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André Malraux (1901–76)

Novelist, autodidact, ubiquitous freedom fighter, book dealer, mesmerizing orator, editor, aesthete, art thief, culture minister, literary talent scout, globetrotting ambassador for one of France's most enigmatic leaders—in espousing the events of the middle fifty years of the twentieth century, André Malraux evinces the contradictions inherent to them. Employing the novel to combat oppression, he wrote the revolution outside the constraints of social realism. Malraux's facility with language equaled his propensity to rush to the defense of the cause of liberty and to take action. Thus, he put away his pen in an instant to defend the Spanish republic in combat against FASCISM; he formed a brigade in 1944 to help oust the Nazis; and, at

the ripe age of seventy, he was stopped from organizing a commando force to help the Bengalis in their struggle against Pakistan only by a personal plea from Indira Gandhi. This man, who had published several exemplars of *littérature engagée* nearly a generation before the term had currency, who had even won admiration (however guarded) from Leon Trotsky, stunned many in France's postwar intelligentsia (unforgivably, in their view) by rallying to the call of General Charles de Gaulle at about the time that JEAN-PAUL SARTRE was joining the communist ranks. This aesthete, whom the public at large had first encountered as the Parisian dandy who mocked a colonial justice system that accused him (rightly) of pillaging a Khmer archaeological site, became France's first minister of culture, supreme protector of art and promoter of the mystical power of the arts. In terms of law, ideology, and custom, a more variegated, unpredictable, paradoxical public life can hardly be imagined. Yet if everything that André Malraux accomplished had endured equally to this day, then assessing the impact of that public life on French intellectual history would be a daunting task.

Among Malraux's literary works, certain books have remained incontestable masterpieces, among them *La condition humaine* (*Man's Fate*), his second novel about the Chinese revolution, for which he was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1933; and *L'espoir* (*Man's Hope*, 1937), inspired by his action in Spain. Highly original in form and content, barely a narrative and unrecognizable as a novel, it reflected the film that he already had in mind and actually shot on location as Spain was falling to Franco's Falangists. There are also important curiosities in his oeuvre—works that promise fresh readings with twenty-first-century eyes: his first novel set in modern China, *Les conquérants* (*The Conquerors*, 1928), touched off Malraux's famous debate with Trotsky, clinching their friendship (Malraux once planned a mission to free him from exile in Alma-Ata); *La voie royale* (*The Royal Way*, 1930), a short novel set in Indochina that might be called Malraux's *Heart of Darkness*, pulsates with personal obsession and disdain for the handiwork of colonialism. After *Les noyers de l'Altenburg* (*The Walnut Trees of Altenburg*, 1943), Malraux gave up writing texts with even the vaguest resemblance to novels.

For all the praise and fame that Malraux's writing earned him in the 1930s and 1940s, despite whatever reverence still surrounds his fiction, and despite the promise of unexplored territories that those books may still harbor, it is not for his literary contributions that Malraux will be most remembered. His enduring legacy lies instead in the foundational role he played in the elaboration of an idea of a republican and idiosyncratically French politics of culture—indeed, a politics of culture for the world, delivered

through his concept of *la République française*. And although elaborating an idea of such a politics is not the same as realizing the politics itself, Malraux lives on in the debates that have persisted in France ever since he gave voice, while trying to lend form, to a type of politics that has become increasingly important to the French national image. And, for better or for worse, the collective (and often unconscious) remembrance of this Malraux—the Malraux who was minister, paragon, embodiment of culture—to the virtual exclusion of “other” perceptions of the figure continues to subtend the seemingly inevitable polarization in debates about culture in France. Woven into the fabric of arguments about the role culture may (or should) play in forming the whole, democratic, and ethical subject, one easily perceives the Malraux thread: the aesthetics of an uncanny visionary and—whether loathed or lauded—the policies he set out.

In January 1959, less than a year after the founding of the Fifth Republic, Charles de Gaulle created France's first Ministry of Culture and named André Malraux as its head. Although Malraux had already proved himself de Gaulle's faithful servant, serving as spokesman, adviser on cultural matters, and altogether indispensable *éminence grise* at crucial moments (from 1945 to 1952 and beginning again in 1958), this new ministry was to struggle throughout de Gaulle's presidency both for funding and even, reportedly, for serious recognition from the boss. De Gaulle was no doubt well aware that although Malraux shared his quasi-mystical vision of the role of France in world history, Malraux's disdain for the pettiness of day-to-day politics was even greater than the general's. Fully cognizant of Malraux's unshakable devotion, de Gaulle treated him as a whimsical genius and his ministry as a toy that he, de Gaulle, would never consider as more than the glitter on the grand scheme.

Malraux nevertheless achieved some spectacular exploits in the valorization of culture. He established an impressive array of programs and instituted many policies that are still in place today. Now taken for granted, the job of cleaning centuries of grime off Notre-Dame and thousands of other French monuments was begun in 1960 under Malraux's leadership. He created the Orchestre de Paris. He commissioned Marc Chagall to paint the old opera house ceiling and André Masson the ceiling of the Théâtre de l'Odéon. The protection of whole neighborhoods perceived as constituting cohesive architectural gems (*secteurs sauvegardés*) began under the Malraux Act, passed in the summer of 1962. He traveled feverishly, mobilizing his oratorical talents everywhere—in Upper Egypt, for example, during the Aswan Dam project—to protect cultural heritage wherever it was under threat. Far from negligible were the *maisons de*

la culture built in a number of provincial cities, starting with Le Havre in 1961 (others were built in Bourges, Amiens, Caen, Grenoble, and elsewhere). Without having to go to Paris, throngs of people could finally gain easy access to theater, concerts, and art exhibitions. And although the *maisons de la culture* would ultimately fail (their flaw was providing an oversupply of "culture" without creating sufficient demand through effective pedagogy), the creation of these "cathedrals" of the modern age at emphatic distances from Paris unwittingly set the tone for the long-overdue decentralization of government that is still taking place in France today.

As imposing as these accomplishments were, Malraux also committed some monumental blunders. For having let students overrun the Théâtre de l'Odéon, Jean-Louis Barrault, whom he had named director of the reorganized Théâtre de France in 1959, and Madeleine Renaud, together the most visionary couple of the French stage, were removed shortly after May 1968. In an ironic twist, the prestigious and influential music institute IRCAM undoubtedly owes its creation to Malraux, who chose Marcel Landowski to reform and direct the National Conservatory of Music instead of Pierre Boulez. And of course, oblivious to the respect of everyone in the film world for the film collector and idiosyncratic conservator Henri Langlois, Malraux turned that entire world against him in 1968 by trying to dismiss this exceptional archivist, who had saved thousands of rare films from the Nazis.

Although Malraux's successors in administering culture in France have either adjusted or abrogated many of his policies, these corrections have not and probably cannot efface Malraux's unique stamp on the expression of culture in France. Just as de Gaulle endures as the standard against whom all leaders of the Fifth Republic are inevitably compared, Malraux remains a permanent emblem of the national attitude toward culture. His focus on "the expansion and diffusion of French culture" is at the basis of the still-current, though perhaps slightly wishful notion that there is (or should be) some cultural cohesion among francophone countries. By the same token, the grandiose projects commissioned by François Mitterrand during his fourteen-year presidency are not only distant echoes of the *grands travaux* executed during the ancien régime and under Napoleon; they also proceed directly from Malraux's fundamental principle that the democratization of culture would necessarily result from enhanced access and exposure to an ever-growing number of great artworks. Two examples illustrate this relationship. That the Ministry of Finance headquarters in Bercy is ostensibly the largest government office building in Europe cannot alter the more fundamental fact that Mitterrand had it built in order to lure a

recalcitrant ministerial staff (of the Right-Center opposition) out of the Louvre so that every square inch of the palace could finally be dedicated to the display of art. Concomitantly, and much more obviously, the primary function of the glass pyramids designed by I. M. Pei is to provide a bright, highly efficient, and centrally located entrance and exit complex to process the huge crowds visiting the same museum.

The institutionalization of culture that Malraux toiled to realize under the banner of the French republic resonates harmoniously with the more personal projects he carried out concurrently with his public functions as vassal to de Gaulle. The thousands of pages that Malraux published on art were not merely the utopian musings of a self-taught aesthete: Malraux's dream was to found a post-Auschwitz world on the groundwork of art by converting the republic into a museum, both tangible and virtual, without walls. In this respect, Malraux's "psychology of art" is inseparable from the evolution of his ideas concerning culture's role in the public sphere. The three best-known books that he introduced through his own series with Gallimard are *Le musée imaginaire* (*The Museum without Walls*, 1947), *Les voix du silence* (1951), and *La métamorphose des dieux* (1957). In each of these expansive essays in aesthetics (among several others), Malraux's mystical commentary weaves its way through carefully selected galleries of photographs of artworks from disparate cultures: his play of text and image, figure and discourse, reflects his conviction—decipherable already in his earlier fiction—that to imagine a humanity beyond the inhumanities of war is to envision individuals necessarily wedded to the artwork by continual exposure which results, finally, in our giving ourselves over to its power.

To make sense of Malraux's life, it has unfortunately become all too commonplace for biographers to divide that life in two, holding the fiction-writing, fellow-traveling freedom fighter up against the Gaullist, to see the Malraux from the age of forty-four until his death as irreconcilable with the revolutionary Malraux. But if, as has been argued here, the immortal share of an immemorial Malraux resides not in the heroic period of his novel-writing youth but in his period as a cultural policy maker, then revisiting his late (in some ways curiously posthumous) literary legacy is to grasp the paradox that reconciles the disparate forces composing this most modern of monumental figures. In *Miroir des limbes* (of which his *Anti-Memoirs* constitute the embryo) we have this "third" Malraux: a man part of whose life is inevitably fiction, a man whose personal affinities ranged from GEORGES BERNANOS, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, and Louis Guilloux to Ho Chi Minh and Leon Trotsky, a revolutionary wedded not only to the Gaullist

cause but indeed, according to his biographer, JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD, bound to de Gaulle himself in a sort of enfeoffment with which he struggled mightily. *Miroir des limbes*, like Malraux's existence, is a monumental palimpsest. Just as de Gaulle had written his voluminous *Memoirs*, Malraux began offering his *Anti-Memoirs* in the late 1960s. When de Gaulle died quietly after what appeared to be a definitive repudiation, Malraux arose from literary oblivion with *Lazarus* (1974). In 1971, he had brought out *Les chênes qu'on abat* (*Fallen Oaks*), a partially fictitious dialogue between himself and de Gaulle that lent expression to the complex fascination that the great figure held for him. Partly a reprieve from the tutelage of de Gaulle, the last years of Malraux's life were devoted to revising the *Anti-Memoirs*, rearranging and gluing it together with other uncategorizable texts about himself, his era, his nightmares, and his dreams of art and life to leave us, finally, in 1976 with *Miroir des limbes*, a compendium of all of Malraux's "anti-memoirs" and one of the most fascinating literary texts of the twentieth century. *Robert Harvey*

FURTHER READING

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