JEAN HÉLION
présenté par Jed Perl et par Pierre Brullé

Les Retrouvailles, 1983, acrylique sur toile, 146 x 87 cm, musée de Grenoble.

Jed Perl
Hélion's Freedom

I

Freedom was an essential theme in Jean Hélion's work. And Hélion had his own ideas about the place of freedom in twentieth-century art. Few artists have felt so strongly that artistic freedom must be related to some larger idea of human freedom, at least few artists have insisted on this relationship while also insisting, as Hélion always did, that painting is a discipline with its own traditions and laws and logic. To really understand Hélion's conception of freedom we must, of course, look at his work, but the subject encompasses much more than strictly artistic matters, touching as it does on questions of human conduct and the relationship between the individual and society that have generally preoccupied philosophers and political theorists, not artists and art historians. What follows are some preliminary investigations.

II

Perhaps it is best to begin with a painting in which freedom of choice is a central motif, *Le Jugement dernier des choses*, painted in 1978-79. The scene is a flea market, with clothes, musical instruments, and household objects for sale. We see people indulging what is a relatively minor pleasure, certainly a simple pleasure, the freedom to decide what one wants to buy. Hélion approaches these activities with a sense of how extraordinarily absorbing they can be. The painting is about the magnificence of daily life, with its familiar rhythms and never-ending little surprises and dependable yet exhilarating forward flow. Hélion makes it clear that the choices available at the flea market are by no means unlimited. Your judgment, although free, is also constrained. You can only buy what is for sale. And since there are often unexpected items, there are also unexpected challenges to be met, you sometimes have to decide, right on the spot, what you are going to do. We see men and women selecting clothes, a painting, a pair of candlesticks. We see them deciding what they like and do not like, what shoes to wear, what piece of furniture to carry home. Painted in broad swathes of striking, dissonant, saturated colors, *Le Jugement dernier* is a vision of men and women in glorious, perpetual motion. And from the evidence of a pair of pants and a high heel shoe left at the bottom of a circular staircase, these vigorous adults are also free to go off together and have a little fun. That couple, whom we do not see, we are

free to imagine. As for the people we do see, they bend, turn, look, touch; they do many different things. A young man holds two pieces of a broken record, wondering whether they can ever be put back together. Perhaps he imagines that what has been broken can be repaired, but of course what we can imagine it is possible to do is not necessarily the same as what we can actually do.

III

Two years before he began work on *Le Jugement dernier des choses*, Hélion was reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* with his wife, Jacqueline. In his Journal he wrote a few lines about his admiration for Joyce. What impressed Hélion was the novelist's insistence on seeing the world as the sum of individuals, individuals who were never squeezed into some predetermined story or arrangement, but were instead each presented as a unique combination of qualities and characteristics. In other words, each character was allowed to pursue his or her own destiny, unencumbered by an overarching scheme that was imposed by the author. Now this is a very interesting interpretation of *Ulysses*, because Hélion is rejecting the idea of Joyce as the fiercely controlling modernist author who subsumes every naturalistic detail in a grand design. Hélion is certainly fully aware that Joyce is an avatar of art-for-art's-sake, the creator of an elaborately orchestrated artifice full of echoes of Homer's *Odyssey* and dazzling impersonations of a gallery of historical literary styles. And surely Hélion understands and admires all these aspects of Joyce's *Ulysses*, but nevertheless he believes that they serve some larger purpose, that the artifice is the means by which Joyce sets his characters free.

IV

If there is some fundamental principle that animates everything Hélion did, both his work as a painter and his engagement with the artistic life of his time, it is a liberal spiritedness, a belief in the supreme value of the freedom of the individual. Any philosophy of liberalism is concerned with the challenges of preserving and expanding such freedoms within a society where there are many competing pressures, and in his writings Hélion was always wonderfully attentive to all the varieties of artistic experience. He loved the pluralism of the art world, the cacophony of styles and ideas. He said that he was exhilarated by this variety, and that it helped him solidify and sharpen his own sense of things. There is a great deal to say about Hélion's liberalism, which may even help to explain the special affinity he felt with the intellectual life of the United States and Great Britain, where

in the twentieth century liberal traditions were more central to the lives of artists and writers and thinkers of all kinds than they were in France or many other parts of Europe. If one were to explore the philosophical underpinnings of Hélion's art, one would do well to begin by examining the writings of Isaiah Berlin, that commanding figure in British liberal philosophy, who wrote so movingly about the dangers of any overarching theory of historical development and about the complexities of defining the possibilities of individual freedom within the restrictions that are quite naturally imposed by civil society. Berlin also has valuable things to say about the relationship between artistic discipline and human freedom, for it is only by coming to terms with the challenges of a particular artistic vocation that a person can achieve mastery, and therefore freedom. For Hélion, this was surely part of the appeal of the intricate representational style that he embraced after World War II. There must have been a struggle involved in learning how to paint in a new way, and that struggle heightened Hélion's perceptions, enabled him to see and experience and represent the world in ways he could not have done before. This rigorous discipline brought a new lyricism into Hélion's work, a strange and surprising lyricism, a tough-minded lyricism that grew out of the artist's dedication to the minutest details of the world around him.

V

Hélion rejected the idea of historical inevitability in art. So far as he was concerned, there was no general model of artistic development or progress. Each artist was engaged in a personal evolution, unrelated to any larger historical evolution. It is this conviction that set Hélion apart from so many of his contemporaries. And it is a conviction that is all the more extraordinary, coming as it did from a man who in his early years was a mover and shaker in the abstract avant-garde, where ideas about the historical inevitability of abstraction were actively embraced, and in some cases regarded as holy writ. One of the things that Hélion noticed in the years when he was involved with the Abstraction-Création group was how many competing versions of the absolute there could be, and this seems to have alerted him to the problem with all absolutes. By the second half of the 1930s Hélion saw no reason to believe that the development of art in the previous half century made abstract art an inevitability. He did not see any other form of art as inevitable, either. He rejected the cyclical theories of the traditionalists and the neoclassicists, who believed in an inevitable return to earlier models of wholeness and completeness. This, too, from Hélion's vantage point, must have suggested a belief in some overarching historical direction — and therefore a threat to the artist's freedom. Although he revered the Old Masters and spoke and wrote about them with great energy

and precision, he had no interest in a return to past practices and warned of the dangers of nostalgia. One might think that an artist so firmly opposed to any totalizing vision would have felt the pull of art-for-art's-sake and the ivory tower, but for Hélion even these quietistic ideologies placed unacceptable restrictions on the artist. Art-for-art's-sake was itself an idea about historical inevitability, about the inevitability of the artist's retreat from society. When in 1946, in a statement published by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Hélion said that "art is a way of increasing the freedom of man", he was consciously rejecting the ivory tower, and the desire to achieve artistic intensity through the restriction of artistic possibilities. This is not to say that Hélion rejected the freestanding value of art. He did nothing of the kind. But the idea of the painter or poet alone in his tower, isolated from the world, creating his masterpieces, was not the freedom that Hélion desired. Balthus is the twentieth-century artist who most fully explored the possibilities of the ivory tower, and discovered in art-for-art's-sake a way of isolating himself from the pressures of his time — and thereby achieving a measure of personal freedom. When Balthus painted a Parisian street, however, it became another of his private fantasies — a fever dream. Hélion wanted to do something different, he wanted the men and women in his paintings to shape their own destinies. Hélion expressed the sublimity of ordinariness, something that was beyond Balthus's grasp.

VI

There is a great temptation to interpret Hélion's work in terms of a dialectic, with representation and abstraction as thesis and antithesis, and the various stages through which his work passed as a series of syntheses, provisional solutions to an eternal problem. Hélion himself, who was in so many respects a child of the 1930s, was sometimes inclined to speak in these terms, and it may be true that the open-endedness of the dialectical approach, its speculative spirit, informs some of his greatest experiments. He did, after all, announce in 1938 that "it is the function of Art to associate contraries and solve them." But I think that too much has been made of the dialectical approach to Hélion's work, and I am now tempted to say that it ought to be avoided at all cost. Hélion may in fact be the least dialectical among the great painters of the twentieth century. The dialectic, whether Hegelian or Socratic, is an effort to unify opposing views, to find some essence, some core, some higher truth. Such a search has preoccupied many artists with whom Hélion was friends, both Mondrian, with his pure plastic relations, and Giacometti, who spent much of his life trying to sculpt or paint an image that would reconcile the rival claims of reality and perception. So far as Hélion was concerned, there was no single truth, no single search. Representation and abstraction could be joined in various ways

or they could be dealt with separately. If there is a unity to Hélion's work, it is because all the different modes and manners that he embraced were embraced as a matter of free choice, so that the variety reflected the varied interests and avidities of one man. The work does not reflect an effort to get beyond the particularities of the man and his life but rather an effort to reflect those particularities in all their glorious, sometimes dissonant richness. The work does not have to add up anymore than the variegated elements in a human personality need to add up in some ultimate, coherent way. For Hélion, thesis and antithesis are simply two possibilities, and there are many other possibilities, a plethora of possibilities.

VII

An interview with Hélion, conducted by the American painter George L. K. Morris, was published in 1938 in *Partisan Review*, the extraordinary journal edited by a group of Leftist American intellectuals who had broken with Communist orthodoxy. At the end of this interview, Morris presented Hélion with a list of artists, and asked which ones he thought would most interest a young artist today. Morris's list included Tintoretto, Poussin, Memling, Phidias, the Ravenna mosaics, David, Delacroix, Mayan sculpture, de Chirico, Van Gogh, Matisse, Manet, and Arp. What Hélion said in response is of the greatest importance. "About art," he observed, "it is dangerous to generalize any opinion or advice." He commented that "art has been rendered multiple, especially since the Cézannian outbreak; tendencies of different character get along very well, progress, live, and influence each other. I cannot assume for the young artist the obligation to choose one in preference to any other. What lessons he can take from the artists you name depend on the tendency he has himself reached or adopted. Also, in any work of real depth, very contradictory directions can be recognized." And Hélion concluded by saying that "Our constant preoccupation must be to enlarge the scopes of Art, not to reduce it, not to confine it to a single aspect, a single case, a pattern." These words, offered in a decade known for its ideological strife, are extraordinary in their openness, their flexibility, their willingness and even their eagerness to take the measure of competing vantage points.

VIII

In an appreciation published just after Hélion's death in 1987, Daniel Abadie said that Hélion was one of the freest spirits of his time. This is absolutely true. But Hélion, for all his love of freedom, was never free of the authority of art. To the end, he accepted the necessities of the painter's

art, the imperatives of the painter's craft. He always began with the rectangle of the canvas, a force that could not be denied. When he chose to do multi-panel paintings, it was to the triptych he turned, a form with a venerable tradition, although he was not afraid to reshape that tradition, in the case of *Le Jugement dernier des choses* making the central panel the smallest, a rejection of the old idea that the center is the most important place. But then a liberal vision is not a centralized vision, it is a vision that finds interesting developments wherever the eye turns.

IX

They Shall Not Have Me is the title of the memoir that Hélion published in the United States in 1943, describing his experiences as a German prisoner of war. The meaning of the title is clear. Hélion was saying that the Germans could not have him, and indeed he escaped and managed to make his way to the United States. But there is a sense in which the resolve that is reflected in that stirring title is a key to Hélion's entire life as an artist. The abstractionists could not "have" Hélion, not for very long. And after World War II those who imagined that his return to realism spelled a rejection of abstract art also found that he eluded their grasp. Hélion's refusal to allow any group to "have" him helps explain the paradoxical nature of his career. He insisted on being free. "How lucky I am," he once wrote, "to be defied on all sides." He quite simply refused to take a place, any place, in the narrative that the critics and historians had designed to explain the development of twentieth-century art. "They shall not have me," he said to the curators and critics and historians and dealers who wanted to fit him into some particular scheme. And in the end, art history would not "have" him, would not give his achievement the full consideration it deserves, would not acknowledge how essential a part he had played in the history of twentieth-century art.

X

What Hélion was totally opposed to was the idea that art follows some particular pattern or trajectory. This was the demagoguery of the avant-garde, the insistence on the part of many artists and critics and historians that art goes in one direction, and that anything that does not is inherently insignificant. Hélion dedicated his life to what he may have believed was the unfinished business of the avant-garde, the development of a truly liberal avant-garde. He saw avant-gardism as a search for freedom, but a freedom that acknowledged the authority of artistic tradition and the seriousness with which the artist must make his case in a society where so

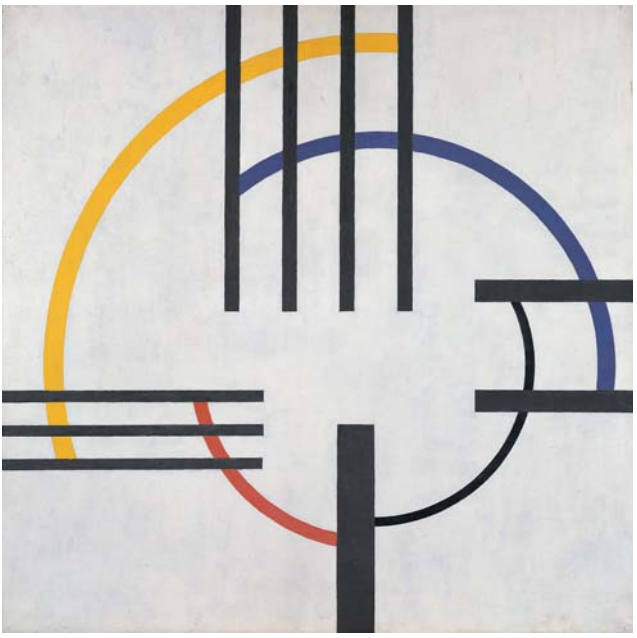
many other artists have a claim on the public. Life was too mixed, too unpredictable for there to ever be any single solution. Artists were too different, one from the other, to fit into some preordained pattern, or even an evolving pattern. Human nature would quite simply never permit all art to go the same way. As for the discipline of art, this was not a bulwark against the vicissitudes of life so much as it was a tool, or a set of tools, that enabled the artist to engage with life more fully, more completely.

XI

If the multifacetedness of Hélion's achievement is a measure of the freedom to which he aspired, then the extraordinary quality of his work tells us everything we need to know about the glorious freedom that he achieved. To think about Jean Hélion's achievement is to find a great many different images and impressions competing for your attention. The work is abstract, representational, slow, fast, sumptuous, severe, psychological, sociological, lyrical, rhetorical, panoramic, telegraphic, and encyclopedic. And it is many more things. Such a variegated achievement should not hold together. But it does, triumphantly. Unity emerges from disunity. The result is the fullest expression imaginable of the freedom of the modern artist.

Jed Perl

Le Jugement dernier des choses, 1978-1979, triptyque, acrylique sur toile, 200 x 350 cm, 200 x 145 cm, 200 x 350 cm, collection particulière

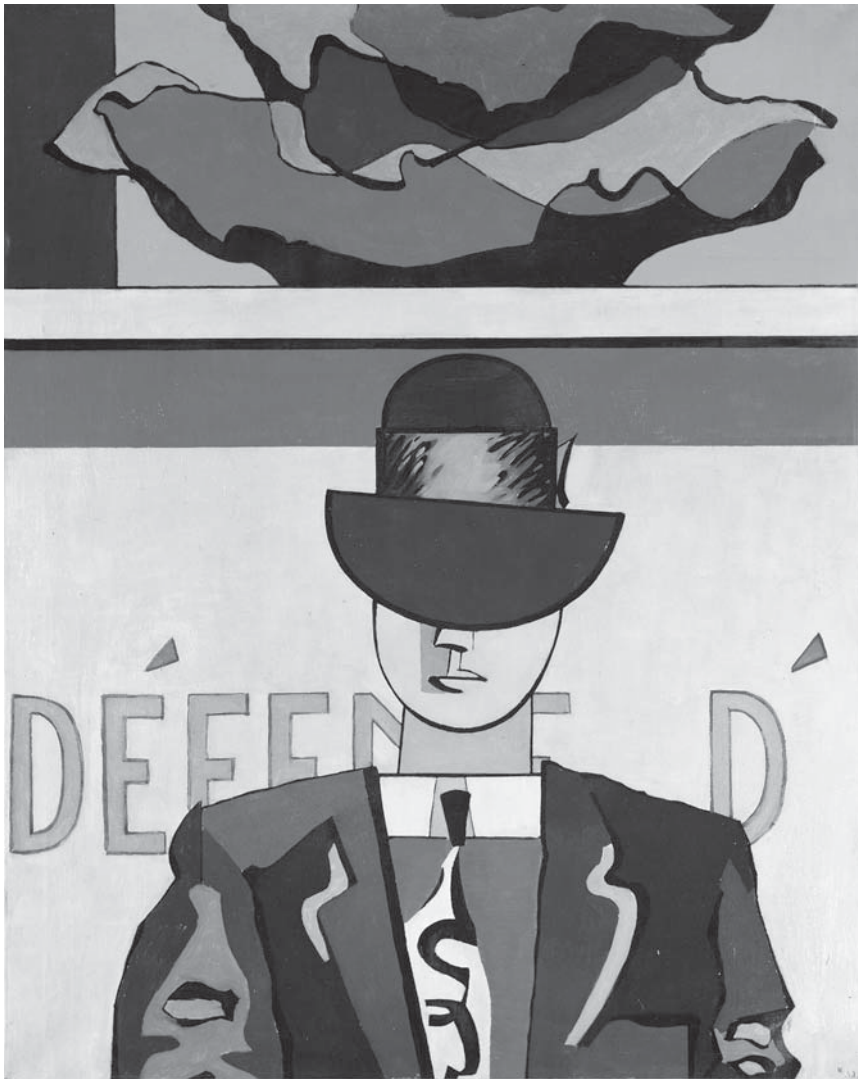


Tensions circulaires, 1931-1932, huile sur toile, 75 x 75 cm, collection particulière.

Les Gros Volumes, 1935, huile sur toile, 99 x 80 cm, collection particulière.

Figure tombée, 1939, huile sur toile, 126 x 164 cm, MNAM, Paris.

Relevé de la figure tombée, 1983, acrylique sur toile, 145 x 200 cm, collection particulière.



Défense d', 1943, huile sur toile, 102 x 81 cm, coll. Daniel Malingue, Paris.