

Marius the Epicurean

HIS SENSATIONS AND IDEAS

VOLUME TWO

by WALTER PATER

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NOTES BY THE E-TEXT EDITOR:

Notes: I have placed an asterisk immediately after each of Pater's footnotes and a + sign after my own notes, and have listed each of my notes at that chapter's end.

Greek typeface: For this full-text edition, I have transliterated Pater's Greek quotations. If there is a need for the original Greek, it can be viewed at my site, <http://www.ajdrake.com/etexts>, a Victorianist archive that contains the complete works of Walter Pater and many other nineteenth-century texts, mostly in first editions.

Χειμερινὸς ὄνειρος, ὅτε μήκιστα αἱ νύκτες+

+“A winter's dream, when nights are longest.”
Lucian, *The Dream*, Vol. 3.

PART THE THIRD

CHAPTER XV. STOICISM AT COURT

The very finest flower of the same company—Aurelius with the gilded fasces borne before him, a crowd of exquisites, the empress Faustina herself, and all the elegant blue-stockings of the day, who maintained, people said, their private “sophists” to whisper philosophy into their ears winsomely as they performed the duties of the toilet—was assembled again a few months later, in a different place and for a very different purpose. The temple of Peace, a “modernising” foundation of Hadrian, enlarged by a library and lecture-rooms, had grown into an institution like something between a college and a literary club; and here Cornelius Fronto was to pronounce a discourse on the Nature of Morals. There were some, indeed, who had desired the emperor Aurelius himself to declare his whole mind on this matter. Rhetoric was become almost a function of the state: philosophy was upon the throne; and had from time to time, by request, delivered an official utterance with well-nigh divine authority. And it was as the delegate of this authority, under the full sanction of the philosophic emperor—emperor and pontiff, that the aged Fronto purposed to-day to expound some parts of the Stoic doctrine, with the view of recommending morals to that refined but perhaps prejudiced company, as being, in effect, one mode of comeliness in things—as it were music, or a kind of artistic order, in life. And he did this earnestly, with an outlay of all his science of mind, and that eloquence of which he was known to be a master. For Stoicism was no longer a rude and unkempt thing. Received at court, it had

largely decorated itself: it was grown persuasive and insinuating, and sought not only to convince men's intelligence but to allure their souls. Associated with the beautiful old age of the great rhetorician, and his winning voice, it was almost Epicurean. And the old man was at his best on the occasion; the last on which he ever appeared in this way. To-day was his own birthday. Early in the morning the imperial letter of congratulation had reached him; and all the pleasant animation it had caused was in his face, when assisted by his daughter Gratia he took his place on the ivory chair, as president of the Athenaeum of Rome, wearing with a wonderful grace the philosophic pall,—in reality neither more nor less than the loose woollen cloak of the common soldier, but fastened on his right shoulder with a magnificent clasp, the emperor's birthday gift.

It was an age, as abundant evidence shows, whose delight in rhetoric was but one result of a general susceptibility—an age not merely taking pleasure in words, but experiencing a great moral power in them. Fronto's quaintly fashionable audience would have wept, and also assisted with their purses, had his present purpose been, as sometimes happened, the recommendation of an object of charity. As it was, arranging themselves at their ease among the images and flowers, these amateurs of exquisite language, with their tablets open for careful record of felicitous word or phrase, were ready to give themselves wholly to the intellectual treat prepared for them, applauding, blowing loud kisses through the air sometimes, at the speaker's triumphant exit from one of his long, skilfully modulated sentences; while the younger of them meant to imitate everything about him, down to the inflections of his voice and the very folds of his mantle. Certainly there was rhetoric enough:—a wealth of imagery; illustrations from painting, music, mythology, the experiences of love; a management, by which

subtle, unexpected meaning was brought out of familiar terms, like flies from morsels of amber, to use Fronto's own figure. But with all its richness, the higher claim of his style was rightly understood to lie in gravity and self-command, and an especial care for the purities of a vocabulary which rejected every expression unsanctioned by the authority of approved ancient models.

And it happened with Marius, as it will sometimes happen, that this general discourse to a general audience had the effect of an utterance adroitly designed for him. His conscience still vibrating painfully under the shock of that scene in the amphitheatre, and full of the ethical charm of Cornelius, he was questioning himself with much impatience as to the possibility of an adjustment between his own elaborately thought-out intellectual scheme and the "old morality." In that intellectual scheme indeed the old morality had so far been allowed no place, as seeming to demand from him the admission of certain first principles such as might misdirect or retard him in his efforts towards a complete, many-sided existence; or distort the revelations of the experience of life; or curtail his natural liberty of heart and mind. But now (his imagination being occupied for the moment with the noble and resolute air, the gallantry, so to call it, which composed the outward mien and presentment of his strange friend's inflexible ethics) he felt already some nascent suspicion of his philosophic programme, in regard, precisely, to the question of good taste. There was the taint of a graceless "antinomianism" perceptible in it, a dissidence, a revolt against accustomed modes, the actual impression of which on other men might rebound upon himself in some loss of that personal pride to which it was part of his theory of life to allow so much. And it was exactly a moral situation such as this that Fronto appeared to be contemplating. He seemed to

have before his mind the case of one—Cyrenaic or Epicurean, as the courtier tends to be, by habit and instinct, if not on principle—who yet experiences, actually, a strong tendency to moral assents, and a desire, with as little logical inconsistency as may be, to find a place for duty and righteousness in his house of thought.

And the Stoic professor found the key to this problem in the purely æsthetic beauty of the old morality, as an element in things, fascinating to the imagination, to good taste in its most highly developed form, through association—a system or order, as a matter of fact, in possession, not only of the larger world, but of the rare minority of *élite* intelligences; from which, therefore, least of all would the sort of Epicurean he had in view endure to become, so to speak, an outlaw. He supposed his hearer to be, with all sincerity, in search after some principle of conduct (and it was here that he seemed to Marius to be speaking straight to him) which might give unity of motive to an actual rectitude, a cleanness and probity of life, determined partly by natural affection, partly by enlightened self-interest or the feeling of honour, due in part even to the mere fear of penalties; no element of which, however, was distinctively moral in the agent himself as such, and providing him, therefore, no common ground with a really moral being like Cornelius, or even like the philosophic emperor. Performing the same offices; actually satisfying, even as they, the external claims of others; rendering to all their dues—one thus circumstanced would be wanting, nevertheless, in the secret of inward adjustment to the moral agents around him. How tenderly—more tenderly than many stricter souls—he might yield himself to kindly instinct! what fineness of charity in passing judgment on others! what an exquisite conscience of other men's susceptibilities! He knows for how much the manner, because the heart itself, counts, in doing a

kindness. He goes beyond most people in his care for all weakly creatures; judging, instinctively, that to be but sentient is to possess rights. He conceives a hundred duties, though he may not call them by that name, of the existence of which purely devious souls may have no suspicion. He has a kind of pride in doing more than they, in a way of his own. Sometimes, he may think that those men of line and rule do not really understand their own business. How narrow, inflexible, unintelligent! what poor guardians (he may reason) of the inward spirit of righteousness, are some supposed careful walkers according to its letter and form. And yet all the while he admits, as such, no moral world at all: no theoretic equivalent to so large a proportion of the facts of life.

But, over and above such practical rectitude, thus determined by natural affection or self-love or fear, he may notice that there is a remnant of right conduct, what he does, still more what he abstains from doing, not so much through his own free election, as from a deference, an “assent,” entire, habitual, unconscious, to custom—to the actual habit or fashion of others, from whom he could not endure to break away, any more than he would care to be out of agreement with them on questions of mere manner, or, say, even, of dress. Yes! there were the evils, the vices, which he avoided as, essentially, a failure in good taste. An assent, such as this, to the preferences of others, might seem to be the weakest of motives, and the rectitude it could determine the least considerable element in a moral life. Yet here, according to Cornelius Fronto, was in truth the revealing example, albeit operating upon comparative trifles, of the general principle required. There was one great idea associated with which that determination to conform to precedent was elevated into the clearest, the fullest, the weightiest principle of moral action; a principle under which one might subsume men’s

most strenuous efforts after righteousness. And he proceeded to expound the idea of Humanity—of a universal commonwealth of mind, which becomes explicit, and as if incarnate, in a select communion of just men made perfect.

Ho kosmos hōsanei polis estin+—the world is as it were a commonwealth, a city: and there are observances, customs, usages, actually current in it, things our friends and companions will expect of us, as the condition of our living there with them at all, as really their peers or fellow-citizens. Those observances were, indeed, the creation of a visible or invisible aristocracy in it, whose actual manners, whose preferences from of old, become now a weighty tradition as to the way in which things should or should not be done, are like a music, to which the intercourse of life proceeds—such a music as no one who had once caught its harmonies would willingly jar. In this way, the becoming, as in Greek—to prepon: or ta êthê+ mores, manners, as both Greeks and Romans said, would indeed be a comprehensive term for duty. Righteousness would be, in the words of “Caesar” himself, of the philosophic Aurelius, but a “following of the reasonable will of the oldest, the most venerable, of cities, of polities—of the royal, the law-giving element, therein—forasmuch as we are citizens also in that supreme city on high, of which all other cities beside are but as single habitations.” But as the old man spoke with animation of this supreme city, this invisible society, whose conscience was become explicit in its inner circle of inspired souls, of whose common spirit, the trusted leaders of human conscience had been but the mouthpiece, of whose successive personal preferences in the conduct of life, the “old morality” was the sum,—Marius felt that his own thoughts were passing beyond the actual intention of the speaker; not in the direction of any clearer theoretic or abstract

definition of that ideal commonwealth, but rather as if in search of its visible locality and abiding-place, the walls and towers of which, so to speak, he might really trace and tell, according to his own old, natural habit of mind. It would be the fabric, the outward fabric, of a system reaching, certainly, far beyond the great city around him, even if conceived in all the machinery of its visible and invisible influences at their grandest—as Augustus or Trajan might have conceived of them—however well the visible Rome might pass for a figure of that new, unseen, Rome on high. At moments, Marius even asked himself with surprise, whether it might be some vast secret society the speaker had in view:—that august community, to be an outlaw from which, to be foreign to the manners of which, was a loss so much greater than to be excluded, into the ends of the earth, from the sovereign Roman commonwealth. Humanity, a universal order, the great polity, its aristocracy of elect spirits, the mastery of their example over their successors—these were the ideas, stimulating enough in their way, by association with which the Stoic professor had attempted to elevate, to unite under a single principle, men’s moral efforts, himself lifted up with so genuine an enthusiasm. But where might Marius search for all this, as more than an intellectual abstraction? Where were those elect souls in whom the claim of Humanity became so amiable, winning, persuasive—whose footsteps through the world were so beautiful in the actual order he saw—whose faces averted from him, would be more than he could bear? Where was that comely order, to which as a great fact of experience he must give its due; to which, as to all other beautiful “phenomena” in life, he must, for his own peace, adjust himself?

Rome did well to be serious. The discourse ended somewhat abruptly, as the noise of a great crowd in motion was heard below

the walls; whereupon, the audience, following the humour of the younger element in it, poured into the colonnade, from the steps of which the famous procession, or transvectio, of the military knights was to be seen passing over the Forum, from their trysting-place at the temple of Mars, to the temple of the Dioscuri. The ceremony took place this year, not on the day accustomed—anniversary of the victory of Lake Regillus, with its pair of celestial assistants—and amid the heat and roses of a Roman July, but, by anticipation, some months earlier, the almond-trees along the way being still in leafless flower. Through that light trellis-work, Marius watched the riders, arrayed in all their gleaming ornaments, and wearing wreaths of olive around their helmets, the faces below which, what with battle and the plague, were almost all youthful. It was a flowery scene enough, but had to-day its fulness of war-like meaning; the return of the army to the North, where the enemy was again upon the move, being now imminent. Cornelius had ridden along in his place, and, on the dismissal of the company, passed below the steps where Marius stood, with that new song he had heard once before floating from his lips.

CHAPTER XVI. SECOND THOUGHTS

And Marius, for his part, was grave enough. The discourse of Cornelius Fronto, with its wide prospect over the human, the spiritual, horizon, had set him on a review—on a review of the isolating narrowness, in particular, of his own theoretic scheme. Long after the very latest roses were faded, when “the town” had departed to country villas, or the baths, or the war, he remained behind in Rome; anxious to try the lastingness of his own Epicurean rose-garden; setting to work over again, and deliberately passing from point to point of his old argument with himself, down to its practical conclusions. That age and our own have much in common—many difficulties and hopes. Let the reader pardon me if here and there I seem to be passing from Marius to his modern representatives—from Rome, to Paris or London.

What really were its claims as a theory of practice, of the sympathies that determine practice? It had been a theory, avowedly, of loss and gain (so to call it) of an economy. If, therefore, it missed something in the commerce of life, which some other theory of practice was able to include, if it made a needless sacrifice, then it must be, in a manner, inconsistent with itself, and lack theoretic completeness. Did it make such a sacrifice? What did it lose, or cause one to lose?

And we may note, as Marius could hardly have done, that Cyrenaicism is ever the characteristic philosophy of youth, ardent, but narrow in its survey—sincere, but apt to become one-sided, or

even fanatical. It is one of those subjective and partial ideals, based on vivid, because limited, apprehension of the truth of one aspect of experience (in this case, of the beauty of the world and the brevity of man's life there) which it may be said to be the special vocation of the young to express. In the school of Cyrene, in that comparatively fresh Greek world, we see this philosophy where it is least blasé, as we say; in its most pleasant, its blithest and yet perhaps its wisest form, youthfully bright in the youth of European thought. But it grows young again for a while in almost every youthful soul. It is spoken of sometimes as the appropriate utterance of jaded men; but in them it can hardly be sincere, or, by the nature of the case, an enthusiasm. "Walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes," is, indeed, most often, according to the supposition of the book from which I quote it, the counsel of the young, who feel that the sunshine is pleasant along their veins, and wintry weather, though in a general sense foreseen, a long way off. The youthful enthusiasm or fanaticism, the self-abandonment to one favourite mode of thought or taste, which occurs, quite naturally, at the outset of every really vigorous intellectual career, finds its special opportunity in a theory such as that so carefully put together by Marius, just because it seems to call on one to make the sacrifice, accompanied by a vivid sensation of power and will, of what others value—sacrifice of some conviction, or doctrine, or supposed first principle—for the sake of that clear-eyed intellectual consistency, which is like spotless bodily cleanliness, or scrupulous personal honour, and has itself for the mind of the youthful student, when he first comes to appreciate it, the fascination of an ideal.

The Cyrenaic doctrine, then, realised as a motive of strenuousness or enthusiasm, is not so properly the utterance of the "jaded

Epicurean,” as of the strong young man in all the freshness of thought and feeling, fascinated by the notion of raising his life to the level of a daring theory, while, in the first genial heat of existence, the beauty of the physical world strikes potently upon his wide-open, unwearied senses. He discovers a great new poem every spring, with a hundred delightful things he too has felt, but which have never been expressed, or at least never so truly, before. The workshops of the artists, who can select and set before us what is really most distinguished in visible life, are open to him. He thinks that the old Platonic, or the new Baconian philosophy, has been better explained than by the authors themselves, or with some striking original development, this very month. In the quiet heat of early summer, on the dusty gold morning, the music comes, louder at intervals, above the hum of voices from some neighbouring church, among the flowering trees, valued now, perhaps, only for the poetically rapt faces among priests or worshippers, or the mere skill and eloquence, it may be, of its preachers of faith and righteousness. In his scrupulous idealism, indeed, he too feels himself to be something of a priest, and that devotion of his days to the contemplation of what is beautiful, a sort of perpetual religious service. Afar off, how many fair cities and delicate sea-coasts await him! At that age, with minds of a certain constitution, no very choice or exceptional circumstances are needed to provoke an enthusiasm something like this. Life in modern London even, in the heavy glow of summer, is stuff sufficient for the fresh imagination of a youth to build its “palace of art” of; and the very sense and enjoyment of an experience in which all is new, are but enhanced, like that glow of summer itself, by the thought of its brevity, giving him something of a gambler’s zest, in the apprehension, by dexterous act or diligently appreciative thought, of the highly coloured moments which are to pass away so quickly.

At bottom, perhaps, in his elaborately developed self-consciousness, his sensibilities, his almost fierce grasp upon the things he values at all, he has, beyond all others, an inward need of something permanent in its character, to hold by: of which circumstance, also, he may be partly aware, and that, as with the brilliant Claudio in *Measure for Measure*, it is, in truth, but darkness he is, “encountering, like a bride.” But the inevitable falling of the curtain is probably distant; and in the daylight, at least, it is not often that he really shudders at the thought of the grave—the weight above, the narrow world and its company, within. When the thought of it does occur to him, he may say to himself:—Well! and the rude monk, for instance, who has renounced all this, on the security of some dim world beyond it, really acquiesces in that “fifth act,” amid all the consoling ministries around him, as little as I should at this moment; though I may hope, that, as at the real ending of a play, however well acted, I may already have had quite enough of it, and find a true well-being in eternal sleep.

And precisely in this circumstance, that, consistently with the function of youth in general, Cyrenaicism will always be more or less the special philosophy, or “prophecy,” of the young, when the ideal of a rich experience comes to them in the ripeness of the receptive, if not of the reflective, powers—precisely in this circumstance, if we rightly consider it, lies the duly prescribed corrective of that philosophy. For it is by its exclusiveness, and by negation rather than positively, that such theories fail to satisfy us permanently; and what they really need for their correction, is the complementary influence of some greater system, in which they may find their due place. That *Sturm und Drang* of the spirit, as it has been called, that ardent and special apprehension of half-truths,

in the enthusiastic, and as it were “prophetic” advocacy of which, devotion to truth, in the case of the young—apprehending but one point at a time in the great circumference—most usually embodies itself, is levelled down, safely enough, afterwards, as in history so in the individual, by the weakness and mere weariness, as well as by the maturer wisdom, of our nature. And though truth indeed, resides, as has been said, “in the whole”—in harmonisings and adjustments like this—yet those special apprehensions may still owe their full value, in this sense of “the whole,” to that earlier, one-sided but ardent pre-occupation with them.

Cynicism and Cyrenaicism:—they are the earlier Greek forms of Roman Stoicism and Epicureanism, and in that world of old Greek thought, we may notice with some surprise that, in a little while, the nobler form of Cyrenaicism—Cyrenaicism cured of its faults—met the nobler form of Cynicism half-way. Starting from opposed points, they merged, each in its most refined form, in a single ideal of temperance or moderation. Something of the same kind may be noticed regarding some later phases of Cyrenaic theory. If it starts with considerations opposed to the religious temper, which the religious temper holds it a duty to repress, it is like it, nevertheless, and very unlike any lower development of temper, in its stress and earnestness, its serious application to the pursuit of a very unworldly type of perfection. The saint, and the Cyrenaic lover of beauty, it may be thought, would at least understand each other better than either would understand the mere man of the world. Carry their respective positions a point further, shift the terms a little, and they might actually touch.

Perhaps all theories of practice tend, as they rise to their best, as understood by their worthiest representatives, to identification with each other. For the variety of men’s possible reflections on their

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