

Modern Critical Views

ANDRÉ MALRAUX

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



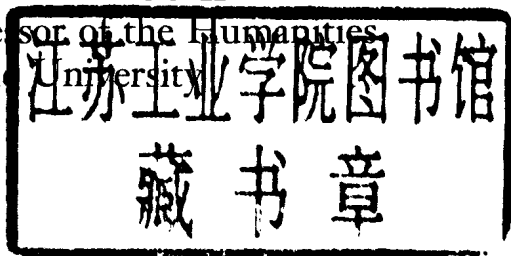
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Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best criticism available in English upon the writings of André Malraux. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. Where the critics have chosen to leave their quotations from the French untranslated, their practice has been followed. I am grateful to Rhonda K. Garelick and Frank Menchaca for their assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon the novel *Man's Fate*, tracing in its heroes a sense of revolutionary belatedness, and partly interpreting that sense as a trope for Malraux's awareness of his condition as a novelist.

W. M. Frohock begins the chronological sequence with an overview of Malraux's first novel, *The Conquerors*, which is seen as a study in psychic anxiety and the metaphysical Absurd. In an interpretation of *Man's Fate*, Geoffrey Hartman emphasizes the dialectic of inward solitude and imposition of the will that dominates the book's heroes.

R. W. B. Lewis surveys Malraux's entire career as a novelist, emphasizing the vagaries of critical reception and expressing an aesthetic preference for *The Walnut Trees of the Altenburg*.

In another consideration of *Man's Fate*, David Wilkinson finds in the book the Myth of "the Bolshevik hero," more Malrauvian than Marxist. Roger Shattuck, in an appreciation of *Anti-Memoirs*, assigns Malraux's autobiographical reflections to the genre of travel writing, and evokes the shade of Henry Adams. A very different account of *Anti-Memoirs* is given by Michael Riffaterre, who exposes the structure of Malraux's obsessions, and concludes that: "He does not write about a reality remembered" but rather a reality that symbolizes his own mind.

Days of Wrath is judged by Thomas Jefferson Kline to be a celebration of the artist as Prometheus, rather than an exaltation of the Communist hero. Lucien Goldmann reaches a very different conclusion in a Structuralist study

of *Man's Fate*, where his sociological insight is that the hero's individual struggle is transcended by the laws of the revolutionary community.

In a reading of *The Walnut Trees of the Altenburg*, C. J. Greshoff sees the novel's ultimate ethos as being the solidarity of men against death. The later Malraux, philosopher of art, is placed in historical perspective by the great historian of art, E. H. Gombrich, who reveals Malraux's limitations, yet ventures to compare him to John Ruskin.

Victor Brombert, in a retrospective view of the totality of Malraux's career, praises him both for the courage of action and for his tragic courage as novelist and aesthete. The early epistolary work *La Tentation de l'Occident* is read by Nina S. Tucci as a prelude to Malraux's projection of the "shadow" of Western man upon the Orient in his first three novels.

Man's Hope, Malraux's novel of the Spanish Civil War, is seen by Susan Rubin Suleiman as a tendentious if moving work, since it emphasizes the need for discipline in the struggle against Fascism, while neglecting the crucial conflict between the Communists and their more idealistic allies. In this book's final essay, published here for the first time, Rhonda K. Garelick analyzes the early novel *The Royal Way* as an autobiographical meditation upon Malraux's own generation, trapped in an alienation or detachment from its own history.

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Introduction

La Condition humaine (1933, known in English as *Man's Fate*) is judged universally to have been André Malraux's major novel. Rereading it in 1987, sixty years after the Shanghai insurrection of 1927 which it commemorates, is a rather ambiguous experience. One need not have feared that it would seem a mere period piece; it is an achieved tragedy, with the aesthetic dignity that the genre demands. What renders it a little disappointing is its excessive abstractness. Malraux may have known a touch too clearly exactly what he was doing. Rereading Faulkner always surprises; there is frequently a grace beyond the reach of art. Malraux's fictive economy is admirable, but the results are somewhat schematic. Clarity can be a novelistic virtue; transparency grieves us with the impression of a certain thin quality.

The idealistic revolutionaries are persuasive enough in *Man's Fate*; they are even exemplary. But, like all of Malraux's protagonists, they are diminished by their sense of *coming after their inspirers*; they are not forerunners, but belated imitators of the Revolution. Malraux's protagonists designedly quest for strength by confronting death, thus achieving different degrees either of communion or of solitude. Their models in fiction are the obsessed beings of Dostoevsky or of Conrad. *Man's Fate* cannot sustain comparison with *Nostromo*, let alone with the anguished narratives of Dostoevsky. There are no originals in Malraux, no strong revolutionaries who are the equivalents of strong poets, rather than of philosophers. Geoffrey Hartman, defending Malraux's stature as tragedian, sees the heroes of *Man's Fate* as understanding and humanizing the Nietzschean Eternal Recurrence:

The tragic sentiment is evoked most purely not by multiplying lives . . . but by repeating the chances of death, of unique, fatal acts. A hero like Tchen, or his fellow conspirators Kyo and Katov, dies more than once.

But is that the Nietzschean issue, the Nietzschean test for strength? Do Malraux's heroes take on what Richard Rorty, following Nietzsche, has called "the contingency of selfhood"? Do they fully appreciate their own contingency? Here is Rorty's summary of this crucial aspect of Nietzsche's perspectivism:

His perspectivism amounted to the claim that the universe had no lading-list to be known, of determinate length. He hoped that, once we realized that Plato's "true world" was just a fable, we would seek consolation, at the moment of death, not in having transcended the animal condition but in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself.

Nietzsche understood that political revolutionaries are more like philosophers than like poets, since revolutionaries also insist that the human condition bears only one true analysis. Malraux's heroes attempt to escape from contingency rather than, like the strong poets, accepting and then appropriating contingency. Though the heroes of *Man's Fate* and of Malraux's other novels meditate endlessly upon death, if only in order to achieve a sense of being, they never succeed in describing themselves entirely in their own terms. This is a clue to Malraux's ultimate inadequacy as a novelist, his failure to join himself to the great masters of French fiction: Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Proust, or the international novelists he most admired: Dostoevsky, Conrad, Faulkner. Would we say of the protagonists of Stendhal and Balzac that the death which overcomes them "is no more than the symbol of an ultimate self-estrangement"? Hartman's remark is valid for Malraux's heroes, but not for Stendhal's or Balzac's.

Malraux, a superb and wary critic, defended himself against Gaëtan Picon's shrewd observation that: "Malraux, unlike Balzac or Proust, in no way seeks to give each character a personal voice, to free each character from its creator." His response was: "The autonomy of characters, the particular vocabulary given to each of them are powerful techniques of fictional action; they are not necessities. . . . I do not believe that the novelist must create *characters*; he must create a particular and coherent world." *Man's Fate* certainly does create such a world; is it a liability or not that Kyo, Katov, Gisors, and the others fall short as characters, since they do not stride out of the novel, breaking loose from Malraux, and they all of them do sound rather alike. I finish rereading *Nostromo*, and I brood on the flamboyant Capataz, or I put down *As I Lay Dying*, and Darl Bundren's very individual voice haunts me. But Kyo and Katov give me nothing to meditate upon, and

Gisors and Ferral speak with the same inflection and vocabulary. Fate or contingency resists appropriation by Malraux's heroes, none of whom defies, or breaks free of, his creator.

Despite Malraux's defense, the sameness of his protagonists constitutes a definite aesthetic limitation. It would be one thing to create varied individuals with unique voices, and then to show that they cannot communicate with one other. It is quite another thing to represent so many aspects of the author as so many characters, all speaking with his voice, and then demonstrate the deathliness of their inability to speak truly to another. Malraux confused death with contingency, which is a philosopher's error, rather than a strong novelist's.

This may be why the women throughout Malraux's novels are so dismal a failure in representation. Unamuno ironically jested that: "All women are one woman," which is just the way things are in Malraux's fictions. A novelist so intent upon Man rather than men is unlikely to give us an infinite variety of women.

What redeems *Man's Fate* from a reader's frustration with the sameness of its characters is the novel's indubitable capture of a tragic sense of life. Tragedy is not individual in Malraux, but societal and cultural, particularly the latter. Malraux's Marxism was always superficial, and his aestheticism fortunately profound. The tragedy of the heroes in *Man's Fate* is necessarily belated tragedy, which is fitting for idealists whose place in revolutionary history is so late. That is why Gisors is shown teaching his students that: "Marxism is not a doctrine, it is a *will* . . . it is the will to know themselves . . . to conquer without betraying yourselves." Just as the imagination cannot be distinguished from the will as an artistic tradition grows older and longer, so ideology blends into the will as revolutionary tradition enters a very late phase. Tragedy is an affair of the will, and not of doctrine. Kyo and Katov die in the will, and so achieve tragic dignity. Gisors, the best mind in the novel, sums up for Malraux, just a few pages from the end:

She was silent for a moment:

"They are dead, now," she said finally.

"I still think so, May. It's something else. . . . Kyo's death is not only grief, not only change—it is . . . a metamorphosis. I have never loved the world over-much: it was Kyo who attached me to men, it was through him that they existed for me. . . . I don't want to go to Moscow. I would teach wretchedly there. Marxism has ceased to live in me. In Kyo's eyes it was a will, wasn't it? But in mine, it is a fatality, and I found myself in

harmony with it because my fear of death was in harmony with fatality. There is hardly any fear left in me, May; since Kyo died, I am indifferent to death. I am freed (freed! . . .) both from death and from life. What would I do over there?"

"Change anew, perhaps."

"I have no other son to lose."

The distinction between a will and a fatality is the difference between son and father, activist and theoretician, latecomer and forerunner. For Malraux, it is an aesthetic distinction, rather than a psychological or spiritual difference. As novelist, Malraux takes no side in this dichotomy, an impartiality at once his narrative strength and his representational weakness. He gives us forces and events, where we hope for more, for access to consciousnesses other than our own, or even his. As a theorist of art, Malraux brilliantly grasped contingency, but as a novelist he suffered it. He saw that the creator had to create his own language out of the language of precursors, but he could not enact what he saw. *Man's Fate* is a memorable tragedy without memorable persons. Perhaps it survives as a testament of Malraux's own tragedy, as a creator.

W. M. FROHOCK

The Metallic Realm: The Conquerors

*"A hopeless conflict . . . prepares us for the metallic realm of the Absurd."
—La Tentation de l'Occident*

Malraux's own esteem for his first two novels is strictly limited. He has called *The Conquerors* "the book of an adolescent"—which, since he was twenty-five when he wrote it, can only mean that he finds the book itself immature—and he omits *The Royal Way* entirely from the Pléiade edition of his novels. He is right.

At least he is right to the extent that these two novels constitute a dry run. He had a basic theme: the Absurd—and some subsidiary ones as well. He had a basic magma of material: what he learned about life and about himself from his first experiences in the Orient. And he had a basic fable: a man goes out to the East, meets another man, somewhat older, with whom he has a special bond and watches his friend go through the calvary of discovering his limitations as human being. He had discovered his basic, tragic mood. What he did not have was a corresponding experience of techniques which would allow him, on the first try, to put everything else he had into one book; he still had to practice his hand and clarify his vision. After he had done so, but only then, he could start *Man's Fate*.

He conceived *The Conquerors* as political by its setting and action, tragic by its tone, and metaphysical by its implications. Since revolutionary events move fast, he had to find a form and a style that would keep up with their fundamental rhythm and preserve the feeling essential in all his novels up

From *André Malraux and the Tragic Imagination*. © 1952 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University. Stanford University Press, 1952.

to *Man's Hope*, that history will not wait for an individual to settle his destiny at leisure.

Actually the shape he gave *The Conquerors* is the exact opposite of the one he finally settled upon for *Man's Fate*. The latter novel opens with its focus entirely upon one character and broadens until it encompasses the whole revolutionary picture. But in 1928 he starts from the widest possible focus and narrows it through the three parts of the narrative until at the end one individual occupies the whole scene. The first part, labeled "The Approaches," takes in the whole play of revolution in Southeast Asia; the second, called "The Powers," studies the fighting at Canton which his hero, Garine, is directing; and the third, "The Man," studies Garine himself. As the narrator's ship moves up out of the Indian Ocean toward Hong Kong and Canton, characters are introduced, issues at stake made clear, and the apprehension of the passengers, coupled with the narrator's impatience to reach the scene of action, builds up the nervous tension and unifies the feeling of the novel as a whole. Next the story moves in upon the battle for Canton and follows the detail of revolution. Finally it turns to Garine, who is the nerve center of the fight, and fixes upon him. Thus the perspective moves, evenly, from wide pan to close-up.

The narrative itself is entrusted throughout to the same first-person narrator. He is unnamed and his personality is kept intentionally unobtrusive; though he is a participant, his acts are always the carrying out of orders and are not significant. He has known Garine a long time, and the latter has put him to doing some vague sort of liaison work for the Communists, but his one real function is to be the Jamesian "central intelligence."

His record is virtually a diary. Action is noted in the present tense and as though at the narrator's first moment of leisure, as soon as possible after it has taken place, *and without his knowing what will happen next*. The device adds greatly to the effect of immediacy and to the reader's feeling of being present at the action. The account starts *in medias res* and with a rush. (This is not a novel where events grow out of contacts between characters; the events would happen anyway even if these characters did not exist.) Radio bulletins alternate with fragmentary explanations and bits of conversation. Each notation bears a date (from June 15 to August 18, 1925) and often an hour. As the story hurries along the reader is always kept aware of time, not the time which wears men away and in this sense works upon and changes characters, but the time which sets a limit in which a man must do what he has to do. The characters rarely relax, sleep fitfully, hardly eat, and are always under dramatic tension.

The style of the diary is impressionistic, in places telegraphic, and rarely in need of the grammatically complete sentence.

Silence. Dès que nous attendons quelque chose, nous retrouvons la chaleur, comme une plaie. En bas, une faible rumeur; murmures, socques, inquiétude, la cliquette d'un marchand ambulante, les cris d'un soldat qui le chasse. Devant la fenêtre, la lumière. Calme plein d'anxiété. Le son rythmé, de plus en plus net, de la marche des hommes qui arrivent, au pas; le claquement brutal de la halte. Silence. Rumeur. . . . Un seul pas, dans l'escalier. Le secrétaire.

(Silence. As soon as we expect something to happen we feel the heat again, like a sore. Below, a quiet stirring; murmurings, shoes, nervousness, the clatter of a street vendor, the cries of a soldier driving him off. Opposite the window, the light. Stillness full of uneasiness. The rhythmic sound, clearer and clearer, of men marching up, in step; the heavy stamp of the halt. Silence. Stirring. . . . A lone step, on the stairs. The secretary.)

Such writing can do with a minimum of syntax because impressions noted in series require little to link them. There is no need to subordinate some to the others, because all have the same value, i.e., the value of events. The rhythm of this particular series goes: silence, noise, silence again, new noise, significance of the noise (the last handled by the event of the secretary's entrance which explains the new noise). The development of the series is dramatic: silence comes over the room; during the wait they become aware of the heat; then a noise brings a tension; tension falls when the source is recognized; they are calm again but still tense when the soldier has driven off the pushcart man. A new noise comes, but is too quickly recognized for tension to mount; there is silence again, then another noise which registers after a moment (note the comma between *pas* and *dans*) as a step, and then in walks the secretary. The punctuation serves, most frequently, to separate stimulus from interpretation: one step (comma for a pause while they ask themselves *where*) in the stairway (period while they ask themselves *who*) and then the answer. Naturally the whole book does not maintain this pace or this impressionistic brevity, but there are many other passages as loaded and as rapid as this one, and the net effect is to add to the feeling of haste and to the nervous tension.

Whenever possible, running narration is avoided in favor of dramatic scenes, even when doing so calls for real ingenuity. To introduce Garine, for example, the narrator is made to dig a captured British Secret Service dossier out of a trunk, and read it aloud, supplying the hero's motives as he reads and arguing with the document when the information is faulty. This

in spite of the fact that he has known Garine for years and might well simply tell us the essential facts on his own authority—except for the nagging question: what happens to the dramatic excitement of the book while he does so? The concern for dramatization is carried so far that when, because of its confidential nature, the narrator cannot plausibly hear a conversation, Garine reports it to him later in dialogue and even imitates the voices.

Malraux sees his scenes much better than he hears them; in places the dialogue may be too smooth to be true, and too elliptical for the characters to have understood each other, but his eye is as true as Hemingway's, and his study of gesture so complete that at times he can get on without dialogue. The scene where finally the captured terrorist Hong is brought before him is handled without a spoken word. Hong enters between two soldiers, with marks on his face from the fight; he stops, arms behind his back, feet spread; Garine looks at him, waiting, fatigued by his fever, his head moving slowly sideways; he pulls in a deep breath, shrugs. Hong catches the shrug, lunges toward Garine, is brought down by a rifle butt on the head. And that is all: each movement is significant and motivated, and—remembering Garine's instinctive sympathy for Hong and his saying that he has few enemies he understands so well—the gestures translate without loss the emotions of the scene.

Malraux sees the scene with the precision of a good movie lens, and to what extent his eye is cinematographic becomes clear in the pages directly following the confrontation with Hong, when Garine and the narrator go to see the mutilated bodies of their murdered friends. They are in a shed where a Chinese sits at the door, kicking away a dog that persistently tries to get in. The dog leaps and dodges, and keeps coming back. Garine and the narrator approach. The Chinese leans his head against the wall, eye half-closed, pushes the door open for them. The large, dirt-floored room has dust piled in the corners. In spite of the blue shades the light is too strong and blinds them. The narrator drops his eyes, raises them again, and sees the corpses *standing up*, not laid out but leaned against the wall. Garine tells the guard to get covers. The guard has to be told three times before he can understand; Garine lifts a fist, then tells him that he will get ten *taels* for bringing covers within half an hour. The narrator's muscles relax when he hears spoken words, but tighten again as he sees that the mouth of a dead friend has been mutilated, widened with a razor. He squeezes his arms against his sides and leans against the wall. A fly lights on his forehead and he does not drive it away. . . .

Recent criticism says much about this kind of immediacy of sensation. The visual detail and the narrator's visible reaction to the detail are passed on to the reader for interpretation: no need to tell the reader what the fly's

remaining on the narrator's forehead means. And because the reader interprets he participates. He is as close to the action as he can be, and seems to live it rather than contemplate it. In other words, aesthetic distance has been cut to a minimum.

The effect is one of compelling authenticity. Malraux seems quite aware of what he is doing, and even introduces a gratuitous but particularly striking and immediate image on occasion to reenforce the reader's feeling of being present. Thus when Borodin reveals to Klein and the narrator how he has worked on Hong's emotions, so as to be sure that Hong will murder the Gandhi-like Tcheng-dai without delay, and adds that from that moment Hong's terrorists will have the Communist group on their list of prospects: "Borodin, chewing his moustache and buckling the uniform belt that bothers him, rises and leaves. We follow. Stuck against the light bulb a large butterfly projects upon the wall a great black stain." The shadow of the butterfly is completely irrelevant to the action and has no symbolic significance, but after Borodin's speech about Hong, full of implications about impending murder which naturally project the mind into a near and ominous future, the image pulls one back into the reality of the present with great force.

The sharpness of Malraux's visual imagination is of course a vast advantage. When he is ready to write *Man's Hope* ten years later, he will return to the device of telling his story in brief, sharply cut episodes like these and make the most use possible of the visual effects. But the Spanish War novel is a complicated one, and much of its meaning is conveyed through juxtaposition of scenes that vary greatly in tone, color, and emotional mood, whereas the story of *The Conquerors* is simple and rectilinear, a matter of aligning the scenes one after the other in the order of the chronology of narration—from the passage of the ship up the South Asia coast to the moment when Garine realizes that his strength is exhausted and he must leave Canton while he still can, in public victory but in private defeat.

Technically, so far as telling a story is concerned, *The Conquerors* was a success. The sharp-focused point of view, the skillfully maintained pace, the extremely immediate imagery, are achievements which Malraux has never bettered.

But Malraux's technique is one that makes the presentation of character inordinately difficult. Personal relations such as the traditional novel exploits can hardly exist here. The only event that could be alleged to develop out of a personal relationship—Gariné's refusal to let Hong be tortured—can be attributed more accurately to his understanding a human case very like his own. Otherwise the important relationship for each character is his political role, and his connection with the other characters is professional.

The characters are primarily types, defined by their attitudes toward

life and politics. Borodin is the man who has submerged his individuality in the Revolution. Hong is the Terrorist. Nicolaïeff is the Torturer. Tcheng-dai is the Moral Force. Rebecchi is the Anarchist who has talked away his energy. The fact that they are also men emerges very slowly, even in the case of Garine.

Like Tartuffe in the play, he is familiar long before we see him, but familiar as a type. At Saigon, Rensky, the art collector, drops the tempting remark to the narrator that he doubts that Garine is really a Marxist Bolshevik. At the next port of call another minor character adds that Garine has joined the Revolution for the same reason men join the Foreign Legion: he cannot abide life in ordinary society. He also remarks that where Borodin is a man of action, Garine is a man *capable* of action, and pays tribute to Garine's ability as organizer. Still a third minor character later adds that Garine seems to him a sick genius and not entirely dependable. Thus in the first seventy pages of a 215-page book we learn about the central figure only what kind of man he is.

Here the narrator breaks out the Intelligence report on Garine and gives us a biography, with footnotes on motives, yet even now the emphasis on Garine as an individual human being is not complete. We learn why Garine's type is not Borodin's—why he is a Conqueror rather than what Malraux will later label a "Curé" of revolution, a maker rather than a custodian. Only when we reach Canton, enter Garine's office, see him, feel the presence and power of the man's personality, does the type recede behind the image of the driving, intense, desperately earnest, desperately sick individual. The fact of his being a type remains in the background through the tense days of the fighting, maneuver, murder, and torture, but it is still there and emerges again in the final pages, when Garine has decided to leave Canton rather than die on the scene of his triumph. We are reminded by a series of dialogue passages that it is just as well he leave, since the Revolution has no permanent berth for the Conqueror: such types are too undisciplined.

The key to Garine's character is his Angst, which has its source in his violent awareness of the vanity of life. His "dedication to a great action" has been an escape, to let him live in awareness of the Absurd without giving in to it. As a student in Switzerland he had financed a number of abortions. Tried as an accessory, he had felt his trial to be a grotesque, unreal farce. The (to him disproportionate) penalty for his offense had finished the job of convincing him of the absurdity of his plight. "I don't think of society as evil—and thus capable of improvement—but as absurd. Not the absence of justice itself bothers me but something deeper, the impossibility of accepting any social form whatsoever." He had not served his jail sentence, but the