

CHAPTER 16

Nineteenth Century Responses to Montaigne and Bruno: A Context for Pater

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MANY OF PATER'S CRITICS have identified in his fiction Pater's response to the intellectual and historical debates of his day.¹ More recently, writers have indicated its appeal both to a wider conventional audience and to an elite readership capable of discerning those carefully veiled references which effectively undermine the apparent moral conformity of the text.² Both these approaches have enabled commentators to regard Pater's presentation of historical figures as further evidence of a deliberate ambivalence, of those "strong but fluctuating identifications" which inform his writing.³ In the light of such research this paper provides an outline of the British context in which Pater created his portraits of Montaigne and Bruno. In particular, I note how, despite a continuing debate over their moral worth, both were increasingly celebrated during the second half of the nineteenth century for the freedom of thought they were seen to represent. By reference to the published and manuscript portions of *Gaston*, I discuss both Pater's sympathetic response to Montaigne and Bruno and his doubts concerning the moral and aesthetic consequences of their philosophies of indifference. In addition, they are associated in the manuscripts with a decadence which simultaneously repels and attracts.⁴ I should like to suggest that Pater manipulated this ambivalent response to form an ironic comment on the duplicity of later nineteenth-century society which had come to associate Montaigne and Bruno with its own moral and liberal self-image.

Donald Frame indicates how Romanticism led to a revival of French interest in Montaigne, but one which attended to his personality rather than to his ideas.⁵ The enthusiasm in France described by Frame is also evident in England. In 1827, for example, *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* published an article discussing passages marked by Byron in his copy of Cotton's translation of the *Essays*. The article examines the link between Byron and Montaigne and particularly defends Montaigne against the charge of "egotism" by finding this "term very ill applied to the self-

reflections of such men."⁶ In 1828 Landor's fictional portrait of Montaigne appeared; in it Montaigne converses with Scaliger and shows him around his house. The reader thus overhears the servants praising God for the kindness and thoughtfulness of their master. The image here is of a man with Epicurean tendencies, whose wit and tolerance outfaces Scaliger.⁷

Such early British admiration for Montaigne's tolerance and self-criticism must be balanced against the evident disapproval of a supposed moral indifference. Carlyle's entry on the essayist, written for Brewster's *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* (1820-23), exemplifies an ambiguity of tone which British writers continued to adopt up to the end of the century. Carlyle found it possible to excuse Montaigne for his apparent egotism because "a modern reader will not easily cavil at the patient and good-natured, though exuberant, egotism which brings back to our view 'the form and pressure' of a time long past."⁸ However, Carlyle could not equate Montaigne's apparent religious scepticism with the pious death recorded in the biographies. Nor could Carlyle accept those sections of the *Essays* in which Montaigne indulges in a discussion he finds needlessly crude, and he concludes that Montaigne "deserves the bad pre-eminence in love at once of coarseness and obscenity."⁹ This mixture of responses continues among late nineteenth-century commentators. Pater would have been aware of a strong body of moral criticism which existed alongside an increasing admiration for Montaigne as a freethinker who demonstrated tolerance in an age of bigotry.

Writing in the 1920s Irene Cooper Willis complained that Montaigne's whole moral outlook had been undermined by the excessively scrupulous Victorians.¹⁰ This kind of outlook can be seen in an extreme form in the writings of Alexander Vinet, who reaches the simplistic conclusion that atheism leads to immorality. His essay of the 1830s was published in English in 1850, his translator also attacking Montaigne with the claim that "God was often on his lips, as in his writings, but not in his thoughts, above all, not in his affections," and thus adding hypocrisy to Vinet's charge of immorality.¹¹ Again, writing in 1857, the Oxford theologian R. W. Church suggested that Montaigne's scepticism was his own fault, being the result of that same weakness of character that displayed itself in the crudities of his work.¹² The persistence of this rather prudish view is demonstrated by John Owen's inclusion of a footnote dismissing Church and defending Montaigne in his book on sceptics of the French Renaissance published as late as 1893.¹³

Despite an evident dislike of what was regarded as crudeness and moral laxity on Montaigne's part, a fascination with his personality, initiated by the Romantics, developed into an alternative view of him as a perplexed and modern man. This was combined with attempts to understand Montaigne as a character and thinker in the context of his complex age rather than to judge him by nineteenth-century standards. The result was a more generally sympathetic viewpoint. F. D. Maurice, for example, described Montaigne as being no common observer of human nature. He discussed Montaigne within his social

context, as an aristocrat believing that moral principles "might be safely trusted to the instincts and cultivated sense at least of gentlemen than to the judgement of professional sages of any school."¹⁴ So, although Maurice did not approve completely of Montaigne, he provided an historical explanation of what others read as a deliberate and arrogant flouting of traditional religious values. In 1858 Bayle St. John published the first book on Montaigne in English and the first extended life of him in any language.¹⁵ St. John found in Montaigne's supposed egotism the source of nineteenth-century empathy with him: "Ordinary selfishness repels; but the selfishness of Montaigne seems to make him more amiable. There is something feminine about it; but, more than this, we feel it to be a flattered portrait, that will bear public exhibition, of our own cruel indifference to the wants and sufferings of our fellow-creatures."¹⁶ In 1865 W. E. H. Lecky also used the term "indifference" in connection with Montaigne, not to describe him as callous, but to praise him for his neutrality and refusal to become embroiled in the contentions of his day.¹⁷

Arnold's response to Montaigne was similarly approving. In his 1861 essay "On Translating Homer" Arnold had spoken of Montaigne as the epitome of the ideal critic, referring to the "ondoyant et divers" (undulating and diverse) being of Montaigne.¹⁸ In 1863 he cited Montaigne as one of "the excellent markers and recorders of the traits of human life," placing him in the same category as La Bruyère and Addison.¹⁹ Perhaps the most significant remark of Arnold's on Montaigne, in terms of the new approach it embodies, is his comment in an 1877 article that rescues the essayist from the still pressing charge of immorality, by redefining moral behaviour and by setting Montaigne alongside other artists. Morality, Arnold argues, cannot be judged according to changing standards of action, but according to a common motivation. Thus Arnold acknowledged a link between Montaigne and Shakespeare: "The master-pressure upon their spirit is the pressure exercised by this same thought: 'Let the good prevail.' And the result is that they deal with the life of all of us the life of man in its fulness and greatness."²⁰ It is this overall restoration of Montaigne's reputation that lies behind such popular accounts as that given by Lynn Linton in 1894 in which Montaigne is characterized as kind, honest, and as "one of the acutest thinkers the world has ever seen."²¹

Pater's image of Montaigne in the published parts of *Gaston* owes more to the approving tone of Arnold than the moralistic approach of Carlyle. Pater stresses not Montaigne's coarseness, but his wonderful "fineness of sensation"²² and praises Montaigne for maintaining basic moral decency which is "better than any kind of heroism, in an age whose very virtues were apt to become insane."²³ Even his link with the later "immodesty of French literature"²⁴ shows him in a favourable light, as an artist making a serious contribution to modern style, while his scepticism may be regarded as a prelude to the acknowledgement of faith as a "certain great possibility, which might lie among the conditions of so complex a world."²⁵ Although criticism may be detected in the way Pater presents Montaigne's friendship with de la Boetie as the one experience that breaks

through Montaigne's indifferent and controlled emotional life, Pater's depiction enhances the earlier Romantic use of Montaigne as a symbol of devoted male friendship which yet retained respectability.²⁶

However, sympathy for Montaigne's relativistic philosophy is matched by doubts about its moral implications. Pater's account also acknowledges how the "suspended judgement,"²⁷ which leads to Montaigne's tolerance, is based upon egotism; the "one subject always in prominence himself."²⁸ While such self-reference may be acceptable as a moral basis, it is itself undermined by the impossibility of fixing any permanent image of the self amidst flux. Instead Montaigne presents us with images of the "disparate . . . men who keep discordant company within each one of us."²⁹ Montaigne's relativism as the "proper intellectual equivalent to the infinite possibility of things"³⁰ leads both to egotism and to a loss of that sense of identity which ensures moral order. The tapestries depicting Circe that hang on the walls of Montaigne's tower represent not only the enchanting atmosphere there, but also the interweaving of good and evil inherent in Montaigne's philosophy.³¹ Similarly, while the progression of *Gaston*, such as it is, leads the protagonist away from the relativism of Montaigne and towards the absolutism of Bruno, in the decadent atmosphere of Valois Paris, their distinctive voices merge for Gaston, just as his presence becomes indistinguishable in the text. The "opportunist" philosophies of Montaigne and Bruno complete a circle of indifference;³² their apparent reasonableness inevitably subsumed into Valois decadence.

Pater's interest in Bruno reflects a contemporary resurgence of interest in "the Nolan" as James Joyce was to call him,³³ associated with the Risorgimento and culminating in the unveiling of a statue in Rome on 9 June 1889 to mark the place where Bruno had been burnt as a heretic in 1600. Controversy over the memorial epitomized the late nineteenth-century Italian reaction against what was perceived as the anti-scientific and anti-intellectual Roman Catholic church.³⁴ In August of the same year Pater's article "Giordano Bruno, Paris: 1586" appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*. The revised version of this article forms chapter seven of *Gaston*.

Analyzing the adulation of Bruno in the last century, Frances Yates traces it back to the publication of Domenico Berti's book on Bruno in 1867.³⁵ This biography opened the way for the use of Bruno as an heroic figure by liberals and intellectuals during the 1870s. Of course earlier writers had also discussed Bruno and may have influenced Pater directly as well as have moulded general opinion to which he also responded. Schelling's favourable book had appeared in 1802, and in a footnote to the fifth number of *The Friend*, Coleridge writes of his intention to give: "hereafter an account of the life of Giordano Bruno, . . . a vigorous mind struggling after truth, amid many prejudices, which from the state of the Roman Church, in which he was born, have a claim to much Indulgence."³⁶ Henry Hallam's remark of 1839 that it is "not uncommon in modern books to find an eulogy on the philosopher of Nola"³⁷ suggests that other writers before 1850 shared Coleridge's

admiration for Bruno. Hallam's tone is far less adulatory. In the second volume of his *Introduction to the Literature of Europe* he finds that Bruno's doctrines are unoriginal and dogmatic in their reduction of the "most subtle and incomprehensible mysteries into positive aphorisms of science."³⁸ Pater borrowed a copy of this volume from Queen's College library in December 1863 and may have absorbed something of Hallam's view of Bruno's philosophy as fundamentally amoral.³⁹

Various images of Bruno emerged during the 1870s and the 1880s, different commentators championing him as a symbol of the "valiant soldier of the right, a fearless defender of his belief, a magnanimous advocate of truth."⁴⁰ This picture of his life as a "struggle against authority in favour of reason,"⁴¹ was enhanced by John Tyndall's Belfast lecture of 1874, in which he claimed that Bruno was an important forerunner of modern science and especially of the new physics.⁴² The other image was of Bruno as an intensely religious man. This was the kind of view taken by Ian Frith in his biography of 1887 in which Bruno is presented as an untainted hero.⁴³

However, it was the rationalists who became the greatest champions of Bruno, regarding him as an example of their own struggle against superstition. The tone had already been set by G. H. Lewes in his influential *Biographical History of Philosophy*.⁴⁴ Writing in the same tradition, Annie Besant extravagantly describes Bruno as "this grandest hero of Freethought, this man who lived and died so nobly that he carved his name forever on the marble temple of Fame."⁴⁵ Isa Blagden, writing in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1871, also celebrates Bruno as a "martyr for freedom of thought and liberty of opinion"; similarly, Arthur Moss declares that "Freethought has had no more ardent lovers, philosophy no more diligent students, persecution no more fearless victims, than Bruno and Spinoza."⁴⁶

This veneration of Bruno reached its peak in the mid-1880s and led to some opposition shown in the earnest debate about the historical certainty of Bruno's having been burnt at the stake.⁴⁷ The English National Committee was set up in 1885 in connection with an international group formed to ensure the erection of a monument to the memory of Bruno. New heights of praise were reached in the *Agnostic Annual* for the same year, 1885:

Hero of heroes, hail! No nobler name
 Gleams 'mid the galaxy of human pride;
 Nor brighter story lights the scroll of Fame
 Than that which tells the world how BRUNO died!⁴⁸

Swinburne had been a founder member of the English committee and in 1889 wrote a commemorative poem on the occasion of the unveiling of the statue:

Cover thine eyes and weep, O Child of hell,
 Grey spouse of Satan, Church of name abhorred.
 . . . Rome, redeemed at last
 From all the red pollution of thy past,
 Acclaims the grave bright face that smiled of yore
 Even on the fire that caught it round and clomb
 To cast its ashes on the face of Rome.⁴⁹

Similarly, though less emotionally, J. A. Symonds was to write of Bruno in 1886 as that "most illustrious example of the school exterminated by reactionary Rome."⁵⁰

It was amidst this atmosphere of anti-Catholic feeling that Pater's article appeared in the same month as C. E. Plumptre's article on Bruno in the *Westminster Review*. Plumptre finds it appropriate to compare Bruno and Shelley but points out that, whereas Shelley warred against all religion, Bruno only rebelled against sham faith.⁵¹ Karl Blind's "Giordano Bruno and the New Italy" had already been printed in the *Nineteenth Century* in July of the same year. Both Blind's and Plumptre's accounts lay stress on the notion of Bruno as a martyr for science. Blind, for example, identifies the neo-platonist elements of Bruno's thought which caused him to strive "for greater beauteousness" and also sees him as a precursor of Darwin and evolutionary thought, for although "unaided by exact science, he anticipated in a general way the scientific results of ages to come."⁵² This is also a theme in Pater's article which points out how "already Bruno had measured the space which Bacon would fill, with room, perhaps, for Darwin also."⁵³ However, like Blind, Pater's emphasis is equally upon Bruno as a religious individual. His study of him is primarily the study of a religious temperament, but without the sentimentality of the religious image of Bruno that had characterized Frith's biography two years before Pater's article appeared. Pater's portrait may therefore be seen as combining the religious and rationalist elements of other commentators. He anticipates the dual response adumbrated by Brinton and Davidson in their addresses on Bruno, published in Philadelphia in 1890. Brinton sees Bruno primarily as a physicist and sceptic; Davidson suggests that Bruno's search was essentially a religious one.

For Pater, just as Montaigne practises Platonic dialogue, so Bruno, as an interpreter of Plato formulates a dialectic between sensual and spiritual desires.⁵⁴ He remains "a lover and a monk."⁵⁵ Within the context of *Gaston* it would seem then that the protagonist discovers in Bruno's system not only a theoretical justification for the integration of mind and matter, soul and body, but also an example of the fulfilment to be found in attaining such harmony. However, Pater's response remains ambivalent, the text casting doubts on the morality of Bruno's doctrines. The manuscripts also reveal a curious further echo of the initial attraction to Bruno, signalling Pater's fascination with the cruel shadow of Bruno's doctrine, whatever the ethical objections which continue to be signalled. In the dark world of Valois Paris, as portrayed in the manuscripts, the voices of the sceptic

Montaigne and the idealist Bruno become conflated through the indifference with which they are both associated.

Gaston is initially attracted to Montaigne's "jealously guarded indifference of soul."⁵⁶ After the massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day however, Gaston considers the weakness of his uncommitted position and "his own helplessness amid the obscure forces around him, which would fain compromise the indifferent."⁵⁷ Bruno's doctrine of indifference, as expounded in chapter six, conflicts with the ideal of aesthetic discrimination, presaging the collapse of "the distinction . . . between what was right and wrong in the matter of art."⁵⁸ This failure of artistic taste is linked to a breakdown of moral order in which the distinctions between art and life, good and evil are eroded and pain and pleasure are no longer separable. Yet within such a breakdown, Gaston is irresistibly pulled towards Montaigne and Bruno: "[B]oth alike recommending though from opposite points in the speculative circle their doctrine of `indifference': yes of moral indifference. It presented itself in fact as neither more nor less than the weighted theoretic equivalent to the actual situation."⁵⁹ In confirmation of that attraction, Gaston is "magnetically" drawn to the tower of Marguerite de Valois. Gaston's ascent is likened to the moment when Ulysses "approaches the palace of Circe."⁶⁰ Marguerite welcomes Gaston and Jasmin to her "charmed circle/area" by "flinging wide the doors upon them suddenly like Homer's sorceress."⁶¹ Once within the court, Gaston adopts the position of distanced observer: "For, as with physical delicacies, if you wished to sip, as you might wine, . . . the singularly attempered character of the so gifted Margaret a calm though kindly indifference was in fact the proper condition for doing so."⁶² However, as he edits Marguerite's text with its "entanglement of beauty with evil,"⁶³ events suggest that Gaston's indifference, like that of Montaigne and Bruno, is also an evasion of moral responsibility. Gaston is linked to the "indifferent" Parisian public who gather to watch the execution of Jasmin's devoted young servant Raoul in chapter ten of the *Gaston* manuscripts.⁶⁴ The description of Raoul's death may be read as a fantasy of homosexual submission to suffering. The boy emerges into the "heat" of the square, into the "long shadow" of a Paris under the influence of Bruno.⁶⁵ Neither Gaston, nor Jasmin the implied watcher, are directly represented, but are displaced amongst the "aristocratic sightseers" looking on.⁶⁶ As in the arena passage of *Marius*, details of horrific death are supplied, while the apparent concentration of the passage is on the crowd's response: a mixture of morbid fascination and sentimentality.

At the end of the chapter Gaston is led to reflect on the evil effects which flow from accidental or deliberate callousness. While Marguerite's cruelty to La Mole may be deliberate, Jasmin's is unintentional. The outcome in both cases is, however, the same. Gaston is therefore linked through his accidental cruelty towards Colombe to Jasmin, and through him to that of Marguerite and the whole age. The policy of experiencing all things "indifferently" is, he realizes, a limiting one,⁶⁷ yet it remains the appropriate philosophy of his day:

Observe, touch, taste of all things, indifferently! So his philosophic guides had steadily recommended guides he might *seem* indeed to have encountered quite casually on the/his way, whose judgements/theories nevertheless as he then actually was seemed to come to him with nothing less than axiomatic force.⁶⁸

Within this charmed circle, traditional distinctions are blurred and Gaston's voice lost amidst those of Montaigne and Bruno. The philosophers, in turn, are missing. Their views are echoed both through the, again absent, figure of Brantôme, who "would have concurred alike with the 'new gospel' of the philosophic monk and/as with the Gascon worldling's . . . doctrine of 'indifference'," and through the portrayal of Henri III as a figure capable of the unexpected in keeping with Montaigne's "doctrine of 'ondoyancy' of life/man/the world."⁶⁹ The indifferent Gaston becomes merely a watcher of events, "thoughtfully looking on with us all along."⁷⁰ Gaston does not emerge again as a distinct persona until chapter thirteen, when he rediscovers the true Renaissance spirit and its "preoccupation with the perennial . . . interests of life."⁷¹ Presumably such moral seriousness would have been necessary to free Gaston from the decadence revealed in the earlier parts of the text. However, whatever change of heart may have been envisaged for his protagonist, Pater's acknowledgement of the decadent implications of Montaigne's and Bruno's indifferent philosophies remains a challenge to the comfortable assumptions of his contemporaries.

Pater thus resists the tendency of the 1880s simply to incorporate Montaigne and Bruno into its liberal tradition and identifies the irony of his society's appropriation of them as symbols of its supposed moral and intellectual tolerance. The ambivalence of Pater's response may perhaps best be understood both as a reflection of his own acknowledged conflicting impulses, and as his reflection upon the unacknowledged strains inherent within the contemporary British admiration for Bruno and Montaigne. As with the mirrors frequently mentioned in the *Gaston* manuscripts, it seems then that we look into the text only in order to recover shifting images; "double and treble reflections of the mind upon itself."