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The Anti-Destiny of Malraux's *Anti-Mémoires*

In the year 1991 André Malraux would have been ninety years old (he died in 1976). More importantly, 1991 is also the year when the Pléiade issued the first volume of the projected six containing the complete works of the writer. This is no less than a secular consecration of Malraux, for the Pléiade is the most prestigious publishing house in Europe, and its books are fastidiously edited and nobly bound. The durability of their product complements the scholarship and the elegance of the presentation.

Reviewers and critics in France lauded, of course, the Pléiade undertaking; but curiously, faced as they were with the early works, they commented more on Malraux's later efforts, most especially on his *Anti-Mémoires*. This semi-fictional narration, caused a great stir in 1991, just as it had captured the immense interest of the public for the last quarter of a century. The book was published in November 1966, and it will be the focus of this paper.

The contemporaneity of André Malraux stems from a baffling and universally important question which he posed throughout his career: how to wrest from human history and mortal civilizations a real and indestructible absolute, that is, a religion? Pascal's thinking reed, the man who constructs history and art, is superior to the universe for he subjects it to his laws. But art, unlike the thinking reed, is as eternal as the human race, for it is reborn for each generation which rediscovers it and reinterprets it, albeit according to new norms and changing taste.

If art is the absolute, the only possible religion, three more haunting questions arise: (1) how much human blood and sacrifice are worth going into the production of art; (2) how can one look at art knowing that much

underpaid and slave labor have gone into its making; (3) how can one glorify art knowing also that while the chosen can view it in museums, the poor and downtrodden suffer and die without the benefit of any catharsis, for they can neither afford, nor are they sophisticated enough to desire the consolation available to the elite?

Such questions Malraux tried to answer in his later works, such as *La Psychologie de l'art* (1947-1949), *Saturne, Essai sur Goya* (1949), *Les Voix du silence* (1951), *La Métamorphose des dieux* (1957) and the already mentioned *Anti-Mémoires*. It is nice to be a humanist, he opined, and to recoil from suffering and blood, but the only way to do that would be to practice what Plato had proposed in his *Republic*: banish the artists and poets, for they value beauty more than life. Such a *solution* is powerless, Malraux held, when confronted by the violent, irrepressible urge to find an absolute. Yet, this urge can be purified if one no longer thinks in terms of human pain and agony. These terms, he concluded, would then become irrelevant. The Egyptian pyramids are worth the suffering that was necessary for their construction; the Aztec images are worth the children sacrificed thereto; Gothic art, Islamic, African, modern and even anti-art are, after all, the only ways for vulnerable humanity to conquer the fatality of death. The imperative goal is worth all means.

It follows, then, that fleeting, feeble human nature has an out:

In the museum [man] discovers majestic works . . . the ancient arts, the Indian sculptures, the sculptures of Chinese and preColombian origin, the Byzantine brilliant efforts, the Roman frescoes, the popular and savage expressions of culture, in addition to the palpable, more glorified representations of the so-called established and accepted civilizations. The museum provides man with an ever-opening fan of human adventure. It furnishes, not a disparate, but a coherent repertory. There are correspondences and concordances . . . [constituting] an inventory of shapes . . . making man look at art as art, that is creation, admirable and triumphant in spite of anything questionable that might have gone into its making. (*Les Voix du silence* 14 [all translations are mine])

It is clear, then, that art obliterates the fatality of death. It offers the opposite of doom, a sort of anti-destiny. In *Anti-Mémoires* (so called because fiction is intermingled with recollections) the author atones for having taken, in his youth, another course for the attainment of the absolute. In *Les Conquérants* (1928), *La Voie royale* (1930), *La*

Condition humaine (1933) and *L'Espoir* (1937), he had thought that Revolution gives meaning to one's life. There may have been some meaning in that, he realized later, but in the end, Battistas are only followed by Castros, and revolutions result only in temporary and illusory solutions; at any rate, these fall quite short of the absolute.

To be sure, Malraux's participation in vigorous and militant activities preceded, went on sometimes during, and often followed the publication of literary works describing them. He took part personally in the leftist rebellions in China, in the defense of the leftist government in Spain, he helped to organize their air force, in tank battles during World War II, in the Resistance during the German occupation of France, in demonstrations after the war, and even in riots. At times he defended, and at other times he attacked the same cause, as circumstances demanded, or he thought they demanded. He passed on, as he grew older, from one *ism* to another. Ultimately, the Leftist turned completely to the Right, in 1959, when he became Minister of Cultural Affairs in the cabinet of General de Gaulle. In *Anti-Mémoires* he confessed: "I was finally believing that I could really be useful" (218).

Anti-Mémoires, which attracts so easily the attention of contemporary public and critics, is perhaps best described by what it is not. It is not a rediscovery of his childhood, which he despises, nor a revelation of his private life. He stated: "What matters only to me does not matter" (3). More importantly, it is not replete with juicy anecdotes which readers of biographies expect. The book says nothing about Malraux's relationship with Trotsky, about his meetings with Hemingway, nor anything about his deals with Eisentein who wanted to make a movie of *La Condition humaine* with music by Shostakovich, or Meyerhold who wanted to make a play of it with music by Prokofiev. Instead *Anti-Mémoires* relies more on Malraux's more recent conviction that reality must be sacrificed to image, which is the object of art: for art alone changes reality to Reality. A lasting representation of the imaginary supersedes the Aristotelian concept according to which truths and lies cohabit in the world. In the twentieth century truths and lies have ceased to exist. They failed to survive the theory of relativity with which science has undermined the humanities and humanity itself. There is only one thing of which one can be sure: the image, hence his *Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale* (1952).

Images of his life dot *Anti-Mémoires*. He begins the book with the last 25 years of his existence, disdainful of reality and chronology. His images of Reality are the conversations he had with others, which are partly true and largely embroidered, and perhaps totally imagined. But a fictional biography is Real, certainly more so than others which pretend to be constructed around precise recollections that only someone with a photographic memory can have. His endeavor is built around sometimes Socratic and sometimes Shakespearian dialogues with General de Gaulle, with Prime Minister Nehru, with Mao Tse-tung, with the Sphinx, and with various pharaohs. To all he talks about the same subjects: man's destiny and death. In his introduction Malraux warns: "Like Asia rediscovered after 30 years, all my surviving recollections converse with each other—perhaps, from my whole, long existence, I have retained only these dialogues" (18).

The interlocutors are concerned about essential problems, about impasses which cannot be transcended. They verbalize on duration and temporality, on the difficulty of attaining permanence, on the chances of culture alone even in a largely uncultured world. But even in a third world country, where illiteracy subjugates, Malraux tells Nehru that the rediscovery of an older civilization is likely to give birth to a new one and keep its citizens really alive:

The resuscitation of the best of yesterday can bring to the human spirit a quenching heretofore unknown. If resurrection occurs occasionally, it is certainly not by chance. For resuscitated art and its immortal representations alone appear to withstand the onslaught of death. Imagine what would happen if nations did not resurrect their art and encourage the emotions it creates in their people. In fifty years our current civilization, exclusively scientific, would make us all slaves to our elementary instincts. Only culture can prevent that. (*Anti-Mémoires* 215-16)

Nehru is attracted by Malraux's idea, but he does not quite see it as a solution. He retorts: "It seems so. Nevertheless . . . Western countries, did they not advance culture only because they had so much leisure time to occupy?" (216). It is a good question, to which Malraux finds only a partially acceptable answer:

In my country the Ministry of Sports and Leisure has been created twenty years ago. But there is no culture without leisure, whereas there is leisure

without culture. Yet, with the exception of sports and gambling, one can occupy leisure within the perimeter of the imaginary afforded by art. So there you are, the gods are dead and our demons [poverty, illiteracy, or anything else that makes appreciation of culture difficult] are quite alive. It may be that art cannot replace the gods, but it can make the nobility of man shine even after his light has gone out. (*Anti-Mémoires* 217-18)

The catastrophe of physical death, then, allows only for survival in the museum, which is neither accessible to, nor desired by most. Nehru's aesthetics draw him into the trap of partial acquiescence, but his first-hand knowledge of the masses makes him see the shortcomings of the *solution*.

In his earlier novels Malraux did not consider this *solution*, nor of course its shortcomings. All he had wanted to do was to establish man's historicity, linking him to the temporal, to specific events. Whether these be wars or revolutions, or disease and natural death, they were all vast frescoes of human suffering, of humans tortured at the hands of other humans, or torture caused by human frailty. What he saw and the drawings of his visions created the drama from which ensued the speculation that commitment and violent physical activity would raise the dignity of the person. He had thought that, in risking his life for change, he would no longer be the slave of destiny. Later, he realized that change was not amelioration, and that art alone could erase human servitude and humiliation. Art could be the antidote secretly desired by most.

In *Anti-Mémoires* he undertook to persuade others that there is hope in culture, or at least something coming very close to hope. Calamity hurts less in the presence of art, and if many cannot afford the museum, or are not educated enough to enjoy it, the problem is merely economic. It is not possible to be immortal, but it is possible to become richer and cultured as training and technology increase production.

Having reminded us of that, is probably the greatest contribution of Malraux: for even if the solution has shortcomings, it is better than none at all. The fact is that its current vogue attracts contemporaries for whom the magic of organized religions has waned; for whom outside strife (ironically rendered more dangerous by technology) has made personal peril felt more acutely than ever; for whom internal conflict seems uneradicable by religious counselling, even less by professional therapy. In France, at least, psychiatric or psychologic help has always been

appreciated little, and has recently been discredited by a number of scandals which related how the practitioners took monetary and sexual advantage of the patients (for an account of this see *Le Monde*, 2 February 1991: 5).

Fortunately, though, there remains art. Yet, the critic Georges Duthuit had made fun of Malraux's *Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale* in his book *Musée inimaginaire* (1956). Humbly and convincingly, the defender of art replied in *Anti-Mémoires* in a dialogue with Mao Tse-tung:

Man's humanity is not saying: "What I have done no lower animal would have done"; it is saying "that I have repressed what the lower animal in us wanted because I wanted to give the upper hand to that part which crushes the beast. . . ." Man is really a man only when he pursues art . . . extracting the song of constellations from indifferent nebulae. . . . In the evening and into the night Rembrandt continues to paint . . . providing survival for all. From his cavern the primitive fathoms it. Thus is maintained, restated, and preserved the better part of man, that which makes for his strength, and for the honor of being a man. (311-12)

His friend, Claude Roy, in *Moi je* pointed to the religion that culture can thus become:

the aestheticism that he is, Malraux does not describe the diversity of the representations of art; he tends to group them together, to fuse them, to reduce them to an effort begun again and again, incessantly, so as to make an eternal present of duration. This is an avoidance of, and an escape from, the nightmare of history. . . . What Malraux had sought in archaeology at age 23, in revolution at age 32, in the inventory of art at age 50, is nothing but a religion. (59)

But from age 50 on he sought no longer for he knew that he had found the indestructible absolute.

To be sure, art and culture are not a panacea for all. The classics in the eighteenth century, and the romantics in the nineteenth, held, the first, that thought, and later, the second that love can provide for a meliorism of society. Malraux, however, was far from being a classic or a romantic, especially not in his mature age. Thought gave birth to *isms* that change, and the transitoriness of love made hate possible. More appealing for the older Malraux was the durability of the marble and the overall aesthetics

of art. He saw in them a permanence that nothing else afforded, and he concluded them to be the ultimate basis of being.

In fact, the author became so convinced of the importance of this discovery that, at times, he deluded himself that art had always been the object of his search. In 1973, in a dialogue with Guy Suarès, when Malraux was not in the best of physical health, an important exchange took place. I shall quote it at length here because the writer is much more explicit than the critic, and because the elucidations offered are pivotal in grasping the contemporaneity of Malraux:

"When you were twenty, did you have a plan? If so, what was it?"

"The plan was a life outside of life: something to which art was to make a tremendous contribution." (*Malraux: Past, Present, Future* 20)

The interviewer realizes that Malraux is wrong in so far as the past, and he shifts gears:

"What is your hope for the future, as we now stand?"

"I have no idea, and I shall systematically eliminate all prophesy from our conversation. . . . [although] Hope is in the search for values, for meaning. But to values and meaning we should also add chimeras. They are extremely important, because in the absence of religious faith imagination acquires tremendous power." (34)

Later he explains the importance of dreaming in the production of images. Representations of art follow visions and constitute that absolute possession which is culture. When he is asked for his definition of culture, he replies with utmost precision:

"The one I gave in the Chamber of Deputies was an impromptu, although that certainly did not stop it from catching on: the knowledge of the greatest number of works by the greatest of men. I was answering some nitwit or other. More seriously, I wrote earlier in *Les Voix du silence* that culture is the heritage left by the world's nobility. But it is also quite interesting trying to define it by its opposite. I also wrote once . . . that it is hard to define dignity but it is easy to define humiliation: everyone knows only too well what a slap in the face is like. And it is harder to define culture than to experience its opposite. All culture, quite clearly, entails a referral back, to the human quality it recognized in its dead. Our culture begins with a knowledge of what the greatest minds have thought, of what the greatest artists created. At one time we could have said: the

heritage of truth. But we don't say that today. Today, the highest culture is perhaps nothing but a knowledge of man's noblest dialogues." (92)

These dialogues, real or imagined, or a little of both, centre mostly on the past: for it is easier to talk about what has taken place than about what will occur in the future. In addition, the assurance of history adds a measure of integrity to the interlocutors who tread on known ground and deal mostly with probable facts. At the same time, the resuscitation of history gives the interlocutors the illusion of their own possible resuscitation, an illusion which extends to the public for whom these dialogues are available.

The past revisited, then, is a presence. It palpitates and lives, as I want to, and as I might, if I have created a work of art, if others coming after me have dug it out, have looked at it, and have become aware of what part of me is in it. That part is an indestructible absolute, my quintessential part. The artist is kept alive by the admirers of art, as shown by a subway vogue which is now several years old.

French subway trains are usually on time, and the waiting period on subway platforms is not long. Nevertheless, the *métro* authorities have installed TV sets on platforms. These present works of artists and writers, most of whom are dead, some still alive but aged and with established reputations. One can look at Rembrandt while waiting for a train, or at Malraux commenting on Rembrandt. There is always a crowd looking at the monitors. One has to weave through other passengers to get to a vantage point, or to stand on one's tiptoes. No matter. The public does make the effort, for the descent into Hades, to which a subway trip is sometimes compared, can thus become a *via* not so *dolorosa*, leading to an anti-destiny at the opposite end of mortality.

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