

CHAPTER 11

"The Last Thing Walter Wrote": Pater's "Pascal"

HAYDEN WARD

WALTER PATER DIED ON Monday 30 July 1894, the day he had been scheduled to give a University Extension lecture on Pascal.¹ Six months later, in refusing his offer to buy the manuscript, Clara Pater wrote to Edmund Gosse: "We could not possibly part with the Pascal manuscript for money. It is the last thing Walter wrote and was writing even during his illness, and so is precious to us."² However, Clara and Hester Pater did allow Gosse to edit the manuscript for publication in the *Contemporary Review* for February 1895; subsequent to Charles Shadwell's publication of it in October in *Miscellaneous Studies*, the sisters gave it to Gosse.³ After his death in May 1928, the manuscript was sold at auction (on July 30, thirty-four years to the day after Pater's death). It was sold again in 1942, as part of a Red Cross fund-raising drive, and finally acquired for the the Bodleian Library in 1945.

The essay on Pascal, although unfinished, is sufficiently complete and revised to be an important part of the Pater canon, not only because in writing of Pascal's last years, when he was composing the *Pensées*, Pater offers, by implication, some hints concerning his own late religious views,⁴ but also because Pater here recapitulates several leading themes of his earlier writings or presents them in new relations to one another.

These themes are the importance of "expressiveness" as an intellectual and moral force at critical moments of historical change or conflict; the struggle of philosophical and religious absolutism to retain its credibility against the pressure of an advancing moral and psychological relativism that is, in Pater's view, the principal salutary consequence of Renaissance humanism and the emergence of the modern romantic spirit; and the centrality of the aesthetic appeal in both the Primitive Church and Modern Christianity. In relation to all three of these themes of Pater's work, Pascal is an ambiguous and ironic figure, at different stages of his life the model of the diaphanous or transparent expressiveness that, from the beginning of his career, with "Diaphanéité" (1864), Pater

regards as the principal attribute of the perfected literary style, and at the same time the most obsessive example of devotion to the Augustinian or puritanical beliefs and practices that Pater regarded as inimical to human fulfillment as enacted in the harmonious aesthetic life.

Pascal is mentioned in several different contexts in Pater's earlier work.⁵In the 1871 essay on Pico della Mirandola, for instance, Pater contrasts the silent infinitude of Pascal's vision of the universe with the cosmos of coded correspondences elaborated by Pico at the onset of the Renaissance humanist's effort to develop syncretic thought out of a vast new range of experience, still sure of his ability to decipher the divine plan. By contrast, Pascal's wretched little man hovers over the abyss, crying out to a "hidden God" for Pater, a precursor of the spiritual crisis of modern humanity, similarly placed between infinity and nothingness.

In his 1886 essay on Sir Thomas Browne, Pater speaks approvingly of Pascal's "great resolution" to define and enact the life in God, in contrast to Sir Thomas's more limited religious aspirations and whimsical anthropology. Pascal is the exemplar of "faith" Browne, of "piety."⁶A year earlier, in the "New Cyrenaicism" chapter of *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater invokes the antagonism of Pascal to Montaigne, who, by historical analogy, is a kind of sponsor for the philosophy of "select sensation" that the youthful Marius, at an early stage in his spiritual quest, is discovering. Pater notes that Pascal calls the kindly and temperate wisdom of Montaigne "pernicious for all those who have any natural tendency to impiety or vice."⁷

Still another allusion to Pascal occurs in Pater's 1886 review of Mrs. Humphry Ward's translation of the *Journal Intime* of Henri Frederic Amiel, a work that by virtue of its fragmentary, occasionally aphoristic musings on morals and religion, prompts superficial comparison with the *Pensées*. Pater remarks that, in contrast to the lonely and sterile Amiel, mired in the still-rigid Calvinism of nineteenth-century Geneva, Pascal was fortunate to come to rest in "the large hopes of the Catholic Church." This statement has ironic implications by the time Pater writes of Pascal in 1894, when he describes the Jansenists of Port-Royal, with whom Pascal had "taken refuge" in his last years, as "the Calvinists of the Roman Catholic Church."⁸

Even in these scattered references in his earlier work, one can foresee the shadow of the tragic figure Pater will make of Pascal in his final essay. This late Paterian Pascal contrasts with the famous Leonardo of Pater's essay of 1869, who in his youth was already a masterful investigator of the laws of nature and of the abstruse, abstract systems of mathematics. The young Pascal was also a brilliant scientist and mathematician. Further, he was a superb polemicist, endowed with wit and pith, capable of expressing his ever-enlarging thoughts precisely and fully, moved by intense intellectual pride and courage to engage himself in the leading religious controversy of his day on the side of the oppressed

party. Ironically, as Pater interprets him, he was drawn by irresistible emotional needs and the relentless logic of his own evolving convictions into a futile sacrifice of his own full humanity. In Pater's view, Pascal became "a solitary prisoner of his own dream of a world," abnegating the sensibility sketched in the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, his last years amounting to "an inversion of what is called the aesthetic life."⁹

However, Pater begins the essay not with the inversion but with the triumph of the aesthetic life. He places Pascal at the center of the quarrel between the Jesuits and the Jansenists, between the adherents of the doctrine of "sufficient grace" and those of "necessary grace." In the early part of the essay, Pater emphasizes not Pascal's commitment to Jansenist theology but his powers as a stylist, a writer whose expressive power reveals as never before "the genius of French prose," just as Pater had said, in *Gaston de Latour*, that Ronsard and the other members of the Pléiade had revealed in the century preceding Pascal's the genius of French poetry. One might remark that, even in his late years, Pater's conception of literary and philosophical history remained Hegelian: the diaphanous or aesthetic hero is destined to bring to formal realization the latent but still inchoate style or gestalt of an artistic school, a religious movement, or a political order. Further, he characteristically does so not by imposing upon the resisting zeitgeist the irresistible force of his dominant will as with Carlyle's heroes, for instance but by possessing what Pater calls, in "Emerald Uthwart," the "genius of submission," the gift for taking into his own "transparent" (and malleable) nature the representative forces of his age and letting them shape him into the type of their conflict and, sometimes, in the happiest cases, of their resolution.

The witty play of the early *Provincial Letters*, like his work as a prodigy in mathematics and experimental physics, makes Pascal seem, at this stage in his career, a seventeenth-century continuator of the spirit of Renaissance humanism revelling in an exploration of the challenging variety of new knowledge, in revolt against the stultifying and corrupt authority of an outmoded scholasticism. Pater leaves implicit the irony of the fact that this scholasticism is defended not by representatives of the medieval Church but by spokesmen for the newly-created Jesuit order whose teachings are informed by the very skepticism that was one of the elements in Pascal's own later struggle for faith, a struggle that turns on Pascal's effort to repudiate the secular skepticism of Montaigne. In 1656, however, in beginning *The Provincial Letters*, Pascal is the diaphanous man engaged in aesthetic play. As Pater writes: "He took up the pen as other chivalrous gentlemen of the day took up the sword."¹⁰

In *The Provincial Letters*, with the perfect "expressiveness" of the diaphanous man, endowed with the "nicety with which words balance or match their meaning, and the writer succeeds in saying what he *wills*,"¹¹ Pascal enacts the aesthetic morality of Pater's essay on "Style," in cheerful but increasingly earnest combat with the logic-chopping equivocations of the Jesuits. The target of his criticism is the divorce of words from

consistent or serious meaning that violates the true aesthetic morality. In this endeavor, Pater informs us, Pascal is of the genial company of Rabelais and Montaigne, of Molière and Voltaire, of Socrates and Newman, able to dissect the weaknesses of his opponents' argument so adroitly that he can afford to be gay and serious at the same time. In Letter XI, Pascal himself, quoting Tertullian, defines the tone of his writing against the Jesuits: "It is the proper privilege of truth to laugh, because she is gay, and to ridicule her enemies, because she is sure of victory. It is true that one must be careful to see that the gibes are not cheap and unworthy of truth, but, apart from that, where there is a chance of using them skillfully, it is our duty to do so."¹²

Pater says that Pascal was carried beyond this playful attitude by his deepening awareness of "those awful encounters of the individual soul with itself which are formulated in the eternal problem of predestination."¹³ In the opposition of the Jesuits' expedient theology for the convenience of the mediocre many (turning upon the crucial but elusive concept of "sufficient grace") to a Jansenist principle of necessary and "irresistible grace" (defined in Cornelius Jansen's own *Augustinus* [1640], which traces the origins of the doctrine back to not only Augustine but to St. Paul), Pascal discovered an opposition between the futile, self-serving pragmatism of a politicized contemporary religion and the enduring truth of historically "developed" Church.¹⁴

His brief account of the Jansenist doctrine of freedom of the will to which Pascal gives his allegiance, as contrasted with the "Molinism" of Jesuit teaching, leads Pater to a reflection that helps to place his account of Pascal's sifting of rival doctrines in a nineteenth-century context that recalls Pater's earliest and most radical formulation of the issue: "There are moments in one's own life, aspects of the life of others, of which the conclusion that the will is free seems to be the only is the natural or reasonable account. Yet those very moments on reflexion, on second thought, present themselves again, as but links in a chain, in an all-embracing network of chains."¹⁵ The "chains" of this passage were the "elements," the "fibres," of the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, whose protean and evanescent forms were to be the objects of watchfulness and analysis in a "life of eager observation," lest they dwindle into nothingness before our eyes.

For Pascal, the intense commitment to the Jansenist doctrine of free will is, in Pater's view, the ironic first step in the assault on skepticism that was to result in the *Pensées* and in his gradual withdrawal from the world (as was, in Pater's mind, the case with Newman). The problem for Pascal, as apparently for Pater himself in his last years, was the inability totally to overcome the appeal of skepticism and to achieve a truly settled faith. Pater writes that Pascal "is not a sceptic converted, a returned infidel, but is seen there [i.e., in the *Pensées*] as if at the very center of a perpetually maintained tragic crisis, holding the faith steadfastly but amid the well-poised points of essential doubt all around him and it. It is no mere calm supersession of a state of doubt by a state of faith; the doubts never die, they are only just kept down in a perpetual *agonia*."¹⁶

The diaphanous clarity and poise that Pascal exhibited in *The Provincial Letters* are clouded in the *Pensées*, as Pater interprets that work, by a "malady" of body and soul. "In his soul's agony, theological abstractions seem to become personal powers," and these "powers" destroy his ability to take joy in the concrete human reality that is, for Pater himself, the basis of genuine religious sentiment. (In this respect, Pascal is more like Coleridge, as Pater describes him, than like Newman, who, as Pater says elsewhere, always had his faith rooted in a love of the "visible church.")

Pater evidently derived most of his information about the opposition of the Jansenists, and of Pascal, to the philosophy of Montaigne and of Molière, "la Morale des l'honnêtes gens," from Book III of C. A. Sainte-Beuve's *Port-Royal*.¹⁷ That philosophy makes the "natural man," in Richard Chadbourne's words, "a self-sufficient source of moral order and happiness," and derives from the teachings of the ancient Stoics, Skeptics, and Epicureans.¹⁸ Such a philosophy is in direct conflict with the Jansenists' belief in "necessary grace," and therefore, as Pascal himself writes in the *Conversations with M. Saci* (1655), confuses and disillusion ordinary men who would believe in the mysteries that inspire true religious faith.

In refuting Montaigne, Pascal begins, according to Alban Krailsheimer,¹⁹ with the same assumption as Montaigne and Socrates, that the end of man is to know himself. Thus, he preserves, at first, his allegiance to the historical role of diaphanous man, which is to be open to the whole range of possibilities in the search for truth and not to be bound or limited by undue adherence to "abstract" philosophies. But Pascal does not accept Montaigne's disavowal of reason in that search, since such a disavowal leads to intellectual inertia and moral relativism, and hence to indolence and hedonism. With reason operating not alone but under the influence of God's grace, man could break out of the false dilemma of skepticism and dogmatism, and achieve true faith, freed from the alienation from God that afflicts him when the evidence of his thought and senses tells him only that the world is hopelessly fallen and corrupt.

For Pascal, as Krailsheimer notes,²⁰ the goal was to transcend the dualism of mind and matter; that transcendence (which for Pater's diaphanous man, in his aesthetic morality of style, is the *fusion* of form and content in "perfect expressiveness") is only possible, according to the Jansenism that Pascal for the most part embraced, by the intervention of grace. Pascal's version of Montaigne believes that humanity is without that necessary grace.

So, too, is Pater's Montaigne, as he appears in the chapter of *Gaston de Latour* called "Suspended Judgement." Writing near the end of his own life, Pater attributes to Montaigne a philosophy that strongly recalls Pater's ideas in the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* and the "New Cyrenaicism" chapter of *Marius*: "The priceless pearl of truth [lies], if anywhere, not in large theoretic apprehension of the general, but in minute vision

of the particular; in the perception of the concrete phenomenon, at the particular moment, and from this unique point of view now, but perhaps not then.²¹ Here, in Pater's own words, is the "relativism" that Pascal fears. Beyond its relativism, Pater notes that the New Cyrenaicism possesses a "somewhat antinomian" cast: antinomianism is akin to the fideism of Montaigne. Pascal, in rejecting Montaigne, then, rejects a heretical doctrine that, by the time he wrote *Marius*, Pater recognized as latent in his own philosophy of the aesthetic life, in diaphanous openness and expressiveness. That is, he came to see that implicit in modern humanism is the temptation or danger of disregard for moral law. Pascal's renunciation of worldly involvement is, of course, a repudiation of humanism (of the "aesthetic life," says Pater, equating the two terms). That kind of about-face was impossible for Pater himself, it seems, and so he set out, as he had in *Marius*, to demonstrate that, by interpretation, harmony could be made to exist between the apparently conflicting strands, the changing "organic filaments," of his philosophic web. He sought to demonstrate the com-patibility of the moral law and the life of disciplined, diaphanous receptivity and expressiveness, in the lectures on Plato and Platonism.²²

Plato is Pater's late model of diaphanous man. He joins to the sensuous felicity and openmindedness of Montaigne a firm belief in the need for intellectual rigor, physical discipline, and perseverance in the pursuit of the higher truth. To Pascal, on the other hand, Pater assigns no such admirable status but stresses instead the melancholy and eventual morbidity that he perceives to be the consequence of Pascal's effort to synthesize reason and faith.

To understand Pater's view, incompatible as it is with the interpretations of Pascal offered by modern scholars much more intimately conversant with Pascal's writings than Pater was, one must go back to the review of Mrs. Ward's *Robert Elsmere* that Pater wrote for the *Guardian* of 28 March 1888. There, he describes what he calls

a large class of minds which cannot be sure that the sacred story is true. It is philosophical, doubtless, and a duty to the intellect to recognise our doubts, to locate them, perhaps to give them practical effect. It may also be a moral duty to do this. But then there is also a large class of minds which cannot be sure it is false minds of various degrees of conscientiousness and intellectual power up to the highest. They will think those who are quite sure it is false unphilosophical through lack of doubt. For their part, they make allowance in their scheme of life for a great possibility, and with some of them that bare concession of possibility (the subject being what it is) becomes the most important fact of the world. The recognition of it straightway opens wide the door to hope and love; and such persons are, as we fancy they always will be, the nucleus of a Church. Their particular phase of doubt, of philosophic uncertainty, has been the secret of millions of good Christians. . . .²³

This "philosophic uncertainty," nurtured by "the scientific spirit which is for ever making the visible world fairer and more desirable in mortal eyes," is in an inimical relation to the "Augustinian" doctrine of Original Sin that so darkened the consciousness of Pascal that he was unable to live with the mere "possibility" of God's redemptive grace. To "wager" on God was to reject a morality rooted in fallen nature, based upon presuppositions about the inherent goodness or self-sufficiency of humanity.²⁴

Pater's "hopefulness" is not a full-blown skepticism or agnosticism (like that, say, of Leslie Stephen, who wrote an essay on Pascal contemporaneous with Pater's²⁵), but a more tentative "hedging" of the bet that in the appeal of the "visible world" (i.e., of philosophical materialism) may lie some dim but consoling spiritual element to be found in the bond of human community rather than in the impossibility of a lonely, transcendent communion of the individual with God. That "transcendent" element is what makes Pater reject Pascal's religious thought, with its "Calvinist" dimension, as the basis of the Christian life.²⁶

Pater begins his analysis by commenting that the *Essais* of Montaigne are "the under-texture" of the *Pensées*; indeed, Montaigne offers a "compte rendu" of the experience of the world as Pascal, too, has known it. However, because of his Augustinian theology, Pascal is filled with terror by the vision of life that inspires merely a complacent skepticism in Montaigne. The "nothingness" of being fallen away from God is unendurable to Pascal; he must strive for its antithesis, sanctity. In Pascal's moral logic, says Pater, there can be no "middle terms."

Pater focuses on the apparent contradiction of Pascal's assertion that the truth of revelation must be based on evidence interpreted by the integrated powers of reason and imagination, and his assertion that the imagination only deceives the truth-seeker.²⁷ Pater suggests that by denying himself the use of the imaginative part of imaginative reason, Pascal failed to achieve "true peace within the Catholic Church." The last words of Pater's essay say that the imagination was simply in "active collusion" with Pascal's physical illness.

One cannot read these last pages of Pater's essay without being put in mind of Matthew Arnold's famous dictum in "Pagan and Mediaeval Religious Sentiment": "The poetry of later paganism lived by the senses and understanding; the poetry of mediaeval Christianity lived by the heart and imagination. But the main element of the modern spirit's life is neither the senses and understanding, nor the heart and imagination; it is the imaginative reason."²⁸ Arnold's dialectical formulation coincides neatly with Pater's own, in his earlier work, in which he discusses the pattern of medieval Christian asceticism giving way to the gradual enlargement of humanist sympathies in the Renaissance. It would seem, as Pater thinks of it at any rate, the Pascal enacts a reversal of this dialectic. He begins, as in *The Provincial Letters*, as a diaphanous advocate of a "fresh current of ideas" against the

corrupt vestiges of scholasticism and expediency in Church and State, but ends his life by returning himself to the most rigorous practices of the old Church, which in its decadence, he had done so much to discredit. The irony of his career is that, in clearing away the debris of the degenerate modern Church, he became a victim (in Pater's view, at least) of an eccentric revival of the debilitating Augustinian theology of the Patristic Church.

Invariably, in applying to Pater's views on Pascal the paradigm of historical change that Arnold proposes and that Pater qualifies, one is led to think of Newman, whom Pater presents initially as comparable to Pascal, at least in the latter's early diaphanous phase.

One finds in the fragmentary text of Pater's evidently early essay on Newman, now in the Houghton Library, a contrast of Newman and Pascal.²⁹ Newman is joyful and confident once he has entered the Catholic Church, while Pascal is anguished in body and spirit, unable to see what Pater calls, in the Pascal essay, "the beauty of holiness." Newman's attraction to the Primitive Church and to Roman Catholicism is rooted in his desire for a historical continuum of religious community, in his desire for a "visible Church," as Pater calls it in *Marius* and elsewhere. Marius himself feels this Newmanesque longing at the end of the novel. Newman's "assent" is comparable to the faith attained by the adherents of the Primitive Church, as Pater describes it in the chapter of *Marius* called "The Minor Peace of the Church." The Newman of Pater's early essay is clearly diaphanous and remarkably undogmatic, a thinker disinclined to give undue weight to the claims of philosophy or theology as against allegiance to the claims of human life in this world. It is what he takes, arbitrarily and very selectively, to be the tranquillity and poise of Newman in the Catholic Church, not the Catholic "influence" and the theologian, that Pater finds attractive, that his entire essay, even in its scattered state, plainly expounds and endorses.³⁰

Pater takes Newman perhaps too much at his word in believing that, after 1845, he never had a single doubt. For Pascal, by contrast, the doubt and melancholy persisted until the end. While Pater had ambivalent feelings about the intellectual triumphs and the human sacrifice of Newman's career, he felt, at the last, no such ambivalence toward Pascal, who, such as Pater draws him in this final essay, is diaphanous man in defeat and despair.