

Review Article

Malraux's Anti-Memoirs: Reflections On Life And Death

Over the past forty years André Malraux¹—French novelist, art-critic, adventurer and, lately, cultural minister under de Gaulle—has created an impressive repertoire of works which explore the crisis of values that is being experienced in the Western world. With this crisis in mind, Malraux first tried to find a meaning for life in and through the created situations of his novels. *The Conquerors*,² *The Royal Way*,³ and *Man's Fate*⁴ try to formulate in artistic terms the meaning of human action in a world where the individual begins to count less and less. *The Walnut Trees of Altenburg*,⁵ a more strictly philosophical meditation on man, brings to a close Malraux's accounts in fiction of action, violence, revolution, and death. He next turned to art in search of a viable human commitment which would take the place of the old and shattered abstract views of man and his world. *The Psychology of Art*,⁶ *The Voices of Silence*,⁷ and *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*⁸ explore the way in which the artistic creations of man give a momentary meaning to the absurd and chaotic human reality. In these works Malraux does not give an historical exposé of art; rather he attempts to hear, as he says, the voices of the great works of art which through the darkness of time call out to each other and to all men, and form what he calls the first true universal humanism.

Anti-Memoirs,* Malraux's latest contribution to the literary world, is both a peculiar and an intriguing book. All scholars and biographers who have delighted in the exciting life and adventures of Malraux might have expected at the end of his life a further elaboration of his image as an adventurer, a man of action. In the preface to *Anti-Memoirs*, Malraux tells his readers that as a personnage he finds himself utterly "boring" and that consequently he is incapable of writing a memoir or a confession in the traditional sense of those terms. Sharply distinguishing himself from those who specialize in psychological introspection and inner probes, Malraux believes almost all such attempts are misguided: "If Man becomes the object of a search and not of a revelation . . . there is a great temptation to drain him dry, to assume that the more

**Anti-Memoirs*. By ANDRE MALRAUX, trans. Terence Kilmartin. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968. pp. 432. \$10.75.

copious all the memoirs and journals the better we will know him." For Malraux, attempts at self-discovery take on a different meaning. They are neither a means of affirming his own personality, nor an instrument of a metaphysical consciousness. Malraux is in search of himself, but of himself in a peculiar way: for he encounters himself within the most immediate moments of experience when "the mystery of life" is looming up. These significant moments man does not possess, as the psychologists might lead us to believe: they do not live "in" man; they rather disturb and haunt him and withdraw not only from his rational scrutiny, but also from his very personality and all that could be said to "belong" to him.

Since memoirs rarely bring to the reader the author's encounters with the ideas which permeate and guide his life, Malraux concentrates on just this in *Anti-Memoirs*. He returns to certain scenes which he once transposed into fiction and he tries to grasp the elusive meaning and haunting mystery of life. In spite of the fact that we do not acquire here any direct knowledge about Malraux as a person, the book seems to be reaching out at the reader to involve him in a participation where he is attuned to the same questions that the author asks.

Perhaps one of the central questions, and one experienced as most piercing, is—for almost any French intellectual and particularly since the last War—that of the meaning of death. As in all of his pre-war works, Malraux reveals in this volume further thoughts on the view that the problem of death must be the matrix of any human reflection. More than that, this problem is in effect for this author the central issue of Western Civilization as a whole. Death as a fundamental reality distinguishes Western cultures from those of the East, in which a concept of endlessness of life in the endlessness of time—and a correlative desire for a birthlessness of the human soul—stand in the foreground. *Anti-Memoirs* casts light upon a number of critical experiences where man is confronted with death situations, some as absurd as the slaughtering of German concentration camps. But in the face of these frightful experiences Malraux tries to understand how the meaning of life can be paradoxically affirmed.

Anti-Memoirs begins with the recounting of a scene from *The Walnut Trees of Altenburg*, in which the narrator's father finds himself confronted with the dead body of his own father, who has committed suicide. At this absurd and painful moment the living man finds himself drawn into a meditation where he can be released from his drive to achieve clarity, where he so to speak receives the meaning of things: "He felt as though the whole of life had be-

come unreal; and suddenly he felt released from it all—mysteriously remote from the world and astonished by it. . . ." At this moment a poignant secret emanates not so much from the presence of death as from that of life. By going to meet death in his person, man confronts that which denies and crushes him. It is as though Malraux were suggesting, however, that man should welcome this test as the supreme chance to fulfil his life and himself before that which threatens him.

The question which still remains, and which this book attempts to illuminate, is how can man come to terms with death, with this strange event which he cannot change and which is imposed on him. How can man do this in a period as trying as the twentieth century where nothing is real but the expression of power without aim? Modern culture, although human in some "mass" sense, is indeed in many respects opposing man or something essential to individual human life. It has become the embodiment of forces and powers which contribute nothing to man and will end up by destroying him. In *Anti-Memoirs*, Malraux suggests that twentieth century man's answering up to death and to life does *not* lie in the field of action (as his novel *Man's Fate* so appropriately shows through the futile actions of the Chinese revolution) or in the field of rational thought (as *The Walnut Trees of Altenburg* tries to demonstrate). Man can only face death and life through a vocation in which his entire being is involved: "It is not the role which makes the historical personality, but the vocation." Malraux joins hands here with Camus, who lets a personage as degraded as that of Clamence in *The Fall*, hold as his last value that man must renounce what he calls professionalism and devote himself rather to a vocation. In *The Fall*, Clamence sees the difference between profession and vocation to lie in the mode of man's concern: the professional attitude is one where man confines what he does to certain times of the day and to places where he lives, whereas the vocational attitude is one embodying a constancy of thought and deed. The vocational path furthermore distinguishes itself from that of a mere profession in that man does not so much "practice" a vocation, he rather "breathes it" and is at one with it.

Malraux suggests in *Anti-Memoirs* that the vocational path *par excellence* is art. The artist devotes himself to his work, he handles his medium in order to sustain and develop his vocation. He modifies the forms of his predecessors to attain distinctive forms of his own. Art carries man beyond himself. Art is "a metamorphosis of a fate undergone into a fate transcended" and it is "one of the most profound which man can create." Human nature and human things undergo a modification when they are incorporated into art. And the

artist thus opens up an aesthetic event which develops in relation to man's relatedness to death. The art-work portrays human mortality and it affords a response to it which reveals man's dignity in the face of death. For Malraux, all great art-works become a mode of response which incorporates death and which makes a revelation in which man can participate and can take a stand before death and be no longer its passive victim.

Applied to the history of art, Malraux's view means that every new artistic creation points up previous ones in a new light; it awakens others to new life; it produces a metamorphosis. Thus we can speak of an art-spirit arising, proclaiming a single and elusive value. Because today we feel ourselves to be the heirs not of one or the other of the values that have arisen at various times of history, but the heirs of all values, therefore it is art as a whole which opposes our culture to destiny. In art, man grabs his only and most noble chance of being a victor over death: each new creation enters into the choir of the "voices of silence" which proclaim man's dignity within the humanly created realm of art and its never-ending metamorphoses.

Aside from the aesthetic solution offered in the works of Malraux, it might be well to consider for a moment what the possible message of a book like *Anti-Memoirs* might be—if indeed we can speak of a message. This book stands in direct opposition to the technological thinking so prevalent in our day, and in an indirect way Malraux seems to be thinking about the loss of man's rootedness, a loss which springs from the spirit of the age of technology. A fear permeates this work, a fear that everything human might fall into the clutches of planning and calculation, of organization and automation. And yet through this fear something else becomes manifest: that a completely new relationship of man to the world, and his place in it, might be near. Up until now man has, so to speak, had a technical relationship with the world, a relationship where he mastered and exploited the world and where he was driven by his technological inventions into a forgetfulness of his own proper destiny. Man must now begin to confront meditatively the transformation of his age. He must keep open to the meaning hidden in the world and in himself. There is a tendency today for man to take in everything in the cheapest and quickest way, only to forget it just as instantly. Malraux's *Anti-Memoirs* suggests to us that it is one thing to take quick notice of things but that it is quite another thing to understand what we are taking in, to have thought it out.

The pre-condition for such a new founding ground for man's being in the world in a meaningful way is in a consciousness that knows its own limitations. And Malraux's belief in man's ability to achieve this consciousness is

optimistic indeed. In *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*, Malraux had already defined modern culture as the "first of all cultures to realize and recognize its ignorance of man's significance". Not restricting himself any longer to the constant and almost physically concrete presence of human solitude which previously marked for him the world-situation, no longer belabouring so much the fundamental fear in front of human existence, Malraux has now struck upon a new principle which grounds man's reflection henceforth in a meditation about its failure to know. To reflect about man's condition means here to attempt to re-grasp it as concretely as possible at its un-graspable, mysterious origin. Such reflection constitutes a return to the point of emergence, a point where man's consciousness understands itself as carried by that which is other than man. This reflection is not a passive contemplation of the self, for the self is hurled beyond itself into the world. Malraux's thought thus does not try to bring us a new human essence, but an existence which is in the making. We are not presented here with a new means of explication but with a means of *understanding*.

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NOTES

1. For readers interested in gaining a preliminary foothold through secondary sources, an excellent introduction to Malraux is given in the recent publication of Professor Wilkinson (*Malraux—An Essay in Political Criticism*. By David Wilkinson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press [Toronto: Saunders of Toronto], 1967. Pp. 224. \$5.95). This book analyzes chronologically Malraux's works, illuminating him primarily as a political educator. The study ends upon a comparison between Malraux, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Camus in an effort to place Malraux among kindred thinkers. Although Professor Wilkinson's essay deals basically with the political themes implicit in Malraux's works, it is nonetheless a dialogue with Malraux and brings out the complexity of his thought while encompassing it in a cultural perspective. The following notes identify English translations of works by Malraux referred to in the text.
2. *The Conquerors*, trans. Winifred Stephens Whale (Boston: Beacon, 1956).
3. *The Royal Way*, trans. Harrison Smith and Robert Haas (New York: Random House, 1935).
4. *Man's Fate*, trans. Harrison Smith and Robert Haas (New York: Random House, 1934).
5. *The Walnut Trees of Altenburg*, trans. A. W. Fielding (London: Lehmann, 1952).

6. *The Psychology of Art*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, 3 vols. (New York: Pantheon, 1949-1950).
7. *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Doubleday, 1953).
8. *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960).

FREDERICTON HOUSES

George Bowering

Fredericton houses
are wooden, frames

of bright paint
 in hard snow
beside the frozen
river.

Bright? In the hard
sun: green, pink, & yellow.

It is my first time
in Fredericton, I don't
watch the houses long enough

to see the dark people,
I don't watch the river

long enough to see the dark
water

 confidently moving
from under the ice.