

A NARROWED HUMANISM: PATER AND MALRAUX

PAUL WEST

The publication, in 1951, of André Malraux's *Les Voix du Silence* bestowed upon the public an up-to-date version of the views on art of Walter Pater. The Malraux version is, of course, wider in range: to substantiate his various theses, Malraux had the advantage of being able to consult photographic copies of works of art not available to Pater. Moreover, between the time of Pater and the time of Malraux there have occurred changes which have thrown a relentless light upon the standpoint of the aesthete in general. Industrialism, spreading like the flood, has changed the landscape and the catalogue of daily life. The possibility of a complete annihilation of civilised life has become less of a remote idea; and the emergence of such a possibility is leading a good many people to call into question our ability to discipline human inventiveness and the restraining power of the so-called civilising spirit. Socialism has consolidated itself as a political scheme and as a stimulus to emotion. Psychology has made a spectacular début and has been erected into a cult. Yet Malraux, who is very much a child of these developments, advances notions which are essentially those of Pater but giving to them and to their prolonged relevance the sanction of the adventurer and man of the world.

Such a sanction confers nothing but credit upon the reputation of Pater. For when Pater died in 1894, his serious followers cannot but have realized that to the regret occasioned by his death would have to be added the misfortune of having his doctrines remembered in terms of the various irresponsible people who embraced them. Pater was not to blame. He had even gone to the trouble of re-writing the end of *The Renaissance* so that he himself should not be misinterpreted and the young and impressionable among his readers misled. He was unfortunate in having felt bound to outline a doctrine easily deformed by the determinedly inferring mind and just as easily misunderstood by the superficial mind. His methods of exposition were intended to assist his doctrine into subtle and meticulous minds like his own. He wrote as Malraux writes now.

He would never state a thing outright, but would write a long paragraph suffused with his theme. He would accumulate sentences similar but not identical in meaning. His scheme was to embed his idea gradually and deftly into the reader's

mind. No single sentence seems to compress into itself the whole import of the paragraph to which it belongs. We find that Pater does not so much advance as mark time, turning his idea round so as to display it in all aspects. Like Arnold and Bagehot, he has a very fine sense of the consistency of his thinking. He assembles parallel variations on a theme; and the result of this tendency is that the finer points of his doctrine always seem confused and over-numerous, even to the point of inconsequentiality. The same is true of Malraux. If you stay in the haze which the words emit, you will absorb the right thing. The enthusiast or the impatient reviewer, however, is tempted to choose a catch-word or a slogan which, in the last analysis, is typical not of the doctrine but only of itself.

This is why attempts to vindicate Pater have stressed the sober responsibilities of the man as well as the spiritual and stylistic delicacy of his doctrine. Even so, Oscar Wilde still seems the true heir of Pater; and, no matter how misguidedly, the aesthetes of any decade can find in Pater's writings an excuse for indiscriminate sensuality and buffoonery. The trouble is that 'ascêsis' and 'the ravishing moment' are terms to which each person assigns his own meaning. There are some who gird more of their loins than do others. There is more than one kind of ravishing moment; and a moment is a vague thing, capable of extension. In fact, there is much in Pater's philosophy which is left vague simply because there were no words to fit. Pater narrowed his meaning as far as his own feeling for words could conduct him without strain or futility. The rest he left to the reader. This is true also of the Malraux who writes on art.

Malraux is helpful in that his writings, more pungent and more desperate in tone than those of Pater, strengthen the aesthetic position merely by displaying it in its most serious version. Why an intelligent man should come to adopt this position is also made clear. As is obvious after a little reflection, this is the best that can be done for Pater and for the outlook he maintained. The most satisfactory method of restoring a good name is not to indulge in casuistry about the past but to find in the thing whose reputation is spoiled an element that can be made praiseworthy in the present.

Like Pater, Malraux is anxious to demonstrate that there is such a thing as the permanent and continuous identity of man. The anxiety shows most in the novel, *The Walnut-Trees of Altenburg*, which not only, so to speak, enacts the theme, but also includes a long debate on it as part of the narrative.

The demonstration ensues in *The Voices of Silence*; and it is the demonstration of a man who is emotionally convinced. The style often becomes oracular. The utterance becomes vatic. The desperateness of the yearning determines the quality of the demonstration. In *The Walnut-Trees*, the yearning emerges in the form of this question: "Does our civilisation carry within itself humanity's past as a man carries within himself the child he once was?" To this, the fictitious anthropologist Möllberg answers no: the facts demolish all hopefulness. In Melanesia, he reports, there are certain tribes who see no connexion between the sex-act and the birth of a child. For, they say, a woman can perform the act without becoming pregnant. Consequently, the concept of fatherhood among these tribes has nothing in common with that which prevails among ourselves. Ultimately, Vincent Berger, who is emotionally sure that Möllberg's facts have given the wrong answer, leaves the debate and walks to the ancient walnut-trees which embody for him the continuousness he is trying to establish. He can do no more: he is convinced, but the only facts he has are his intuitions.

Pater, equally convinced, had virtually the same intuitions. But for Pater, Europe was as large as is the whole of history and pre-history for Malraux. The deeper view, says Pater, "is that which preserves the identity of European culture." But occasionally he has inklings of views more ambitious:

The basis of the reconciliation of the religions of the world would thus be the inexhaustible activity and creativeness of the human mind itself, in which all religions alike have their root, and in which all alike are reconciled; just as the fancies of childhood and the thoughts of old age meet and are laid to rest, in the experience of the individual.

This is at once an astonishing view of religion and an equally astonishing anticipation of Malraux. It is significant that Pater should have been so fascinated by the mind of Pico della Mirandola, who was always trying to reconcile and affiliate doctrines which were apparently opposed. Yet, for Pater, whose main concern was Europe, the craving for unity was less ambitious and less desperate than it either is for Malraux or was for Pico.

The principle of reconciliation, however, is the same for all three. Pater is sure that "nothing which has ever interested living men and women can wholly lose its vitality—no language they have spoken, nor oracle beside which they have hushed

their voices." Malraux, in his turn, speaks of "revealing lost fragments of the haunting abundance of humanity, united in the community of their unconquered presence." He speaks also of "the invincible interior voice of vanished civilisations." What both Pater and Malraux propose is a humanism founded on human creativity; a humanism which, if it cannot reconcile differing theologies, is likely to supplant them and become a religion itself. It is a humanism intended to replace theologies that are insufficiently religious.

Malraux has more in common with Pater than can be demonstrated by any but the most prolonged quotation. For Malraux, as we have noticed, has Pater's habit of avoiding the succinct. Both writers tend to use precise words in vague contexts. Both prefer very often to leave an idea unstated lest its journey into words contaminate its subtlety. Both tend to expand what seems unnecessary while omitting what seems essential. Both take small trouble to articulate the relationships between their ideas. Minds so consistent, so homogeneous, perpetually show us two polarities and expect us to devise for ourselves the spark that connects them. So our work as readers is arduous. Our only solace is that the combination of furious effort and dream provides us with a reading experience of an almost mystical kind.

There is more to be gained from Pater and Malraux than the thrill of novelty. For those who need it, there is expounded a religion of art. Malraux, like Pater, is anxious to establish a tradition of man's noblest aesthetic achievements. Both men appear to have been unable to accept revealed religion. Both see no grand design behind the chaos of everyday life, behind the efflorescence and fall of civilisations. Both feel that life is such that it can be shaped and made tolerable by means of art. Pater says,

What modern art has to do in the service of culture is so to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit.

Malraux, in similar vein, casts art in a rôle more hostile:

All masterpieces are purifications of the world; but the one lesson they hold in common is that of their existence; and the triumph of each artist over his servitude joins, in a vast strategy, that of art over the destiny of man.

Malraux has seen the revolutions and wars that Pater had not. But the function of art is clear: simply, Malraux seems to have learned by experience what Pater assumes.

The feverish political activity of the former has its counterpart in the feverish interior life of Pater the armchair adventurer. Garine and Marius are worlds apart and yet, oddly enough, it is Marius who is more interested in what goes on around him. Garine, apparently the man of action *par excellence*, is really trying to obliterate his awareness of himself. Like Marius, he achieves a satisfaction through martyrdom. But the important thing is that Garine, and his type, came to symbolise for Malraux the vanity of action. Art became first a refuge, then a record of victories. For Pater, art had suggested a way of life which was right for himself and which he therefore recommended to his fellow-men.

Marius augurs the development of Malraux himself. Marius was, says Pater, "reliving the ideal or poetic traits, the elements of distinction, in our everyday life—so exclusively living in them—that the unadorned remainder of it, the mere drift or debris of our days, comes to be as though it were not." This is the process that Malraux supervises in *The Voices of Silence*. And Malraux, no less than Marius, had his phase of cyrenaicism, his passionate and haphazard encounters with all the sensualities that chaos could offer. Both eventually to seek a principle, whether it be that of playing straight line against curve or that of reducing the world to a philosophical scheme.

To be human is to crave pattern. It is also to be willing to indulge in a self-deception to attain the heart's desire. Malraux's own desire is evident in *The Walnut-Trees*, where he says, "Whether or not we call it history, we need a world that is intelligible. Whether or not we know it, that, and that alone, can gratify our yearning for survival." The elucidation of the possessed past, of the tradition of art, is part of the eternal pursuit of victory over chaos. This is what Pater meant when he said, "A protest comes, out of the very depths of man's radically hopeless condition in the world. . . Dared one hope that there is a heart, even as ours. . . a heart even as mine, behind the vain show of things!" To enact the protest, or, as Malraux would say, to refuse one's destiny, is to incur martyrdom and perhaps honour. But the better martyrdom ends not only in honour for the individual but also in the form of art, in the amalgam of art traditions, and in the repudiation of destiny.

First, no doubt, one runs the gamut of sensual delight. One lives in isolation. Like Perken in *La Voie Royale*, like Garine in *Les Conquérants*, one plunges into action irrespective of its ends. One enlarges one's charity because the mere loss

of the self in the ravishing moment proves unsatisfying. One makes a principle of co-operation, political or not, and seeks some kind of '*fraternité virile*.' But even such fraternity seems fated to fail. The record of noble actions performed together soon loses its resonance. Too often, as Malraux shows in *L'Espoir*, something in the nature of things thwarts even the noblest collective enterprise. There remains, however, the undiminished fact of the nobility which mooted the enterprise. But such a fact has only limited powers of consolation: it lacks the richness, the completed achievement, the reverberation in time of the work of art. Of this, both Pater and Malraux are sure. Neither would say that art is the only possible basis for a humanist view. Rather, they say, it is for them simply the best of available *mystiques*.

According to Malraux, the modern artist is a desperate eclectic. He is a rebel against the world of appearances, which is part of the absurd human condition; and, accordingly, he can turn with pleasure only to the work of artists who have been similarly rebellious. Among these artists he cannot include the Greeks, for they were too much in harmony with the condition of their existence.

The view of Pater is not substantially different. He is troubled, but he is troubled in the nineteenth century. He can still contemplate the possibility of achieving again that serenity of the Greeks:

Certainly, for us the modern world, with its conflicting claims, its tangled interests, distracted by so many sorrows, with many pre-occupations, so bewildering an experience, the problem of unity with ourselves, in blitheness and repose, is far harder than it was for the Greek within the simple terms of antique life. Yet, not less than ever, the intellect demands completeness, centrality.

Even the distraught cadences of the prose suggest a bewilderment that Pater has only just managed to tame into punctuated order. The sick hurry, the divided aims, of which Arnold spoke, have already caused him to pare away what is wishful in his thinking. The disquiet of Pater and Arnold is the logical predecessor of the desperation of Malraux. A rather fictitious Hellenic ideal augurs the serenity of the museum without walls, of which Malraux speaks.

Neither Pater nor Malraux is an advocate of shallow or self-pitying modernism. They have nothing in common with Marinetti and Soffici. Malraux rejects the human condition, and especially its twentieth-century version: the gas-chamber,

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the concentration-camp, remote-control warfare, the secret police. The human condition is not new; but, from time to time, it becomes extreme. Thus, for Malraux as for Pater, art is more than a social grace. It is an almost religious sanctuary founded in a spirit of defiance. It is not an institution rife with dogma: it is an abstract museum. Nothing could be more liberal.

Now an institution has the power to confer dignity upon the individual who attaches himself to it. It has also the power to corrupt, to blind, to atrophy. A man has to take as much of a risk as his needs enforce. There is no doubt that Pater longed for the peculiar solace which an institution such as the Catholic Church interposes between one's ideal needs and the awkward facts. Equally, there is no doubt that Pater could get no nearer to the heart of Christianity than the sensuous delight in the ritual. Marius, as A. C. Benson observes, does no more than discover the old philosophical peace all over again. And he dies none the wiser.

Pater, like Malraux, pushes art into the realm of catechism. His *Renaissance*, no less than Malraux's *Voices of Silence*, is a form of doxology to the muse Clio at her best. History at its general best, and European or Western history in particular, would appear to be the history of the arts. The rest of history attracts from Arnold and Pater and Malraux an unrestrained scorn. The scorn of Arnold is well known. I have quoted Pater in his wailing mode. But Malraux's *La Tentation de l'Occident* is less known than either.

Briefly, it says that Europe has involved itself in absurdity as a result of having placed inordinate trust in individuality and action. China—a China no less idealised than Pater's or Arnold's Greece—is contrasted with Europe. Western man, says Malraux, has too quickly become enthusiastic about ends which have been insufficiently scrutinised. The faith in getting ahead has brought more loss than profit. These facts prompt the humanist to narrow his faith. Thus Malraux, who had sought action and allied himself to enterprise, managed only to confirm his intuitions of Europe's absurdity. *Les Voix du Silence* expands not the laments of *La Tentation*, but those elements in it of brave affirmation. For doing this it deserves the commendation of even the outright humanist: for to attempt to gather a faith to live by reveals at least a will to endure; and the humanist has to be grateful for what he can find. Yet, in so commending and feeling grateful, the humanist is compelled to regret that a brave affirmation implies odds so fearsome that the only possible mode of combat is a wistful retreat.