Hagiography and Iconoclasm: On Recent Contributions to the Malraux Legend (1976-1979)

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There is a lamentable tendency among many of those who write about André Malraux to allow their sympathy or aversion for the man and his legend to completely cloud their critical faculties. This is naturally to the detriment of any reasoned evaluation of his novels, his concepts of art and, latterly, the various volumes of *Le Miroir des limbes* (1976).[1] It is likely that the legend of Malraux will continue to favor the publication of ephemeral studies whose authors are less concerned with analysis than commercial exploitation. Until quite recently—the polemics of the pseudonymic Jacques Bonhomme and Pol Vandromme are something of a novelty—most of this material was penned by those who had been either "dazzled" or "fascinated" or "awed" by Malraux's genius, his numerous accomplishments, or his brilliance in conversation. More usefully, certain close collaborators (Brigitte Friang)[2] have recorded a personal account of an aspect of Malraux's life about which little was known. Each of these *témoins* has had to deal with the danger of "deifying" Malraux and thus indulging in what may justly be called hagiography. In one of the books under review, *Notre Malraux,* by Philippe and François de Saint-Cheron,[3] the risk of deification is assumed but, unfortunately, the temptation proves irresistible.

Not that this is entirely unexpected, given the circumstances. The authors—despite or perhaps because of their youth—were among Malraux's very few interlocutors from 1973 until his death in November 1976. Such a privilege made it impossible for them to subdue their admiration, a fact revealed in the opening paragraph—"Sa parole ténébrante nous foudroya"—which sets the tone for the remaining two hundred pages. A fascination bordering on hero worship allows the Saint-Cheron brothers to practice what their prefacer Pierre Emmanuel unindulgently (and correctly) describes as cult of personality. Malraux's dying days are catalogued with considerable care. In order to highlight the imminent drama, press releases tracing the deterioration of his health until his final demise are quoted liberally. So too are some of the letters, none of which were presumably intended for publication, that inundated Verrières-le-Buisson in mid-November 1976. Eulogies composed by some of Malraux's most famous contemporaries—Chagall, Senghor, Aragon, Saint-John Perse—add to the myth, and only the occasional negative remark (from *Libération* or *Rouge*) is allowed to flaw the picture of near perfection. The best chapter of the book, "Lorsque vous irez à Chartres," relates an interview (recorded or reconstructed?) which Malraux gave the authors on April 1, 1975 at Verrières-le-Buisson. Even this is a minor contribution to his views on art and death, the focal points of the discussion.

[1]This work comprises two main parts: a revised version of the *Antimémoires* (1967) and *La Corde et les souris,* which in turn consists of *Hôtes de passage* (1975), *Les Chênes qu'on abat . . .* (1971), *La Tête d'obsidienne* (1974) and *Lazare* (1974).

[2]*Un autre Malraux* (Paris: Plon, 1977).

[3]Paris: Albin Michel, 1979.

Though Philippe and François de Saint-Cheron concede that their book is mostly a *témoignage*—and their choice of title bears this out—their ambitions go beyond the mere chronicling of Malraux's last years. Their reminiscences and observations, together with the array of quotations already mentioned, are woven into a pattern of meditations on death. These purport to provide a continuation of, or prolonged commentary upon, Malraux's own often elusive reflections upon that very subject. Given the complexity of such an undertaking, it should come as no surprise to learn that the authors—out of generosity—have overextended themselves. Their enthusiastic espousal of Malraux's point of view has all but obscured their own contribution.[4] *Notre Malraux* often lapses into involuntary pastiche: Malraux's vocabulary is borrowed, but not explicated; the rhythm of his sentences is imitated, as is his propensity for the laconic; and the style, in turn *précieux* and inflated, is slightly parodic.

The authors of *Notre Malraux* have provided few new insights into Malraux's thinking, nor has their *témoignage* shed much light upon him or his contemporaries. At best, they have written an encomium, and paid homage to a spiritual father-figure they fervently admire; at worst, by their absolute and unquestioning acceptance of Malraux's genius, they have succumbed to hagiography of the most innocent kind. In so doing, they have added another title to the legend of Malraux.

In one sense, one can readily appreciate why there should be a Malraux legend, as the following random survey of biographical events makes abundantly clear. Prior to the Indochinese adventure, as a result of which such literary figures as Gide, Maurois, Aragon, and Mauriac signed on his behalf an appeal in the *Nouvelles Littéraires* (September 6, 1924), the twenty-year-old Malraux had already edited texts by Sade and Baudelaire and written praisingly of Max Jacob's *Art Poétique* in the *NRF*. The originality of his first novel was acknowledged by the exiled Trotsky, whose guarded praise drew a swift rejoinder from the author himself and initiated a dialogue that was to last until the late thirties. His third novel, *La Condition humaine,* in addition to winning the Goncourt Prize for 1933, moved Eisenstein to work on a film adaptation which, regrettably, never came to fruition. In 1934, on an official visit to the USSR, Malraux stressed the limitations of "socialist realism" and advocated greater freedom for writers and artists. In 1936-37 he organized and commanded two international squadrons that fought against Franco during the first seven months of the Spanish Civil War, and then toured the United States and Canada on behalf of the Republicans. When Franco entered Barcelona at the beginning of 1939, Malraux was filming a sequence of *Sierra de Teruel,* his only film, which was awarded the Prix Louis Delluc in 1945. During World War II he enlisted as a soldier; was imprisoned by the Germans; commanded the Brigade Alsace-Lorraine, which was responsible for the defence of Strasbourg; and won the Croix de Guerre several times. In the postwar period, he threw in his lot with the Gaullists, a seeming volte-face that many found both incomprehensible and unforgiveable. From 1959 onwards, as Minister in charge of Cultural Affairs and as General de Gaulle's special envoy, he engaged in privileged dialogue with Nehru, Senghor and Mao-tse Tung, stylized versions of which later appeared in *Le Miroir des limbes.* In 1971, though ill, he volunteered his services in the cause of Bangladesh and, over a period of several years, he participated in a series of television programmes entitled "La Légende du siècle."[5]

[4]Malraux's meditations upon death are the subject of a recent study by François Hébert, *Triptyque de la mort* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1978).

[5]The well-documented and lively biography of Jean Lacouture, *Malraux, une vie dans le siècle* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), is the best overview of Malraux's life.

What precisely is the Malraux legend? What relationship does it bear to biographical and historical facts? Who is responsible for the creation and circulation of the legend: the press, gullible critics, unquestioning scholars, unsuspecting readers, Malraux himself, his friends and admirers? To what extent has it been nurtured and enhanced by such influential figures as Trotsky?[6] Since there is no denying Malraux's partial responsibility—the various volumes of *Le Bruit de nos pas* contain incontrovertible proof of this,[7] what need or desire does the existence of his legend fulfill? What are its underlying psychological motivations? Has it served or misserved Malraux? Has it been furthered by the once widespread fallacy that Malraux's novels are mere *reportage*? What is understood by the myth of an author? Is some form of mythical projection of the self an inescapable dimension of art and literature? Does the Malraux (or the T. E. Lawrence) myth differ only in degree, or in kind, from the myth of Flaubert or Baudelaire? How do myth and legend differ?[8] Is it legitimate to diagnose Malraux as mythomaniac?[9] How would such a diagnosis affect our understanding or appreciation of *La Condition humaine* or *La Corde et les souris*? It is to these complex—not to say intimidating—questions, that those scholars and critics who wish to rescue the writer from his legend must now address themselves.[10]

Of course, one can ignore the whole problem, or refuse to recognize its importance. One can be simply dismissive and pronounce, *ex cathedra*, à la Richard Cobb, that Malraux (along with Gide, Cocteau and Saint-Exupéry) represents an "example of fraudulence"; or, à la Hugh Trevor-Roper, that Malraux (along with Teilhard de Chardin) is a "great charlatan." These opinions, which appeared in the 75th Anniversary issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, are unsubstantiated and, as was intended, highly personal.[11] If they are worth mentioning, it is not on account of the prestige that both historians enjoy, but precisely because they equate Malraux the writer with his legend. We are not informed as to how accusations of "fraudulence" and "charlatanry" relate to *Les Conquérants* or *Les Voix du silence* or *Le Miroir des limbes*. Malraux the artist is eclipsed by Malraux the public figure, and the legend continues to thrive.

A much more rewarding approach to the problem of the Malraux legend has been taken by John Russell who, in a brief but penetrating discussion of "the lie as a source of vital energy: as an indispensable part, in other words, of the persona that drives a writer to write," issues the following salutary warning to those who specialize in sweeping condemnations: "It would . . . be a mistake to assume that because some of [Malraux's] claims are untrue, all of his claims are untrue."[12] In fact, this thought-provoking essay, ostensibly a review of new

[6]In his well-known article on *Les Conquérants* (*NRF*, April 1931), Trotsky referred to Malraux as a "revolutionary"; and in 1937 (*The Nation*, March 27) he accused Malraux of being partially responsible for the strangulation of the Chinese revolution.

[7]See in particular Vol. 6, . . . *Et pourtant j'étais libre* (Paris: Grasset, 1979), pp. 157-58.

[8]Not as literary forms, of course, but as components in what Haakon Chevalier has defined as "the aura of surmise surrounding any public figure, filling the gap between known facts" (*Modern Language Quarterly*, June 1953, 200). In this article, we have more or less used the terms interchangeably. Further analysis will doubtless show that they denote two quite different phenomena.

[9]As Clara Malraux does in . . . *Et pourtant j'étais libre*, pp. 15, 49.

[10]A special issue of the *Mélanges Malraux Miscellany*, 11, No. 2 (Autumn 1979) entitled "Malraux and Mythomania" explores mythomania as it relates to the role of the artist.

[11]"Reputations revisited," *TLS*, January 21, 1977, a special section on overrated books and authors.

[12]*New York Review of Books*, March 4, 1976, p. 10.

material by and about Malraux, deals honestly with some of the questions raised above. In accordance with the rigorous demands of scholarship, Russell examines the evidence before arriving at his conclusions. Though he too is critical of Malraux, his criticisms are discriminating. Furthermore, in his assessment of Malraux he endeavors to distinguish between "l'homme" and "le mythe qu'il incarne."[13]

Such scruples are of secondary concern to Pol Vandromme, despite the claim ("C'est essentiellement de son oeuvre littéraire qu'il s'occupe") advanced in the publisher's promotional material. His peculiar pamphlet, *Malraux du farfelu au mirobolant précédé d'un dossier Pol Vandromme,*[14] is one of the most sustained attacks that has been made to date on the author of *L'Espoir.* This short polemic seeks to debunk and destroy Malraux's reputation as a writer and as such stands out among the numerous works that have appeared over the past few years. But it is noteworthy for another reason. The first twenty pages of the book are made up of a "Dossier Pol Vandromme": two *entretiens,* one with Alain Clerval on Belgian literature, the other with Claude Schmitt on Vandromme's rereading of Marx (pp. 9-19); four *témoignages* or letters of recommendation by Alain Bosquet, Bernard Clavel, Kléber Haedens and François Nourissier (pp. 20-21); a brief biographical sketch of Vandromme (pp. 22-23); and, finally, a rather lengthy bibliography (essais, pastiches, pamphlets, libelles, roman, ouvrages collectifs, conférences, prix littéraires, collaborations actuelles, ouvrage en préparation [pp. 24-28]). The Dossier is set apart from the pamphlet, it is printed on a different color paper and there is no mention whatsoever of Malraux. One can exploit the Malraux legend or one can try to deflate it. Vandromme, curiously enough, wants to do both.

His starting point is a long quotation from *La Paille et le Grain* where François Mitterand writes: "Le personnage [de Malraux] a . . . éclipsé l'oeuvre; on n'a plus remarqué que lui et on les a pris l'un pour l'autre. Regrettable quiproquo." Convinced that Malraux is wholly responsible for the legend, which was his main means of fostering interest in an oeuvre whose value and originality have been exaggerated, Vandromme falls short of claiming that Malraux's writings are essentially a series of elaborate publicity stunts designed to call attention to the personage and to perpetuate his memory (p. 75). In his discussion of Malraux's style—heavily indebted to Cubism and Expressionism and relying upon a limited number of rhetorical devices—Vandromme tries to demonstrate that (in spite of certain "trouvailles compensatoires" [p. 66]) Malraux is a vastly overrated writer. He lists dozens of examples, culled at random from the novels and art essays, of "weak sentences." And of course some of them are, especially out of context. There is no analysis of Malraux's style or language, and the author has overlooked the simple fact that there are similar deficiences in Hugo or Shakespeare, for example,

The defects of Vandromme's book are legion: a total disregard for scholarship, which is somewhat surprising in the case of a writer whose scholarly credentials (essays on Brasillach, Drieu La Rochelle, Céline, Anouilh) are paraded in a five-page bibliography; hasty generalizations ("Les grands auteurs se révèlent dès leurs premiers textes," p. 47); desultory use of quotations (pp. 89-90); misinterpretation (chiefly the failure to understand the importance of "le fondamental" in *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg,* [pp. 84-85]); a strange sense of

[13]"Quelle relation y a-t-il entre un homme et le mythe qu'il incarne?" André Malraux, *Le Miroir des limbes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 575.

[14]Lausanne: Alfred Eibel, 1976.

priorities (an essay Malraux wrote at nineteen is given more attention than *Les Voix du silence,* which is not even mentioned); and, above all, a bombastic style (*passim*). The quest for arcane words and expressions leads to a verboseness that is ultimately tedious. Verbal agility, in spite of its attractiveness, is a poor substitute for substance.

Despite a shift in emphasis, similar flaws abound in *André Malraux ou le conformiste,*[15] a collective work published by Régine Deforges in the collection "Nos grands hommes."[16] Whereas Vandromme does acknowledge that Malraux is a writer, the authors of this pamphlet are concerned only with the legend.[17] Relying heavily upon the research of Walter Langlois and Jean Lacouture, and the Memoirs of Clara Malraux, they have concocted a miniature biography that often resembles a distorted gloss on Lacouture's *Malraux une vie dans le siècle* (1973). More scurrilous in intent than Vandromme—certain charges (p. 117) are clearly libelous, unless proven—they confuse fact and fiction (pp. 97-98), identify Malraux with his characters, and delight in peremptory generalizations. They oversimplify as, for example, in their presentation of Malraux's polemic with Trotsky in March 1937 (pp. 95-96), and attempt to justify their prejudice by the convenient "Certains contemporains racontent . . ." (p. 75), "on dit" (pp. 69, 83), etc. When confronted with such tactics, it is difficult not to recall Beaumarchais's injuncture about the pamphlet being "la dernière ressource des lâches."

However, one may well object that the polemicist is exempt from such criteria, that his writings must be judged by standards other than those of scholarly criticism, that outrageous accusations and hyperbole are part and parcel of his trade. Such an objection is, of course, partly valid. Rather than argue his case in a cogent, coherent manner, the polemicist, through irony, satire, wit, sarcasm, humor—seeks to shock, to provoke, to deflate. He attempts to expose sham and pretence, thereby enabling his readers to perceive what propaganda or adulation or legend had concealed. In a sense, the pamphleteer is to literature what the terrorist is to politics, and if he is in a position to substantiate his claims fully, the pamphlet can be an absolutely devastating weapon. Such is not the case with either Vandromme or Deforges's "bureau d'auteur associés," even though the former occasionally allows his literary insights to surface from beneath the layers of rhetoric. One suspects that there is a degree of truth to some of their accusations, but they have failed to provide convincing evidence of this. The polemicist is often the first victim of his excess in that, through oversimplification and distortion, he contributes to those very factors he had intended to destroy. Demystification, however desirable—and it *is* in the case of Malraux—, is both difficult and dangerous, but iconoclasm is not necessarily the answer. These pamphlets do not undermine the Malraux legend; on the contrary: they merely add to it.

As a literary genre, the pamphlet has exerted a lively influence on the intellectual life of twentieth-century France. The surrealists, Nizan, Etiemble and Viansson-Ponté—to name but a few of its most challenging practitioners—have amply demonstrated and exploited the full range of its possibilities. Nevertheless, the inherent limitations of the genre—its impassioned partiality, its propensity for provocation—render it inappropriate for the purpose of demystifying a

[15]Paris: Régine Deforges, 1977.

[16]According to the publisher's note, "ce livre [est] le produit du travail collectif d'un bureau d'auteurs associés" p. 6.

[17]"D'abord, l'oeuvre de Malraux n'est pas notre propos," p. 115.

legendary writer. Assuming that such an undertaking is feasible, it will require greater distance and greater objectivity (not to be confused with impartiality) on the part of the critic. It will also entail a scrupulous and scientific concern for facts. If, as the opening quotation suggests, it is desirable to differentiate between "l'homme" and "le mythe qu'il incarne," the verifiable biographical and historical data must be established. It will thus be possible to measure the distance separating these from the myth. Furthermore, conditions are then ripe for tracing *how* and *why* the legend developed and, more interestingly, for examining its relationship to *L'Espoir* or *Le Miroir des limbes.* Needless to say, numerous other approaches to Malraux's works could be equally valid and just as fruitful. But we are dealing with myth, and it would be foolish to ignore what Stephen Spender had perceived as early as 1937, and what is curiously confirmed—though the terms are inverted—by Clara Malraux some forty years later. The former observed: "I believe that for Malraux *the creation of his own legend*—his political activities, the 'Malraux Squadron'—*fulfils a spiritual need which is essential for him as an artist*;"[18] and in 1979 the author of *Le bruit de nos pas* lamented the memory of "celui qui voulait que sa vie répondît de son oeuvre."[19]

[18] *New Writing*, No. 4, (Autumn 1937), 246.

[19] . . . *Et pourtant j'étais libre*, p. 36.