***\* Pater Noster \****



***Two Conversations***

***Table of Contents***

Pater Noster 3

Classical Desire 6

***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 blessèd 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 *‘Poor, dear Pater has lived to dis-*

Artists of ourselves, my dear Pater, *prove everything he has written.’*

*You* chose to be a mere spectator

Of life, in ‘passionate celibacy’. *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 Ah, but what am I, Dears? What am I?*

*Another’s words: Wordsworth’s this time. (It’s true; from* The Prelude, *Bk. 3*.)

You spoil my woodcock springe, all lime-

Bespred! *I steal your stolen thunder.*)

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! *To* Studies in the Renaissance *(orig. vers.)*

It was, or rather proved to be

Both my beginning and my end.

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’, *Pater’s description of Flaubert.*

As well? Extended to the life.

*And martyrs, too, you made of wife*

*And sons. Was not that somewhat…vile?*

*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*

Σοφροσυνε*, that thing without Sophrosyne, ‘moderation’.*

*Which Eros is a fatal curse?*

*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* un*cultivated 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 απολαυστικος *Bios apolaustikos, ‘Life of pleasure’.*

*Turns caustic, and the pleasure gnaws*

*Itself away in overdose.*

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 cailloch’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 *Am I a vampire?*

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 overfill.

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!

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—

*The two philosophers fuse into*

Epicturus: *one, with a portmanteau name.*

*Brilliantly self-deceiving elf*

*Of a man, wittily outwitted*

*Sphinx of a man, hopelessly pitted*

*Against the riddle of himself!*

