

Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

André Malraux's Man's Fate



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Man's Fate

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best critical interpretations of André Malraux's major novel, *Man's Fate* (*La Condition humaine*, 1933). The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. All passages in French have been left untranslated where the critics have chosen to leave them so. I am grateful to Rhonda Garelick and Frank Menchaca for their assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction reads *Man's Fate* in terms of its heroes' sense of revolutionary belatedness, and interprets their fictive anxiety as a trope for Malraux's own aesthetic belatedness in regard to Dostoevsky and Conrad, his strong precursors. Geoffrey Hartman begins the chronological sequence with a meditation upon the process in which the heroes of *Man's Fate* must confront a final solitude, without ceasing to impose their wills upon the world.

In another study of "the Bolshevik hero" in the novel, David Wilkinson sees this mythic figure as "a Malrauvian, not a Marxist, breed." The Structuralist sociologist Lucien Goldmann finds that the laws and values that govern *Man's Fate* are those of "the revolutionary community," rather than those of the hero's individual realization.

Kyo is the focus of C. J. Greshoff's discussion of the gift of love in the novel, while LeRoy C. Breunig's brief essay traces changes in *Man's Fate's* historical reception. The ethos of action in *Man's Fate* is seen by Derek W. Allan as Malraux's determination to accept, rather than escape, the human condition. W. M. Frohock, addressing the same issue, centers upon Gisors, finding in him an embodiment of Malraux's antihistoricism.

In this book's final essay, Roger Dial sees *Man's Fate* as a successful, but only momentary, fusion of Malraux's aesthetic heroism and Marxist ideals of the sacrifice of the individual to historical dialectics. I doubt the

fusion, even in *Man's Fate*, and urge again the counterargument of my introduction, where the heroism of the belated revolutionary is defined in more aesthetic and Conradian terms.

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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 to 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 another. 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.

“The Silence of the Infinite Spaces”

Geoffrey H. Hartman

Malraux entitles his . . . greatest novel *La Condition humaine*. Political in subject, it is, like *The Conquerors*, more than political in range, and deepens the definition of Man explored in the previous books. Of the novel's seven chapters, the first two tell of the quick success of the Shanghai insurrection, while the remainder portray an ironical, protracted series of events, reducing the characters one by one to solitude. Because, in the first part of the story, they can still impose their world on the world, they also succeed in imposing their will. Yet, from the outset, a contrary pattern prevails, ripened by apparently external circumstances. Soon every character suffers an experience of self-estrangement through which he becomes aware of the radical gap between the world and his view of it. A moment of “the silence of the infinite spaces” mocks his deepest dreams, and, though it may not alter his will to act, suggests a contradiction, inescapable in its nature, between Man and History.

In this book Malraux's architectonic vigour surpasses any shown before; it almost convinces us that the form of the novel is the natural medium for his view of life. The premise that Man inevitably imposes his world on the world, that thought and act are fictional in essence, grants the slightest event the same expressive potential as the greatest. It is true, at least, that Malraux's power of *development* has advanced. We can take, as an example, his treatment of what was probably the germinal incident of the novel. Towards the end of the *Psychology of Art* he remarks:

From *André Malraux*. © 1960 by Geoffrey H. Hartman. Hilary House Publishers, 1960.

Every man's self is a tissue of fantastic dreams. I have written elsewhere of the man who fails to recognize his own voice on the gramophone . . . and because our throat alone transmits to us our inner voice I named the book *La Condition Humaine*. In art the other voices do but ensure the transmission of this inner voice. The artist's message owes its force to the fact that it arises from the heart of silence, from a devastating loneliness that conjures up the universe so as to impose on it a human accent.

The incident to which the author refers occupies an unobtrusive section at the beginning of the novel. Kyo is listening to records prepared by the conspirators, which purport to teach a foreign language but actually transmit secret messages. Kyo, who does not recognize his own voice in recorded form, thinks the disks have been changed or that the phonograph distorts, but the matter is quickly dropped. Malraux allows the event to interpret itself by haunting the consciousness of Kyo, who associates more and more persons with it. When, for example, he tells his father (Gisors) about the estranged voice, the latter explains: "We hear the voices of others with our ears, our own voice with our throat." And he adds, astonishingly: "Opium is also a world we do not hear with our ears." Thus one germinal detail gathers momentum and begins to symbolize the human condition in its entirety. Gisors himself takes opium, and it seems that every man, wittingly or unwittingly, finds a way to overcome an irreducible solitude. The world of Man's perceptions is, like that of the artist, a second birth, a world conjured up to impose on it a specifically human accent.

As with the detail so with the persons. There are many characters now, none really minor, and all affected in various ways by a radical experience of estrangement. Kyo fails to recognize *his* voice; Tchen did not recognize *his* arm. Some, like Gisors, are always aware of an inner desolation; others, like Kyo, the man of action, who distrusts his father's tendency to convert every experience to knowledge, only by usurpation or chance. The death which overcomes Malraux's heroes is no more than the symbol of an ultimate self-estrangement. And even those who survive do not always escape it.

Malraux is, at last, in full possession of his idea. He has found a law encompassing all "fatality," and can give each of his characters an individual and widely varying fate because they are still instances of that law. Man, as *The Royal Way* had implied, is defined by the world he imposes on the world, not potentially but actually. Man's fate, the present novel adds, follows from his nature. What is *fate* except an inextricable involvement

with the world, one which comes about because of the nature of Man, who wants to make the world inseparable from his life?

That this attempt, however vital, must fail, is the *condition humaine* out of which Man's greatness and tragedy spring. Malraux stands close to the existentialistic thesis that we "invent" our fate in order to be irremediably bound to the world. But even though every such "invention" reveals a specific power in Man to impose his world on the world, it is also an escape from his intrinsic solitude, and leaves an anguish that tells he is greater than the sum of his acts.

The multiplication of individual destinies is also part of a more relaxed and "epical" narrative manner. Tchen still runs to his fate as if action were a drug against solitude which wears off and had to be increased. But others move at different speeds, and reach their fulfilment at different points in the plot, which is no longer in a state of continuous high tension. The specifically *literary* problem which Malraux solves in the present novel is how to convey Man's pursuit of fate without the artificial, fantastic tempo of *The Conquerors* or the conglomeration of synthetically staged adventures we find in *The Royal Way*. His problem is of the same order as that of an artist who strives to obtain a three-dimensional effect with two-dimensional means, to show that the medium does not have to be of the same nature as the thing it represents. All problems of this order are essentially aesthetic and imply that artistic freedom consists in the power to represent an experience without being subject to its law.

If we compare two incidents, of how man runs towards his fate, one from *La Condition humaine* and the other from *The Conquerors*, Malraux's new artistic freedom will appear in greater relief. In the latter, Klein, a friend of Garine's and fellow-worker in the strike, is taken hostage by the terrorists and killed. Garine and the narrator are told that a number of bodies have been found and go to identify them. As a morbid joke the terrorists have propped the bodies upright, and for once the narrator's speed of perception fails: "As soon as I raise my eyes I see the four bodies, *standing*." The author here suggests two things: an event too quick for human eyes, and that Klein's body is death, as if death had been within him as a hidden fatality. The slashes on Klein's face, perceived later, express a further trick of fate: Klein was always terrified at the idea of knife-killings. Then Garine wants to close his comrade's eyes, and, with a blindly foreseeing gesture, puts two fingers "stretched apart like scissors" on the white eyeballs—realizes the murderers have cut the eyelids off.

The scene described above is one of the finest in *The Conquerors*. It haunts the mind by its compression and its obsessive emphasis on the faculty

of sight. It seeks to show that fate is quicker than Man, and yet within Man, who anticipates and even conspires with its action. A very different scene, expressing the same idea, occurs just before Kyo listens to his voice and does not recognize it. Very casual, it is enlivened by a single naïve gesture. Tchen has just informed his comrades of the completed murder, and feels a great need to leave them and confide in Gisors, because no one else, except perhaps Katov, is really close to him:

The Russian [Katov] was eating little sugar candies, one by one without taking his eyes off Tchen who suddenly understood the meaning of gluttony. Now that he had killed he had the right to crave anything he wished. The right. Even if it were childish. He held out his square hand. Katov thought he wanted to leave and shook it. Tchen got up. It was just as well: he had nothing more to do here; Kyo was informed, it was up to him to act. As for himself, he knew what he wanted to do now. He reached the door, returned however.

"Pass me the candy."

Katov gave him the bag. He wanted to divide the contents: no paper. He filled his cupped hand, chewed with his whole mouth, and went out.

"Shouldn't 've gone 'lone," said Katov.

A refugee in Switzerland from 1905 to 1912, date of his clandestine return to Russia, he spoke French almost without accent, but he swallowed certain of his vowels, as though to compensate for the necessity of articulating carefully when he spoke Chinese. Almost directly under the lamp, very little light fell on his face. Kyo preferred this: the expression of ironic ingenuousness which the small eyes and especially the upturned nose (a sly sparrow, said Hemmelrich) gave to Katov's face, struck him all the more as it jarred with his own features and often troubled him.

"Let's get it over with," said Kyo. "You have the records, Lou?"

The passage effects a transition from one personal focus to another, from Tchen to Kyo. In so doing it swiftly illuminates the relationship between both and the third main character, Katov. Though the latter is a pivot he appears momentarily in greatest relief: his personality is an *unknown* which Tchen and Kyo (and Hemmelrich) cannot solve. Katov is often kept opaque, and he does not hold the centre until the last great scene of his sacrifice and death. Still, we are often shown into his thoughts, and if he remains mys-

terious here it is because Malraux always chooses some opaque pivot around which actions or thoughts turn. In Tchen's first scene it is the victim shrouded by the white gauze; in Katov's last scene the strangely empty space of the prison compound; and often such an obscure experience as that which Tchen wishes to clarify with Gisor's help, or that which Kyo puzzles over after hearing his voice in recorded form.

Malraux's characters are defined by their different reaction to this "unknown." All are drawn towards it like Perken to the idea of torture, or Claude to his map, or the conquerors to "China." But now Malraux varies more skilfully the structure of each fascination, its momentum, form and quality. Both Tchen and Kyo subtly transform the other man, make him less strange, more at one with their wishes. The manner in which each imposes his world on the world is, however, quite different.

Tchen is strongly conscious of his solitude, his increased familiarity with death, and wants to deny it. He thinks he understands Katov's "gluttony," but when the latter misinterprets his outstretched hand, we are reminded of the distance between any gesture and its interpretation, as well as of the distance between Katov and Tchen which the latter would have liked to deny. Yet Tchen accepts Katov's misunderstanding too quickly, and his returning for the candy, and gulping all of it, has something equally hasty about it, this time wilful rather than spontaneous. It may reflect the speed with which he moves towards his "fate." As for Kyo, he tends to pass over differences in character, proceeding by the quickest route to the next item: "Let's get it over with." He too, therefore, displays a certain haste. Katov, finally, appears kind and relaxed, but there is the suggestion of gluttony and that curious "swallowing of vowels." The whole scene has a great deal of humorous strength not found in any of Malraux's previous work except his fantasies.

The estrangements of which we have talked always occur in the midst of the secret haste the above passage hints at. When the records are played, Kyo hears a voice he does not recognize as his own. Despite the fraternal effort of revolution, all the characters, by the end of the novel, come to face death or destiny alone, strangers to themselves and to the world. The moment of death is, in fact, associated with this leitmotif of the strange voice. Just before Kyo joins Katov in the prisoner compound and takes poison, he passes through an experience in which it plays a deeply disguised role.

König, Chiang Kai-shek's police chief, in charge of rooting out the Communist revolutionaries, has heard that Kyo is a believer in the "dignity of Man." He therefore has Kyo brought from prison and plans to make

him betray his belief. During their interview the telephone rings and a voice asks whether Kyo is *still* alive. Soon it rings a second time with, apparently, the same query. König, in the meantime, has begun an aimless interrogation. Does Kyo want to live? Is Kyo a Communist through . . . dignity? Kyo, who does not see a purpose to these questions, tensely expects the telephone: when it rings a third time König lets it ring, hand on receiver, asking where the Communists have hidden their arms—another pointless question, since he already knows the answer or does not need Kyo for it. Then, suddenly, Kyo understands that the telephone is merely a piece of stage-business.

What business Malraux does not say, but König is obviously not interested in specific information. He wants merely the gesture of betrayal, and later offers Kyo his freedom in exchange for it. The business of the telephone, a devilish variant on the game of one two three . . . gone, is rigged up to achieve this end. For the repeated ring suggests more than a limit to Kyo's life which König (the name perhaps symbolic) has the power to suspend. It evokes the *indifference* of the world—that repetitive machine, that strange anonymous voice—to Man's existence and will. The real temptation faced by Kyo is not König's power or his humane offer but the subtler suggestion of this voice. It demands nothing except the sacrifice of an idea, the idea of Man. The inhuman whistle of the locomotive which later pierces the prisoner compound, the scene of Kyo's and Katov's death, is the image of König's telephone raised to the height of impotent terror.

The tragedy Malraux depicts, and which the world of *Man's Fate* embodies most clearly, does not stem from any special flaw in the protagonists. It comes, at first sight, from the brutal confrontation of Man with external fate. Yet each of the novels shows a reversal in which external forms of fate appear as invited or even invented by Man. A later work such as *Man's Hope*, in which the author feels even freer towards his idea, suggests this reversal also in occasional images, as when Loyalist aeroplanes appear to *seek* the enemy's anti-aircraft fire. Malraux's view should, however, be distinguished from religious and psychological concepts of fate. The former may hold that a person creates what he deserves, the latter that he creates for himself what he most deeply wants or is compelled to want because of early experiences. For Malraux there is a fatality prior to every individual fate, and this lies in the specific nature of Man, who cannot accept a world independent of his act, and so aspires to identify himself with forces greater than his being, even at the risk of losing part of his humanity. This risk is expressed in the general theme of self-estrangement, as well as by the symbols of alienated or inhuman face and voice. König with his telephone