

## THE CHANCES OF A DIALOGUE

### BERENSON AND MALRAUX

*The Voices of Silence* resembles a long monologue proceeding from affirmation to affirmation. With this work, André Malraux has finally concluded a meditation of twenty years.<sup>1</sup> The proud assurance of his intelligence, reinforced by an extraordinary array of works left in his memory from travels and from reading, and by a brilliant mastery of his style, expects neither contradiction nor reply. Caught in the enchantment of his phrases, convinced by the choice and the scholarly relevance of the photographs, the reader has some difficulty in freeing himself from Malraux's reasoning. If anybody should nevertheless wish to answer, Bernard Berenson's last book offers the chance for a discussion. In a sort of impromptu conversation, in a tone at times lyric and at times peevish, Berenson challenges contemporary taste in those of its aspects which Malraux meant to justify: From a conviction formed by long familiarity with the works, he answers almost point by point Malraux's theses, which perhaps he does not know and which he does not mention.

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<sup>1</sup>Already in *Voie Royale*, one of Malraux's personages expressed the aesthetic preoccupations and the attitude towards art which were to remain those of the *Voices of Silence*.

Berenson's thought recovers and renews the certitudes which shaped the aesthetics of classicism. To the will to justify the invasion of taste by foreign or barbaric art he opposes his constant faith in the values of Western civilisation. To the encyclopaedic admiration which reveres indiscriminately contradictory forms left abandoned through history by the most distant peoples and cults, he opposes respect for Greek culture and its tradition. The history of art is conceived by Malraux as a series of mutations, a succession of metamorphoses by which style succeeds style. Berenson sees it as progress, trial and error, always a process of becoming. For Malraux, the forms in their multiple language express destiny. For Berenson they are the stubborn assertion of human will, of the power of civilisation over destiny. A kind of moral law obliges criticism or taste to recognise only those works in which man affirms his mastery of nature.

Thus the comparison between the two texts would set off a debate on the sense of history: the history of art or of culture or even of society. But this imaginary dialogue is coloured by the diversity of the preferences and admirations. A different aesthetics is not merely another idea of history: it is, more than that, a conflict between two sensibilities and, therefore, between two conceptions of the means and the laws of art: whether the role of the imitation of nature in artistic creation be involved, or the privilege accorded or refused the representation of man, or the disdain or respect for technique—the opinions of Malraux and Berenson are unfailingly opposed. So are, for that matter, their opinions on those aesthetic questions—the most precise, if not the most serious ones—which are raised by the contact with and the love for works of art.

For a little more than a half century, Europe's art and taste have lived through a time of great invasions; they have been won to admiration for forms previously regarded as barbaric: the works of tribes considered savage, or of civilisations hardly come to light from the depths of history, which formerly were but subjects of curiosity or erudition, have now become objects of art.

The whole of Malraux's meditation is centered on this fact. In its most studied assertions, his book refuses to be the presentation of a thesis or the expression of personal preferences. The avowed purpose of his reflection was to present and explain a historical or sociological fact: the actual nature of contemporary taste. In short, Malraux meant to answer such questions as: 'Why do African masks, terracottas of Sumer, or the schists of Gandara have the power to touch us while the pictures of Guido or Boucher do not?' It was not until a later place, in logical order if not in the

*The Chances of a Dialogue: Berenson and Malraux*

order of his attention, that the act itself of the creator would be analysed, considered always as a fact for which it is necessary to account.

This historical account, nevertheless, turned into a thesis.

Among all the voices of silence, Malraux has given a loud voice to that which is barbaric. The reader, conducted through his 'museum without walls', could not be surprised to find there Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Delacroix, the statues from Chartres, from Reims or from Naumburg, and even Cézanne: such admirations must have been familiar to him. But Celtic coins, bronzes from the steppes and Gupta sculptures had engaged his attention more recently and still hold first place. Thus, to those for whom it was intended—they are not so much historians or artists as the public—Malraux's book must seem to be, first of all, an apology for barbaric art. And, in fact, he does reject the idea of a superiority of civilised forms—which to academic culture meant, it is true, only the works of the West. He does not admit that it is obligatory to bestow greater attention on Greece than on the decomposition of its style in India, on Rome more than on the first Christian figures of Gaul. At most is it legitimate to prefer, within the frame of a given style, a period in which art expresses itself in its full strength and purity, to be wasted and softened later in the search for pleasure. Yet Malraux will always choose the archaic epoch of a style, whether it be that of Greece or of the Romanic churches: this prejudice itself goes against classical taste, which instinctively admires the greatest technical perfection, viz., the moment in which an art, master of its means, begins to use them for their own sake, forgetting the search or the passion of which they had at first been but the expression. But, according to Malraux, there can be no progress or decline except within the history of the same style, never in successions of styles.

As art is for him the expression of human feelings in the face of destiny, it is almost necessarily of all times and all peoples: no rule permits a choice. Fate is no less strong, nor is its image less poignant, when it weighs upon the meanest tribe than when it weighs upon the riches of cities or nations. The smile of Reims is not that of a more human style than the fetishes, but only of a style in which the fear of the universe did not impress so strong an image upon the acts of men. Such an art can express a happier moment of destiny, it does not express it more truthfully than does the crude form of a primitive object. 'Nothing is more corrosive to the idea of fate than great styles, whose evolution and metamorphoses seem like the long scars of destiny's passage over the earth': thus the most diverse arts are found united by a common intensity of expression. Humanism itself, in the

Greek or fifteenth-century Italian sense, has no right to any privilege except to be one of the forms of consciousness of man's relation with the world; it is neither the only nor the most valuable of these forms. Whatever the power of seduction that Greek and Gothic statues may have for Malraux, it seems that the appeal of barbaric magic, with its grimacing images of sorrow and despair, remains nevertheless dimly perceptible all through his book.

Also, the 'voices of silence' speak a language of tragedy. The tone of the book is without doubt more significant than the affirmations in which Malraux seems to rehabilitate the West and sometimes to forget a sort of latent pessimism. Its most tormenting words are those of destiny or fate. Before all serene art, where the torment of the human condition is no longer apparent, it seems that Malraux feels distrust, which easily becomes disdain: of Michelangelo's work he chooses *The Judgment* or the statues that the chisel left unfinished and whose material itself seems charged with unrest. To this taste for impassioned form corresponds a tragic idea of history and of art which bares the tensions and the inner torments of the work and of the genius.

As Malraux does not recognise the genius of Raphael, except in so far as by reason compels him to, so Berenson does not admire Michelangelo without some fear: in the Sistine Chapel he would gladly turn away from *The Judgment* to look only at the figures of the vault. All of his taste accords with this preference. For him the continuity of history is a tie between some privileged epochs and some chosen peoples: classical Greece, the France of the cathedrals, the Renaissance. Instead of a train of metamorphoses, he sees in it a chain of attempts and of conquests. The value of works must be judged according to their service to the progress of human society. Not every civilisation has its truth or its art. The function of the critic is to unmask and to condemn all form that is opposed to the development of man. This progress does not go without setbacks, without periods of decline; but it recovers and goes forward always. Art denies itself if it belittles man, even in his relation to destiny. The convictions of Malraux could not be more vitally different.

This writer, however, is concerned less with commenting on these contradictory ideas of human destiny or of history than with understanding what judgment they imply of the qualities that make masterpieces and the conditions for artistic creation. For the rest, it is likely that the encounter with works of art and the feelings inspired by them precede all

*The Chances of a Dialogue: Berenson and Malraux*

theories, if they do not determine them. Perhaps also the circumstances in which this experience occurs, differing for each one, are not extraneous—not more so than the particular sensibility of a man—to the theories that he can conceive. The aesthetics of Berenson occasionally suggest the temperament of a lover of drawings; that of Malraux rather indicates a natural preference for sculpture. The one is formed, above all, in the presence of the works, in the patient examination of the expert; it searches instinctively to discover the inimitable, to distinguish the true from the false, to recognise the weaknesses of a copy, in a style as in a picture. The text of Malraux evokes rather the passion of the spirit, intellectual speculation; the application of social analysis, the handling of books and photographs; but also travel and even adventure are inscribed here more deeply than the slow learning from collections and museums.

Berenson's book in its turn can be read as one would wander through a museum. A persevering love of works of art has deposited in it the memories of a singularly varied experience, the sum of interests gathered all through a life. Entirely oriented by a classical taste, this culture is no longer that of the humanist or academician: Chinese painting, Egyptian statuary, Romanic and Gothic churches, and even the bronzes of Benin and drawings of Lascaux meet here with the works of antiquity and the Renaissance. The objects by which geographical and historical exploration has enriched the knowledge of the West are judged by the standards of classicism: there is no art of value outside of humanism, i.e., outside the representation of man and of the human world. Any work which does not meet these demands may well evoke in us the wonders of childhood or inspire for a moment our admiration for the brilliance of a precious material, but it is never more than the glitter of barbaric artisanry. Even the glass of the Middle Ages, so prized by Malraux, inspires Berenson with a mixture of admiration and distrust. Colour itself in the last analysis is suspect to him as a misuse of the eye and the spirit, turning them away from form.

Colour is a quality of objects; the painter cannot make legitimate use of it unless he respects it as a reality; even though its appearance, far from being constant, may change under the influence of light or contrast, it is *in nature*, where the artist must perceive it before rendering it. He is not allowed free use of the hues that he finds on his palette, but only to paint with his proper means the colours of the things themselves. It is only a scarcely tolerable licence to paint, as Uccello does, horses red or green.

Likewise, objects have a form of their own which, by means of drawing and perspective, the painter can represent without altering it. At any rate, the invention of the painter is not an arbitrary act: respect for reality imposes a discipline upon him. His norm and his law is the imitation of nature.

That, in its apparent naïveté, is the doctrine of the classical tradition. It offends the modern feeling which rejects the idea that the artist should subject his work to any but interior necessity and denies that a work of art should be *compared* to anything at all. Certainly the conformism of popular taste expresses itself only in phrases like, 'the painting is like', 'the portrait is nearly alive', or finally, 'one would mistake it for the actual': Let photography and mechanical reproduction worry about satisfying the desire to recognise the depicted in the picture, to identify the individual; wax mannequins are not works of art. It is not the aim of the painter or sculptor to reproduce nature but to create. Thus contemporary aesthetics despises imitation and illusion, easily and equally, as artifices of craft. Relief, the accuracy of reflections, the proper feeling for shades are at most all minor qualities, manifestations of craftsmanship, or concessions to academic authority—when they so much as merit the attention of a critic concerned only with revelations of the absolute or with creative freedom.

But it is not sure that such severity is accompanied by an equal discernment. It is easy to pronounce the words 'imitation' and 'illusion'; it remains to be seen what consequences are implicit in this aesthetics and its refusal. Berenson has forgotten, or disdained, an easy argument to support his idea: to seek a norm outside the work, in the relation of the picture to the subject it represents, is to secure at least the advantage of a method of judgment. If art may not be subjected to the discipline of representation, what measure of its value can be proposed? Contemporary criticism readily praises the 'austerity' of abstract works; it marks the stages in the freedom of painters and sculptors; it separates the arbitrary and the necessary in construction. With that one can agree, but not without asking oneself: what sign reveals the accuracy of relations closed in the work itself, the harmony of forms which cannot be referred to any sensible reality? The law which justifies the compositions of Klee or of Miro may not be obvious. That coloured surfaces may be pleasantly displayed on a canvas is without doubt confirmed by the pleasure felt by the eye; but, to be exact, the question is not one of pleasure but of conformity to a law

which is as strict as it is secret. The inner reasoning of the painter which, from certain coloured, imagined and traced shapes, drew the first concepts of the painting, the structure of lines and shades which form an abstract work, can be reconstructed at best very sketchily. The relation of certain complementary tints, the symmetry or the movement of certain geometric tracings soon exhausts all commentary. The logic which compelled the creative act does not exist complete but in the spirit of the painter; it cannot be communicated.

In a work still subject to the demands governing the imitation of appearance, on the contrary, relations are established between the painted figures and the real world. A still life of Picasso still makes its allusion to real objects, no matter how deformed the figures. Their structures are not defined and are not judged solely in relation to the picture, arbitrarily isolated from nature, but also in relation to the guitar, the newspaper, or the milk jug of our own most simple experience. Thus the painting catches the world of the every-day visible, and aesthetic feeling is born of a complex relation between the figures and the real objects. This relation is not necessarily an immediate and complete resemblance; but it creates a common measure for ordinary every-day vision and the perception of art; it serves as a vehicle towards a universal judgment. The traditional idea of 'quality' in painting appreciated correctness of perspective, exactness of anatomical design, force in the evocation of relief; it is only an aspect of this comparison, which grows as complex and profound as the character of the relations between painted figures and nature, but remains, like a language, a store of collective and certain notions. Should one question the composition of the forms in Italian painting, for example, from Giotto to Michelangelo: the sense of order, the almost rational satisfaction born of these figures, strong in their symmetry and their correspondances, comes from their submission to a *real* necessity, the necessity of weight. These volumes built in a fictitious space suggest the foundations and the equilibrium of material things; their solidity is constructed according to a law more severe than that which rules the mason who builds with real stones, but of the same nature as that law; the arches, the alternating projections and recesses, the progressive climbing of the masses towards the centre, replace for the eye the stability of real edifices. But this effect would be impossible if the pictures of Piero della Francesca, of Mantegna, of Baldovinetti, or of the young Raphael did not claim resemblance to the real world, the nature of whose laws they have arrogated in the most secret way.

Furthermore, the very idea of imitation is profoundly equivocal. For Berenson it implies first of all that art is a relation between man and nature. Malraux, on the contrary, represents the creative act in a kind of static universe where only the works themselves exist, where a style is always the victor over another style, and never over vision itself. In Berenson's conception, as in the classical doctrine, the artist is put between man and reality; he acts as a mediator between the universe, of which he makes the picture, and the eye. Thus it would not be absurd to think that impressionism had revealed certain colours and certain lights of which no one had been aware in the landscapes of the Île de France before the canvases of Monet or of Sisley. It does not follow that the painter should or could give the *illusion* of reality: no one should forget that he is looking at a picture and not at nature. Modern aesthetics, and Malraux's in particular, has the game in its hand when it condemns an art of *illusionism*: in truth such an art has never existed. Even the baroque painter did not hope to deceive to the point of making anyone take the painted shape for the real body clothed in real fabrics: it was enough for him that the shades in the relief produce an effect similar to that of real bodies, that the hands reach from the frame.<sup>2</sup> There never was absolute illusion except in certain combinations of architecture and decoration such as the vaults of Père Pozzo and his imitators. For all figurative art the question is only to decide which appearance of reality should be chosen to symbolise it, which accents of line or volume could awaken feelings strong enough to vie with the perception of the objects, not to replace it.

It is just about this difficulty that the theory of Berenson is explicit. He claims that there is no art without verisimilitude, and that the aim of creation is to arouse feelings capable of rivalling the experience of the sensible world. But the painter does not acquire this power by an impossible fidelity of imitation; his aesthetics does not take him to the Crévin Museum. It would be the function of art to lend power to certain qualities expressive of the objects, and, above all, to relief, to weight, and to movement. Now it is evident that an object is not only volume, weight, and mobility, but that it has at the same time grain, material, that it encloses perhaps the promise of odour and taste. It is no less evident, on the other hand, that the painter or the sculptor cannot recreate the qualities of things

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, on this point, that Goya, so much admired by Malraux, does not deny himself this effect of virtuosity: in the portrait of Don Bernardo Yriarte (Museum of Strasbourg and Metropolitan Museum) the elbow pointed towards the spectator comes right out of the canvas.

but only images of them by line, colour, and volume. Thus imitation, such as Berenson conceives it to be, is itself analytical. It supposes a relation, not identity, between reality and art, even from the point of view of the spectator. Berenson thinks, indeed, that the perceptions which come from a work of art have specific properties: they are the 'imaginary sensations' which define the aesthetic sentiment.

Creation, in this hypothesis, would not be an arbitrary act independent of and without any relations to the object. On the other hand, it would not express complete docility to appearance. Nothing would, in the beginning, prevent an artist from choosing among the qualities of his objects a symbol other than relief, and from representing them by their colour rather than by their form. It would have to be admitted, however, that, to our experience, relief and movement have more expressive power than all other properties. At any rate, without the faculty to translate nature into tokens which represent it, but do not reproduce it, art would be no more than an image or vain geometry. But in massing in his design characteristics which reality offers only scattered in the continuity of acts and feelings, the painter gives them a power which our every-day experience does not have. Thus the preferences of Berenson do not go to epochs or styles which imitate reality as painstakingly and exhaustively as possible—as certain Dutch masters do—but to Giotto, to Masaccio, to Raphael. No one will fail to notice how much their pictures neglect certain qualities of objects, such as the texture of flesh or fabrics.<sup>3</sup> Giotto's people could be made of stone; Masaccio's have nothing but the muscular energy of a human body, no look of flesh.

This theory of aesthetic feeling, which Berenson had offered in his study on the Florentine painters of the Renaissance, certainly does not give us a complete explanation. Faced with the works for which it was conceived, it is difficult to deny that it accounts for their power. To the 'tactile values', Berenson himself had to add the poetry of space, the sensation of nobility and life which is born of the rhythm imposed on the imaginary depths of the distances. But the composition of the expanse, the order assigned by the painter to the volumes enclosed in the precise limits of a feigned architecture or distributed according to a law of

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<sup>3</sup> It is just these qualities which are often emphasised by artists who do not care so much about relief or movement: Gentile da Fabriano imitates cloth better than Giotto; the brocades of Grivelli are more realistic than the draperies of Mantegna; the Flemish painters of the fifteenth century are more sensitive to the particular quality of a metal than the Italians, to the point that this kind of imitation, in Antonello da Messina or Piero della Francesca, is a sign of Flemish influence.

alternation from the foreground up to the horizon, still awaits, among the causes of aesthetic admiration, a more precise analysis. The suggestion of relief by the expressive force of design, the intensity of movement written in the necessarily immobile lines, still are, as Berenson affirms, the essential value of a form of painting, of a form of sculpture, if not of all painting and all sculpture. To contest the aesthetic effect of these qualities is to stint admiration to the Pisan statues, to all the great Italian works since Giotto, and also to Van Eyck, Rubens, or Delacroix. Whatever importance the masters of European painting may have given to the analysis of colours, the harmonious play of tones, the chiaroscuro, in effect all these attempts add to the will to express relief and movement, not to annul it. An honest observer cannot fail to recognise this will, whether he looks at *The Death of Sardanapalus*, or *The Virgin of Chancelier Rollin* or *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*. To other arts—Egyptian statuary, all the work of Greece, Chinese painting—Berenson's comments may apply more or less: European art, from Giotto to Degas, can hardly be understood without recourse to his interpretation.

For Berenson imitation itself is an abstraction; it is also an idealisation of nature, insofar as it possesses plastic or decorative qualities, as Berenson calls them. This explanation is necessary to understand another law of his aesthetics: art, he writes, wishes to represent a humanity more sane, happier, more gracious, more distinguished, more noble, more heroic than we are. Taken literally, such an affirmation would refer to the subject matter of the work; it implies a preference for embellished images of reality if not the taste for an optimistic presentation in the manner of Van Dyck in his portraits, of David, or even the naïve academic imagery. It accords very badly with the views of modern aesthetics—we need only recall the theory of the '*beau idéal*' which Malraux holds responsible for the degradation of art since the sixteenth century. But, taken in this sense, it does not agree with the preferences of Berenson himself: these evidently do not go to either Steven or Bouguereau. Classical aesthetics, likewise, associates the exigence of a likeness as perfect as possible, i.e., of a certain realism, to that of an harmonious representation, i.e., a false one, of the human body and of nature. This contradiction, however, is not insoluble, according to Berenson, although it undoubtedly corresponds to two different tendencies of his spirit. The masterpiece does not reproduce the forms which would please the eyes or the sentiment, if they were true: art must surely not diminish the intensity of life which objects have in themselves;

*The Chances of a Dialogue: Berenson and Malraux*

on the contrary, it raises this intensity for the very reason that it suggests only certain of its qualities, chosen for that effect. Without these plastic virtues an image would be a vain flattery of our inclinations, however idealistic it might be. Whether the personages of Giotto were beautiful or ugly loses any importance: abstraction, changing them into contour and colours, gives them an aplomb and a force more expressive than that of real bodies.

There remains the fact that the aesthetics of Berenson rejects certain extremes of expression, whether they be the effect of passion or of a *parti-pris* in favour of realism, as in the case of Caravaggio. When El Greco elongates the limbs of his figures, when Grunewald imposes on Christ the weight of a head too heavy for his twisted body, art commits an error. Imitation and idealisation remain necessary disciplines. A sort of respect for Man ought to bound the creative liberty of the artist as if the classical precept of 'decency', although quite forgotten, should find, in a different form, a new force. The reason for such a rule is undoubtedly more moral than aesthetic; it accords with the function which Berenson assigns to art in history but, applied to the works themselves, it is surprising because it seems to condemn admiration for certain things which it is difficult not to admire. To be exact, it corresponds to a hierarchy of aesthetic sentiments rather than to an absolute refusal: it expresses a preference for a discreet art, the art of Velasquez as opposed to the art of El Greco.

No matter: all these affirmations go against the most common tendencies of contemporary taste. That taste arouses the anger of Berenson when it yields to the seduction of an art which ignores or disdains the representation of man, when it allows itself to be captivated by the awkward works of naïveté or savagery, by the exaggerated forms of expressionism; undoubtedly even his judgment of El Greco, on two occasions, shows the effects of this irritation. This, on the other hand, is the kind of admiration which Malraux wants to legitimise. For him, figuration is only one of the metamorphoses of art; even the representation of the human body does not deserve any privileges; imitation of objects, realism, are only passing disciplines, and more often the vain preoccupations of civilisations gone insipid. The very idea of awkwardness is only a prejudice of academism. While Berenson rejects all work which does not represent man or the world of his sensations, Malraux welcomes into his museum without walls the pure ornamentation of interlacing figures or the decomposition of forms in the Celtic coins. For him, Miro and Klee, like so many of the

barbaric works, express man without representing him, and better than if they represented him. And although he recognises the power of an art of imitation—that of the Middle Ages or the Far East—he searches in it for the deformation of the body rather than its likeness. Whatever the intelligence and the emotion he may reveal in his commentaries on the sculpture of Olympia or the frescoes of Giotto: only torn scripture, brutality of accents or angles, a violent abstraction of forms, twisting or smashing the contours of reality, can animate his phrase to a thrill: the more a style tortures the figures, as in the *Regents* of Hals or the *Hours* of Rohan, the better he identifies in it that stamp of inquietude and genius without which no work seems to strike the depths of his sensibility. All the hierarchy of his preference is ordered by an instinctive aversion against the docility of art to common vision.

The very idea of a resemblance between reality and the sculptured or painted forms appears to him not only as a perversion of taste, but as an illusion: only the prejudices of a conventional classicism could deceive the eye to the point of claiming that Raphael or Leonardo painted more realistically than Giotto. Moreover that would not have been a merit.

This contempt for illusion is extended even to the most abstract qualities of nature, like space. It is, in effect, one of the habitual tendencies of modern aesthetics to disavow linear or aerial perspective and to value it only as a 'symbolic' representation of expanse: Lhote tries to show how an arbitrary system of 'screens' and 'passages' can represent a dimension different from real depth even in the painters of the sixteenth century like Patinir. In the same way Malraux affirms that Georges de Latour, whom he admires, expresses certain volumes as if they were surfaces: that would be a way of escaping from the tyranny of illusion and of arriving at genius. It is true that Latour often prefers to encompass his reliefs with a smooth surface and to paint, e.g., a cloth without creases, when the others rumple the cloth to make more surfaces. Where Michelangelo or especially Rubens<sup>4</sup> would be inclined to swell the muscles of an arm to show up contrasting curves or to divide the light, it would suit him better, on the contrary, to model almost unified forms, near to geometric solids. But where is the proof that he tries thus, not to simplify the volumes in order to make them more expressive, but to abolish them? That certain profiles, sharply illumined, or, on the contrary, bathed in the shade, do not present

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<sup>4</sup>Rubens made designs from the figures of the Sistine Chapel: but his nude limbs are more lumpy than their models, a more divided light strikes the more numerous juttings out.

*The Chances of a Dialogue: Berenson and Malraux*

reliefs as plastic as the nearby figures, caught in the contrast of the light, might be just an effect of observation. His way of representing space is certainly personal, even in those paintings where the hand of less adroit pupils has not excessively weakened the relief; his objective is nevertheless the representation of depth. It is still more surprising that Malraux discerns a similar tendency in Piero della Francesca, who would perhaps have been struck to learn that his perspective of plan and the calculated disposition of his masses did not *represent* space. If Vermeer liked to cut up space, to hold it in perpendicular planes, to break its perspectives on the side, in the vanishing rectangle of a window, rather than to open it up in the background of his canvases, this does not prove that he refused the illusionism of space. It reveals, rather, how personal was his approach to suggesting its existence. It is obvious that a painter cannot reduce the three dimensions of reality to the surface of his picture without some subterfuge; but perhaps it is not prudent to conclude from this that the painter rejects illusion, or a certain form of illusion. No one would think, there again, to walk right into the countryside of La Gioconda or to pass behind Federico di Montefeltro, right into the tiny world of hills and rivers which form the background of his portrait: it is nevertheless true that the one as well as the other vie to arouse the impression that a real expanse would give us.

However, at this point of their disaccord, Berenson and Malraux touch on the same problem of pure aesthetics. Whatever may be the point under discussion—whether or not the content of a work lays the foundation of its value; whether imitation is the law of art or a fake discipline; or whether a masterpiece can be created without skill—there arises the same question: among the organic elements which any analysis distinguishes in the work of art—technique and inspiration or subject matter, plastic qualities and meaning—any theory and, implicitly, any criticism, parcels out the roles and establishes a hierarchy.

The invention of judicious forms can be considered the sole criterion of art. Thus, André Lhote, whose likes and dislikes are so similar to Malraux's, pays attention exclusively to those qualities which dispose and order, in a picture, the calculated alternation of lines and values, of ornaments and tones, so that they correspond to the universal laws of number and of rhythm. Neither feeling nor meaning matters: creation is but an exercise of genius. It is not at the same time a craft. The technique can itself be an invention. The virtue of art resides only in the mastery of forms.

Inversely, all the power of the masterpiece can be attributed to inspiration. The merit of the painter or of the sculptor consists then of the feeling which he expresses. But this poetry is often confused with the invention of the subject or its interpretation; in any case, it is difficult to separate them. This form of evaluation is common among writers, like Diderot or even Baudelaire. Greuze was a great painter because his family scenes are moral and because the people there act their roles well; the sketches of the Crimean War show the genius of Constantin Guys because the figures of the soldiers are true, etc. Summed up this way, such an idea may seem naïve; yet it is held by a majority of the public. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century it dictated the hierarchy of the genres, which was nothing but a hierarchy of subject matters. But any judgment which appraises a work on account of a moral or of a sentiment subordinates style to subject matter. Even the truthfulness of the gestures, in a picture, cannot be felt except in relation to the scene represented. As for the rest, whether one admires *L'Angélu*s of Millet for the piety of its peasants or for the poetry of its evening; or *The Barricade* of Delacroix as a revolutionary work; or some interior of Mitsu or of Boilly because it offers a touching image of family life—the aesthetic bias is the same. In disregarding, intentionally, the plastic qualities of a work of art, iconography does not mean to prejudge the foundation of its value; but it is no less liable to accord more interest to the contents of a work than to its style.

In this quarrel of inspiration and form, neither Berenson nor Malraux is quite explicit. Like Focillon, they both discard the common opinion which encloses the creative act in the imagination and believes that the singularity of the artist is to be found in the intensity of the dream: they stop at the figures which the hand traces or models rather than at the phantoms of a dream of which these would be the images.

Malraux, for his part, justifies aesthetic feeling by the meaning of the masterpieces because they express human destiny. By this he does not mean the subject matter, however. Forms have, for him, a specific language: their expression has nothing to do with whatever they represent or with the emotion which they deliberately try to arouse. It is this expression which counts, however, not the vain assemblage of sounds which would be like a word without the sense that animates it. Nothing is more contrary to the plastic analysis of Lhote; but the literary approach to art, conceived as an illustration, does not find grace in the eyes of Malraux.

Contemporary criticism has a loathing for the 'anecdote': art cannot lower itself to recount, any more than to imitate, without losing dignity;

for its function, in this aesthetics of the absolute, is not to please. Indifference towards the subject matter does not suffice: one must feel a horror of it. That is undoubtedly why actual taste so readily permits the painter to deform or decompose the appearance of the objects, if he intends to represent them at all. Abstraction is less appreciated for the plastic efforts that it presupposes than for the havoc it wreaks on the subject matter. Now, if the 'meaning' of Malraux is not anecdote, it is still not easy to separate it from the 'narrative', as long as this 'narrative' has even a minimum of noblesse. In all Christian art, if not in all religious art, there exist scenes which are themselves expressions of faith; the Nativity or the Pietà at any rate are narrations. Christ and the Virgin are personages as are the saints: they carry within them a history, a character. Malraux's aesthetics is not secular. It accepts the crucifixion or the manger, painted or sculptured, for their meaning: an admission in spite of all, that the subject matter is of indifference in art. Thus Malraux does not simply reject all that is subject matter in a work of art. He rather distinguishes different qualities of inspiration, but inspiration, in that case, is but a relationship between the artist and his subject matter. The presentation of the birth of Christ, in an epoch of faith, would be a work of art: not so the representation of the retreat from Russia—unless you considered Napoleon a god. The subject is hateful only if it is extraneous to the deep sentiment of an artist and, above all, to the meaning of a civilisation.

On this point, the idea of Malraux appears more just and more refined than the rejection of all forms of illustration. Considering all the arts of the past, and especially those of Christianity, this rejection scarcely appears to have any meaning. For the painter or the sculptor of the Middle Ages, it is likely in effect, as Malraux observes, that a statue or a picture is above all a Christ or a Virgin. It is less certain that a Venus of Titian is essentially a goddess. It is only in modern art, after Manet, that Malraux can legitimately recognise the absence of or the contempt for subject matter and the search for an absolute of forms: and he finds himself in accord with that attitude. But when he writes, '*The Execution of Maximilian* by Manet is *The Third of May* by Goya, if you take away the meaning of that picture', he could also have said, 'without the subject matter of that picture.' For, before Manet, at least, there is no work of art without a subject matter. It remains to be seen what conclusion should be drawn from this statement.

Of eighteenth-century France, Malraux is willing to admire scarcely anything except Chardin: that choice does not lack motives. However,

when he justifies it with the reason that a painter of still life is free of anecdote, he only expresses once more that aversion against the human figure which is one of the tendencies of his aesthetics, as opposed to that of Berenson. But the common taste of our epoch, which leans more towards still life than towards mythology, portrait, or *genre*, is not susceptible of a reasonable explanation. Except for the difference of the subject matter, in what way would a bowl of peaches be different from a birth of Venus or a Diana at her bath? Only a singular illusion could carry us to the assumption, from the simple fact of the things represented, that the picture which shows fruit is a work of art while the painted goddesses would be only an 'image of glut'. Any representation can invoke somehow pleasure or sentimentality: there are gourmands, hunters, or mothers to love the plates of fruit, the game, dead or alive, or the portraits of children. A spectator really indifferent to a subject matter—who would be perhaps a sincere lover of art—would not feel any difficulty in admiring the great composition of Rubens: the life of Maria de' Medici could not hide from him the genius of its painter. The average taste of the modern public which is content with the semblance with nature, inherent in classic art, and which, on the other hand, is disturbed by the system of 'illustration', whether religious or mythological, of that same tradition, cannot be insensible to the subject. The baths of Diana, the geniuses of victory, the virtues of Scipio, seem to them to belong to a dead language, but the scenes from the Gospel or the lives of the saints embarrass them no less. All the rhetoric of the painter of history, which the art critics appreciated so much in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, conceals, for the modern eye, the plastic value which the painters, after the Renaissance, attached to the representation of the human body. From Raphael to Rubens, the form of man has served as element of composition, as if it were a geometric volume; the Italian painters of the baroque talk of limbs and muscles as one would talk today of cubes and spheres. But to perceive this, one must forget that these gestures can be read also like the setting of a tragedy—or an opera—played for ever by the personages of fable or sacred legend. To the cultivated public after the end of the Middle Ages, these little histories or these allegories undoubtedly were no less familiar than the silver cups, the faience dishes, and the bread of the Dutch or Flemish still lifes, just as the episodes of the Bible were no less familiar to the Christian public than the portraits of princes. There must have been a moment when the subject matter of a still life seemed more surprising—and therefore more important—than those of mythological

scenes or the lives of saints. Today, on the other hand, the spectator knows neither one nor the other, so that he perceives only the painting itself, for which they serve only as pretexts. Also it is not so sure that, for Malraux's acute vision, the virtue of Chardin's still life lies in the rejection of illustration: at the most, the absence of illustration would reveal more sharply the quality of the painting.

The definition of an art of *assouvissement*, such as suggested by the text of Malraux, suffers from a similar ambiguity. It may be granted that the *1814* of Meissonier, the nudes of Bouguereau, or *The Sacred Woods* of Böcklin are only images; granted, also, that they are the result of anecdote, the servility to pleasure or to sentimentality. But perhaps it would be enough, after all, to consider the plastic qualities of these pictures: *The Graces*, *The Game of Teetotum*, and even *The Soothsayer* are subjects too, which not even the worst imagery would disavow, and the curves of Titian are undoubtedly more voluptuous than those of Bouguereau.

Malraux's reflection, however, leads up to an affirmation less easy to fathom. For him, form is meaning. The specific language of the masterpiece is the style. In this sense, Malraux rehabilitates 'technique'<sup>5</sup> although he does not use the word. Since indeed the painting or the sculpture does not express what it represents, if it represents anything at all, the secret of its meaning can be contained only in the very manner of the artist, or his style, in the signature of his boldness or the habits of his hand. If this technique itself is inspired, if it translates, without always knowing it, an idea of destiny or of man, the power of a masterpiece nevertheless resides in it. This is why Malraux is justified in isolating such particular aspects of representation: the sharp edges or the softened surfaces in sculptured faces, which give him his best examples because sculpture is undoubtedly the art which most touches his sensibility. It is the stylistic study, not the iconographic examination, which reveals the essence of a work. Whether technique is or is not the substance of art, it is in it that we must learn to read.

To believe that the power of a work—save perhaps, in some chance and lucky instances—owes nothing to pure formal invention; that it does not depend on the docility of the hand; that the artist's gift is not also a gift of 'know-how', though perhaps a 'know-how' itself created by

<sup>5</sup> This word covers all of the means which the artist uses to realise his work. It is the part of artistic creation which relates neither to the subject nor to the meaning. The painted or sculptured forms are the accomplishments of a technical operation which begins with the choice of the material, of the base or the pigments, but includes the various workings of the hand, chisel or brush-strokes, the procedures of imitation, and the composition itself.

the imagination of genius: nothing would take us farther away from the discovery of the real properties of art. If Rembrandt, El Greco, or the sculptor of *The Devout Christ* had a deeper feeling for sacred history or faith than their contemporaries, who would care for their piety if they had not found the art of inscribing it on their canvas or wood? Think how irrelevant would be a journal of Rembrandt, compared with the least of his paintings; one would look there only for the history of his pictures. Malraux's idea on this point is undoubtedly in accord with the feeling of those who love works of art not as a testimony of the past, not as the reviewing of a state of the soul, but for their own qualities. Whatever its theoretical meaning, attention brought to bear on the forms of expression, is a method; undoubtedly it finds its justification, one way or another.

Such was, more directly, the attitude of Berenson. When he published his work on the Italian painters of the Renaissance, in a period completely engrossed with questions of significance and with symbolism, the strength and the novelty of his judgment lay in the interest finally accorded to the plastic qualities of a work of art, which he calls 'decorative' qualities. Both his conception of history and his hierarchy of painters are based on the consideration of these qualities; more than that, the power of the 'tactile values', the intensity of relief, of motion or weight enclosed in the design with a craftsmanship ever growing since Cimabue and Duccio, are the foundations of his aesthetics, and explain the very feeling of art.

Meanwhile, this potency of forms is gaining; it requires a technique. Imitation, also in this sense, is impossible without expertness. For a long time, no one would have conceived of art at all without apprenticeship. In the seventeenth century mastery and genius were hardly separable. The very term 'masterpiece' is an artisan's expression in an age taking the badly executed and the barbarous to be one and the same. Berenson certainly would fall in with this conception; for him the progress of the painter's technique, from Cimabue to Leonardo, for example, is progress in art. Raphael's craftsmanship allows a more *truthful* representation of the human body than the Byzantine technique; and this veracity in imitation is an aesthetic quality. Whatever the impression Berenson may have had from such Byzantine works as the mosaics of St. Cosmas and St. Damian, he would never admit that they could be considered the equals of the frescoes of the Arena or the Carmine. The history of painting from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century consists of a series of *discoveries*, of successive solutions reaching the *problems* of representation: with these

same words one might describe as well the progress of a science. Painting, after Raphael, as in the time of Giotto, is not so much forgetful of the fact that the beliefs of society have changed as it is unreasonably heedless of a means of action: it insists, so to speak, on using the hoe when there are ploughs on hand.

For this very reason classical taste has shown an indiscriminate contempt for all works prior to Raphael. Berenson however does not share this attitude: a Giotto fresco is not inferior to a picture by Perugino or Leonardo, still less—whatever the judgment of the cultivated public until the middle of the nineteenth century—to the minor paintings of the Bolognese school. But this reasoning seems contradictory: how are we to understand this progress which, far from relegating these works of the past to the ranks of historical testimony, leaves them their value eternally? To justify Berenson, one should accept the idea that in a privileged epoch, such as the Italian Renaissance, certain plastic qualities have been developed from their first expression to their greatest forcefulness. The means may afterwards have become subtler and more varied, but they could not surpass the forcefulness of those first inventions: the study of anatomy and the analysis of space do not efface the massive forms of Giotto. Furthermore, the discovery of a new plastic quality confers upon the masterpiece a power which cannot be imitated; the first line that designated movement after centuries of immobility will not give up its secret to any acquired skill. Genius receives skill and invents technique. In this respect the admiration of an old masterpiece certainly does not resemble that tenderness for the historical which is evoked by the contemplation of the first watch or the first loom. The admiration of a masterpiece of art is evoked by its own specific quality.

But Berenson denies ever having granted formal values the highest rank in his aesthetics. Illustration seems to him no less important an element of art.

From the beginning, with the Italian painters of the Renaissance his analysis has proceeded as a psychology of the spectator. Our self-awareness forces us to admit that the feeling of art, as dependent as it may be upon the mute beauty of forms, cannot be isolated from the echoes awakened around it of feelings or dreams in harmony with the desire of the character of the individual. Faith is not an element necessarily extraneous to the admiration for the Roncalli Pietà, nor is love of nature necessarily a thing distinct from the admiration of a Song landscape. Berenson in his turn concludes therefrom

that decoration cannot be separated from illustration, the form from the meaning; that is the very conclusion reached by Malraux. In the complex development of his thought, however, in summing up a very long experience and a daily reflection, a single proposition cannot by itself account for his opinion; as in Malraux's book, though less openly, the affirmations that follow one another are moments of reasoning, almost pauses, rather than the sole expression of recognised truth. Granted that the decorative element must not be detached from its content, since both are merged in one and the same feeling of admiration: but the perfection of forms remains the foundation of art; the decisive quality of the bisons of Altamira, as of the paintings of Degas or of Cézanne, is to suggest motion or relief; that is the only indispensable element of art. All the rest, brilliance of colours or charm of representation, is only superfluity which can fill the senses or enchant the eye but not establish the value of a work. Without inventiveness of design, without the sharpness of vision which brings together in one line the substantial qualities of forms, any art would exhaust itself vainly to express a thought.

Even in the dialectics of Malraux a sentence appears, here and there a supposition, which would justify other preferences than his own, as if he had not been able to regulate all the admirations which he felt possible; this is the case where he puts in doubt his own disdain for the eighteenth-century English portrait. Any reflection on art forces us to accept, though it be for an instant, different and contradictory convictions if it expresses an experience of works of art: these impose on every sincere spirit, as long as he is admiring them, their own truth. Thus one would be tempted to choose, from all of Malraux's pages, those passages where his intelligence investigates the works themselves in their particular qualities, had he not found at times words so vitally expressive of the outburst of feeling aroused by a statue or a picture: when the *Jeune fille au turban* becomes a 'translucent pebble', it is of little importance that the art of Vermeer be grasped exactly through reasoning; the style suffices to render the beauty of a painted work, and Malraux is here an artist himself rather than the reasoning commentator of the art of others. For the rest, searching his book only for commentary on visual art, one would love to stop at the pages which are engrossed with the sculptural force of Giotto's frescoes, or isolate such details as the modelled eye-lids or the lips of Gothic or Indian statues. Where attention is fixed upon a work to justify its power, aesthetic reflection justifies itself more than in his doctrine.

*The Chances of a Dialogue: Berenson and Malraux*

One might say, in this sense—without forcing the resemblance—that from different approaches Malraux and Berenson end up, nevertheless, in a similar orientation. Their disagreement remains a quarrel of tastes: to the defensive distrust of Berenson, so anxious to clear aesthetic feelings of ill-founded admirations, responds the receptivity of Malraux, persistent in justifying the preferences of his age. But despite the regrets or the passing contradictions of their thought, they return unfailingly to the same concern: to question only the works themselves, and to consider objects or feelings only insofar as they are represented, denied, or transformed in statues or paintings. Hence their common aversion against subject matter, literary merit or sentimental aesthetics. Many reservations are effaced before the utility of such an attitude. That the taste which Malraux wants to justify in his sociology of art is not the taste of the large public but only of certain circles; that he is unable to give a valid explanation of all of European art because he follows too closely certain current aesthetic trends; that the theories of Berenson, on the other hand, justify but scantily certain forms of art too alien to his taste; that this taste may seem too narrow, for instance, when he rejects, however reluctantly, even the glass of the Middle Ages: all this is less important than discipline upon which both insist.

Berenson's prejudices therefore count little, no matter whether one agrees or does not agree with the pages where he explains the power of certain qualities of art: 'Motion is the pure energy which gives life to the arabesque. There is a tendency here towards aesthetic identification, as if there were something in me which lived the life of the contour, when it glides, moves, turns, smooth or rugged, always endowed with life and with sensibility . . .' The state of grace which a beautiful drawing can give has certainly never been more exactly described.

Thus the essential remains this discipline of analysis, applied to works and solicitous to discover there the autonomy of art. In the spirit of Malraux curiosity for and love of masterpieces never efface his own creative temperament, so fascinated at the same time by the history and by the singularity of genius, that he is tempted to form both the one and the other in the image of his own passions. That is why his book is perhaps less than Berenson's a breviary for those who want to learn how to see. But the movement which thus carries contemporary criticism to a discernment of the particular properties of a work of art validates too many of his observations: undoubtedly there is food for thought here for a wider public. To deny that the masterpiece may be defined by the pleasure it gives

implies, first of all, that this pleasure is rarely the effect of art, and often originates in a ready sentimentality: on that point Berenson and Malraux would agree. In this respect, aesthetic admiration would not be facile sentiment; reflection on art has the merit that it makes us experience its difficulty and thus curtails the biases of each of us. Faced with the works of art, we learn that the taste for the pastorals of Huet or the coloured splendour of the early Hals is more spontaneous than the taste for Pol-laiuolo or for Piero della Francesca. The facility of a lovable art is in no danger of lacking admirers. The history of art would not suffer greatly from a discipline which would force it to do some homework, in the form of a patient commentary, such as exists in the history of literature.