, in
contrast, the material is a name for something that precisely
escapes all of our cognitive attempts to grasp it--i.e., a <u>non-</u>
<u>phenomenal</u> materiality. To explain de Man's highly idiosyncratic
notion of materiality would require far more space than is
permitted in a footnote; the starting point would have to be de
Man's seminal late essay Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,
in <u>Aesthetic Ideology</u>, pp. 70-90. See also Miller's thoughtful
reflection on it: J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man as Allergen, in
<u>Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory</u>, ed. Tom

Cohen, et. al. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 183-204.

[16] Hohendahl, A Return to History? The New Historicism and Its Agenda, <u>New German Critique</u>, no. 55 (1992), 99.

[17] In the (necessarily limited) line-up that I have just offered, Loesberg devotes only a footnote to the portraits (see <u>Aestheticism and Deconstruction</u>, p. 203, n. 11). And while Carolyn Williams discusses a number of the uncollected portraits, she makes no reference in <u>Transfigured World</u> to the group of four that Pater published with Macmillan under the title <u>Imaginary Portraits</u> in 1887. True to his titular promise, Miller in his <u>Daedalus</u> essay deals only partially with the portraits in his essay, devoting the bulk of his attention to <u>Marius the Epicurean</u> and The Myth of Demeter and Persephone (1876, 1895) in his reading of Pater's use of personification. Thus Gerald C. Monsman's fourth chapter in his <u>Pater's Portraits</u> remains the best and most comprehensive analysis (see Monsman, <u>Pater's Portraits: Mythic Pattern in the Fiction of Walter Pater</u> [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967], pp. 99-138). This is not to say, however, that no important work has yet been done on the portraits: see for example, Steven Connor, Myth as Multiplicity in Walter Pater's <u>Greek Studies</u> and `Denys L'Auxerrois, <u>Review of English Studies</u>, 34 (1983), 28-42; William F. Shuter, The Arrested Narrative of `Emerald Uthwart,' <u>Nineteenth-Century Literature</u>, 45 (1990), 1-25; M. F. Moran, Pater's Mythic Fiction:

Gods in a Gilded Age, in <u>Pater in the 1990s</u>, pp. 169-88; and Jay B. Losey, Epiphany in Pater's Portraits, <u>English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920</u>, 29 (1986), 297-308. Billie Andrew Inman also deserves special note for her extended reading of the portrait of Sebastian van Storck (see Inman, `Sebastian van Storck': Pater's Exploration into Nihilism, <u>Nineteenth-Century Fiction</u>, 30 [1976], 457-76).

[18] Walter Pater, Sebastian Van Storck, in his <u>Imaginary Portraits</u> (London: Macmillan, 1910), p. 111. Further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

[19] Inman provides a useful summary of the critical tradition that sees Sebastian as a Paterian version (and distortion) of Spinoza, although her own preference is for Schopenhauer (see Inman, `Sebastian van Storck': Pater's Exploration into Nihilism).

[20] See Dowling, Walter Pater and Archaeology: The Reconciliation with Earth, <u>Victorian Studies</u>, 31 (1988), 211.

[21] Walter Pater, The Genius of Plato, in his <u>Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures</u> (London: Macmillan and Co., 1893), p. 132.

[22] Walter Pater, Coleridge, in <u>Appreciations</u>, pp. 86-87.

[23] Euclid, <u>The Thirteen Books of Euclid's Elements</u>, 2d ed., 3 vols., ed. and trans. Thomas Heath (Cambridge: At the Univ. Press, 1926), I, 155.

[24] See Adorno, <u>Negative Dialectics</u>, trans. E. B. Ashton (New

York: Continuum, 1973), p. 149.

[25] Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, <u>Essai sur l'origine des conaissances humaines</u> (1746); quoted in Paul de Man, Epistemology of Metaphor, p. 43 (de Man's translation).

[26] Friedrick Nietzsche, Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen sinne; quoted in Paul de Man, Epistemology of Metaphor, p. 43 (de Man's translation).

[27] Condillac, <u>Essai</u>; quoted in de Man, Epistemology of Metaphor, p. 45.

[28] See Slavoj ∫i∫ek's own take on idealism in his <u>The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters</u> (London and New York: Verso, 1996).

[29] Billie Inman goes so far as to say: It seems obvious to me that Pater intended the reader to be shocked by Sebastian's passion for <u>Schwindsucht</u>, or the death of all humanity by quick consumption (`Sebastian van Storck': Pater's Exploration into Nihilism, p. 472).

[30] Walter Pater, Diaphaneité (1864), in his <u>Miscellaneous Studies: A Series of Essays</u> (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910), p. 248. As a subgenre of the Victorian short story, the <u>Imaginary Portraits</u> have typically been read through the tradition of aesthetic fiction pioneered by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, and Simeon Solomon. But while for these writers the central characters obtain what Elisa Bizzotto calls a final revelatory moment which seems to quench their existential and

artistic thirst, Pater's portraits are singular in the narrative
irresolution they proffer the reader (see Bizzotto, The Imaginary
Portrait: Pater's Contribution to a Literary Genre, in <u>Walter
Pater: Transparencies of Desire</u>, p. 220). This failure at the
level of plot makes it difficult to insert the portraits into the
pedagogical interpretative framework that characterizes the
majority of responses to them. Inman provides a helpful summary
of these responses: in a footnote she lists the lessons in self-
sacrifice, the destructiveness of aesthetic distance in life and
in equivocal victory, and the ultimate assertion of human nature
that Thomas Wright, William W. Main, Germain d'Hangest, Jan B.
Gordon, Wolfgang Iser, U. C. Knoepflmacher, and R. V. Osbourn all
discover in Sebastian van Storck (see Inman, `Sebastian van
Storck': Pater's Exploration into Nihilism, p. 472, n. 24).
Continuing in this pedagogical tradition, Martine Lambert-
Charbonnier concludes in a more recent essay that the saving of
the child testifies to a new balance . . . between spiritual
aspirations and the world of the senses (see Lambert-Charbonnier,
Poetics of <u>Ekphrasis</u> in Pater's `Imaginary Portraits,' in <u>Walter
Pater: Transparencies of Desire</u>, p. 212). Similarly, for Monsman
the portrait depicts an act of love for mankind arising from an
instinctive sense that reverses Sebastian's philosophical logic
once the need for action finally arises (see Monsman, <u>Pater's
Portraits</u>, pp. 117-126, esp. p. 125). I follow Bizzotto and
Harris in emphasizing the characteristic open ending of imaginary

portraiture (see Bizzotto, The Imaginary Portrait; and Wendell Harris, Ruskin and Pater--Hebrew and Hellene--Explore the Renaissance, <u>CLIO: A Journal of Literature, History and the Philosophy of History</u>, 17 [1988], 173-85).

[31] <u>The Swearing of the Oath of the Ratification of the Treaty of Münster</u> (1648) by Gerard ter Borch (1617-1681) is now at the National Gallery, London.

[32] For a discussion of Nietzsche's critique of this formal nihilism, see Alenka Zupan i , <u>The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two</u> (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003) pp. 66-67.

[33] They form limits for the limits (my translation).

[34] For an overview of the changing representation of consumption in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Clark Lawlor and Akihito Suzuki, The Disease of the Self: Representing Consumption, 1700-1830, <u>Bulletin of the History of Medicine</u>, 74 (2000), 458-94.

[35] Robert Louis Stevenson, Requiem, in <u>The Collected Poems of Robert Louis Stevenson</u>, ed. Roger C. Lewis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2003), p. 88.

[36] See Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould, Punctuated Equilibria: An Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism, in <u>Models in Paleobiology</u>, ed. Thomas J. M. Schopf (San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper, and Co., 1972), pp. 82-115.

[37] See for example the joint debate between Judith Butler,

Ernesto Laclau,and Slavoj ∫iʧek in their <u>Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left</u> (London: Verso, 2000).

[38] See Balibar, The Infinite Contradiction, <u>Yale French Studies</u>, no. 88 (1995), 161.

[39] It is in this sense, I am suggesting, that the <u>Imaginary Portraits</u> present us with the lines of flight of an alternative materialist history, if we understand history as the (impossible) articulation of a representational crisis appearing within a resolutely materialist, anti-transcendentalist structure.