

André Malraux and the Artist's Quest

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"All that I have written consists in posing the contradiction between the realm of appearance, in the metaphysical sense—that is, what one could call life—and the realm of the absolute, whatever that might be . . ."¹

André Malraux was one of the first to draw the full implications of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God: if God is dead, then man—man as he knew himself—is also dead. As Gabriel Marcel was later to point out in his book, *L'Homme problématique*,² man has become a question mark for himself: he no longer knows who he is, where he comes from, where he is going. It is with this awareness that Malraux began his career; it is this fundamental interrogation which has been the touchstone of all he has written. "Ce mystère de l'homme" as the narrator of *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* put it,³—has been his constant obsession. The problem is also stated succinctly in *La Condition humaine*: "que faire d'une âme, s'il n'y a ni Dieu ni Christ?"⁴ Malraux's novels outline a number of successive attempts, on the fictional level, to explore the possibilities left open to man: leaving a scar on the map, like Perken; struggling for the revolution even without loving the workers or the poor, like Garine; fraternal action for the dignity of man, like Kyo and Katow; organizing the lyrical illusion, like Manuel. In each case, the real adversary is not political or military as much as existential, what Malraux calls destiny: "tout ce qui impose à l'homme la conscience de sa condition."⁵ Various incarnations of this destiny in the novels are

by turn death, solitude, humiliation, dependence, incommunicability. Increasingly, Malraux will see in art itself—including his own—the best means of affirmation in the face of destiny; for “l’art est un anti-destin.”⁶

Most critics are now willing to apply to Malraux’s own novels the essential analysis which he so long developed regarding the visual arts. The artist does not transcribe reality, he *rivals* it.⁷ He transfigures the “real” and gives it a new dimension. As the titles of some of Malraux’s later studies suggest, he makes visible the absolute, the supernatural, the non-real. The work of art is essentially an “interrogation” which transcends not only the raw material drawn from reality, but also the artist’s time and place and the artist himself, both in his psychological make-up and in his conscious intentions. As Malraux noted in *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, his first work devoted entirely to literature: “the artist does not possess the secret of his genius.”⁸ Indeed, “literary creation does not express men, it goes beyond them mysteriously [. . .].”⁹ I would like to suggest one very specific way in which Malraux’s work transcends its creator and to share with you some of Malraux’s remarks which I found both surprising and enlightening.

For some time I have been interested in the role of vision and blindness in Malraux’s novels. Prior to a visit with him in early 1972, I sent ahead a long list of questions including several on his (for me) obvious life-long obsession with blindness. These latter questions drew, in writing, monosyllabic responses: “non. . . non. . . non.” When I subsequently brought them up in person, the otherwise voluble Malraux was singularly reticent. Why, in his speeches and books on art, were there so many images of blindness and violence to the eyes?¹⁰ “C’est par hasard.” Two years later (in the meantime, Malraux had been kind enough to read my dissertation¹¹), I again suggested that throughout his novels the various faces of destiny as he defines it are made present either literally or figuratively by the image of blindness. “Il n’y a pas que chez moi,” replied Malraux. “I’m not the only one!” And thereupon he launched into a discussion about blind destiny in Greek thought and art.

This manner of linking up with a human concern much broader than his own personal obsession gives, I think, an important clue to one kind of transcendence that Malraux seeks—and finds—in artistic creation. The surprising thing for me was his recognition of the role of the subconscious; for I had always thought him to be extremely distrustful of the entire realm of the subconscious, of dreams, of whatever remains beyond the pale of the conscious will. Let me put my opening quotation

back into the context of our discussion about the image of blindness: "Je crois que métaphysiquement il doit se passer ceci: étant donné que tout ce que j'ai écrit consiste à poser la contradiction entre le domaine de l'apparence au sens métaphysique—c'est-à-dire ce qu'on pourrait appeler la vie—et le domaine de l'absolu quel qu'il soit, il est probable que le personnage qui se définit par sa rupture avec l'apparence, par son ignorance de l'apparence, doit être dans l'inconscient un personnage très important. Mais ça me dépasse peut-être de loin, parce qu'il a dû y avoir quelque chose comme ça avec la Grèce." Through the play of his subconscious, Malraux thus transcends his own personal obsession with blindness and attaches it to a larger human reality, to something like the "fundamental man" sought by Vincent Berger, transcending limits of space and time.

Indeed, Malraux extended and generalized this recognition of the role of the subconscious in artistic creation—his own and others'. For him, a poetic and an artistic success—a powerfully evocative image, for example—is never the result of a deliberate effort but always of an encounter: "Et cette rencontre se produit à un degré inconscient—je n'aime pas beaucoup le mot, mais ça ne fait rien—qui est un degré excessivement profond et c'est ça qui lui donne ce qu'on appellerait en musique son lyrisme." What he means is that the novelist, for example, sets about writing a given scene which he has chosen, and while he is writing or preparing to write, something else which he has *not* chosen surges up from the peculiar kind of memory characteristic of the novelist—a memory at once optical, emotive and affective—and plugs itself into the scene in question as an electrical plug fits into a socket (the image is Malraux's own). These two elements are often contraries or opposites, like the positive and negative poles in electricity: "une image réellement puissante est une image qui à peu près toujours est appelée par quelque chose qui est en quelque sorte son contraire dans un domaine tout à fait inconscient, tout à fait profond." As an example he cited the image of the ant crawling along a machine-gun barrel in his film, "Sierra de Teruel." His direct memory was of an Italian pilot bearing down on him. As he set out to describe the scene, he saw the ant. It was the image of the pilot which called forth, from his subconscious memory, the contrary image of the ant, totally indifferent to man's life and death. Each time, says Malraux, that the artist's memory calls forth at once something important which he has chosen and something important which he has *not* chosen, it touches very profound things.

In a recent question-and-answer session in Boston, Eugene Ionesco

spoke of his recent and on-going work as an attempt to get away from ideology of any kind and to link up directly with something much more fundamentally and universally human, in the Jungian sense, by expressing as purely as possible his own subconscious, his own dreams, his own obsessions. I think Malraux has come to a similar point through his own experiences of artistic creation. Malraux, the artist, thus transcends his "biography"; he is not simply what he has done, the "sum of his acts," as Sartre would have it.

It is perhaps in part through such experiences that Malraux has at times caught glimpses of what he increasingly calls the secret, the enigma, the fundamental mystery of life. The opening pages of the *Antimémoires* bear witness to the importance of such moments of intuition for Malraux. His recognition of "la part éternelle" in man goes hand in hand with his openness and sensitivity to the sacred in its myriad forms and expressions. In *La Tête d'obsidienne* he explicitly makes the connection between the profound experience of the artist and the revelation of the sacred: "Et auprès d'une figure de Giva, est-ce tellement solliciter les mots, que rapprocher le fameux 'je ne cherche pas, je trouve' de Picasso, et la note que Pascal a prise pour les siècles: 'Tu ne me chercherais pas, si tu ne m'avais déjà trouvé?'"¹²

Père Pierre Bockel tells how Malraux reawakened the faith of many believers among his comrades in the Brigade Alsace-Lorraine through his attitude and action, but he makes a necessary distinction: "Malraux n'est pas un chrétien qui s'ignore, mais un incroyant si perpétuellement en quête de transcendance que le monde chrétien est devenu sons univers familier [. . .] Mais la grâce qui s'était emparée de Max Jacob ou de Claudel ne paraît pas l'avoir rejoint."¹³

Indeed, Malraux seems to fully share what he terms the fundamental interrogation of our civilization "qui ne parvient ni à chasser l'inconnaissable, ni à l'accueillir."¹⁴ Both the world and he himself, he told me, were in "une position d'attente;" for no modern civilization has a center and none is informed by a transcendence—Russia and China no more than the West. And while the Revolution might for a time replace such a transcendence by allowing one to avoid the question, for Malraux the world of the 21st century would be either religious or non-existent. As for himself, throughout a life of action he never stopped asking the question, interrogating his destiny and ours, and we are the richer for his quest.

¹ André Malraux to the author (October 1974). The major part of our conversation will appear in the fourth volume of the *Série Malraux* published by Lettres Modernes, under the title "L'Art et le roman: L'imagination visuelle du romancier."

² Aubier, 1955. In English, *Problematic Man*, trans. by Brian Thompson (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967). See also Elizabeth Brody Tenenbaum, *The Problematic Self: Approaches to Identity in Stendhal, D. H. Lawrence, and Malraux* (Cambridge, Mass./London, England; Harvard University Press, 1977).

³ *La Lutte avec l'ange* (Genève: Skira, 1943), p. 25.

⁴ In *Romans* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade edition, 1947), p. 226.

⁵ *Les Voix du silence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 628.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 637.

⁷ Malraux specifically includes writers among artists, in the analysis in his posthumous *L'Homme précaire et la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p. 152: "comme le peintre, l'écrivain n'est pas le transcritteur du monde, il en est le rival."

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁰ For a brief discussion, see my article "The Image of Blindness in Malraux's Meditations on Art," *Mélanges Malraux Miscellany* III, 2 (Autumn 1971), pp. 16-25.

¹¹ "Vision and Blindness in the Novels of André Malraux" (Harvard, 1970).

¹² *La Tête d'obsidienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 190.

¹³ Pierre Bockel, "Métaphysique de l'agnosticisme," in *Malraux, être et dire*, ed. Martine de Courcel (Paris: Plon, 1976), p. 83.

¹⁴ *La Tête d'obsidienne*, p. 237.

