

*signed, Malraux*

by Jean-Francois Lyotard

Translated by Robert Harvey

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*Reviewed By Paul Devlin*

Andre Malraux (1901-1976) is certainly a challenging figure to write a biography about. Take a novelist, art historian/critic, soldier in two major wars, archaeologist, and Charles de Gaulle's Minister of Culture – then attach "extraordinaire" to each of these "incarnations" (as he calls them in *Anti-Memoirs*) and you have an idea Malraux's career. He was an abstract thinker and theorist, but was also committed to real world action. He did everything from looking for the lost city of Sheba to commanding troops in the Spanish Civil War and World War II, to ordering the sand blasting (cleaning) of Paris's building facades after the war. His output as a writer was huge, and includes classic (and perhaps under-read) novels such as *Man's Fate*, *Man's Hope*, and *The Conquerers*, books on individual artists such as *Saturn: An Essay on Goya* and *Picasso's Mask*, as well as his monumental studies of art *The Voices of Silence* (originally *The Psychology of Art*) and *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*. (To give an example of the current unevenness of the way Malraux is being read today, his *The Voices of Silence* is currently in its sixth paperback printing [at \$35 a copy] from Princeton University Press, while *The Metamorphosis of the Gods* is out of print.)

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1925-1999) was one of the most influential thinkers of the late twentieth century, perhaps best known as author of *The Post-Modern Condition*, as well as many other books of philosophy and criticism. Here he has written a brilliant study of a complicated man. But this is a strange book. It is written in odd, shifting styles, and it is not like reading any ordinary biography. The tone varies from light-hearted bravado, where we can imagine Lyotard in a Paris café giving an off the cuff assessment of Malraux, to a deadly serious sacred-sounding discourse, as if the secrets of existence are being whispered through the story of Malraux's life. If someone is looking for an introduction to Malraux, do not look here. Numerous books provide a basic introduction, a good one is *A Portrait of Andre Malraux* by Robert Payne (Prentice-Hall 1970), which is right to the point and full of excellent pictures. Lyotard's is neither introductory, nor definitive, but it is certainly an informative, thought-provoking, and entertaining ride. He has written a funny, painstakingly researched, and sympathetic biography of Malraux which hopefully will become a classic of Lyotard's oeuvre and of Malraux studies.

Lyotard gives fair treatment of all of Malraux's work, and is especially fond of his novels. *Man's Fate* (*La Condition Humaine*), a story of a young man involved in the Communist revolution against Chang Kai-Chek in 1920's China, which is probably Malraux's best novel, is one of the finest literary productions of the twentieth century. "Take another look", says Lyotard, "at his Asian novels [see also, *The Conquerers*] look again at the thunderously mortiferous upheavals of their plots where the world's destiny is played out as if spinning in a hurricane around a serene eye."

Malraux's vast commentary on art is also examined in depth. He looked at, *in person*, vast amounts of the world's greatest art work: from the Lascaux cave paintings to Buddhas carved into Chinese mountainsides to the masterpieces of museums and galleries of Europe and America. Lyotard says that "the hunt for masterpieces had occupied his entire life. Not one day had gone by where he wasn't scouring museums, monuments, deserts, or the jungle to flush out some 'presence' or another, to experience it, then countersign it." And Malraux's thoughts about what he saw are a profound education.

Lyotard is known for his definition of "post-modernism" as being "the incredulity toward meta-narratives". Malraux is perhaps best known for his idea of the "Museum Without Walls", which is like a museum in the mind, comprising the art of past centuries and civilizations. It is not difficult to see how Malraux became an attractive subject of biography for him, considering how the Museum Without Walls is meta-narrative exploding idea, and of course not forgetting that Malraux was a dominant figure in French political and

world cultural life from Lyotard's birth through his middle age. The problem with meta-narratives is that they always exclude something by narrowing in on one thing, whereas the Museum Without Walls is an inclusive idea. Lyotard says that academic art critics and theorists tend to be dismissive of Malraux, but he writes in Malraux's defense, "the museum without walls is the only ontology allowed to our doubting thought, for only that which questions may enter."

And it is not only in the case of the Museum Without Walls that Malraux is defended, at times passionately. In fact, Lyotard's celebration and vindication of Malraux continues in *Sound Proof Room: Malraux's Anti-Aesthetics* (Stanford University Press, 2001) a brief but *dense* book, which cannot be summarized here, although it is perhaps worth noting that Lyotard mentions, in it, with great vigor, that nowhere, in Malraux's entire output as a writer, or his life's story, is there a trace of anti-Semitism. Lyotard claims that this is remarkable for a gentile in Malraux's times and places. All this is just to emphasize that Lyotard greatly admires Malraux and is trying to put his reputation in its proper place – a very high place; as both a thinker, novelist, and man.

First published in French in 1996 and translated by Robert Harvey of SUNY Stony Brook (who deserves much credit and for whom it must have been no small task) *signed, Malraux*, for all its stylistic idiosyncrasies, is a tour de force. The title of the book comes from Malraux's signature – an image of a cat. It is this image of the cat that seems to haunt Lyotard. Malraux's personality is often described in terms of analogies and metaphors dealing with cats. The last paragraph of the book is like a hyper-example of what occurs throughout the whole book:

He signed with cat's silhouette. And the (dismantleable) cenotaph that was solemnly honored, following his death, in the Louvre's Cour carrée, was topped by a late Egyptian bronze: the cat-goddess, Bastet, her nose raised toward the cosmos. Cats sign by scratching. Not long ago, people called them clerks and griffins. They also sign the indeterminacy of space and time by their whimsical comings and goings – some cheery, some nasty – stopping at thresholds we cannot see where they sniff some 'present beyond'. The beyond of a just-this-side – the one that roars or rumbles or purrs in their throats. ....Of the ellipsis, they understand much. And the name for this, the name for this life at the threshold, for the door that's ajar, for questioning: is limbo.

Straightforward it ain't, but it is frequently powerful and poetic prose and it adds up to a fitting monument from one great mind to another. After another especially dense paragraph where Lyotard says that the *graphé* must get itself signed, consigned, and countersigned to "the dread of true death", we are prompted to smile and ask, "what the \_\_\_\_?". Lyotard asks at the beginning of the next paragraph, "A bit abstract?". Oui, Monsieur. But that is part of the fun.

Lyotard often drifts between tenses, frequently speaking in the present tense, as if setting the scene for a play, as if the events are taking place on a dark stage under a bright light, suspended in time. (While I'm sure there are several stylistic precedents for this that I am not aware of, one that comes to mind is Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, another is Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History*. Perhaps Lyotard felt Malraux's life deserved a style similar to these other subjects?) Lyotard's prose style is light and playful – peppered with his own aphorisms, almost as if he wrote a book of aphorisms and carefully wove them into Malraux's life's story, and occasionally digressing in unexpected ways.

Perhaps this is meant to be some sort of model of "post-modern" biography, but I do not think so. Lyotard adopts a playful, joking style that few other biographers would be able to get away with. Also, coming from someone other than Lyotard, this style, at times, might seem to be in bad taste. I do not mean this in an "only Nixon can go to China" sense, but perhaps one French intellectual one generation removed from Malraux can tease him the way Alan Iverson might lightheartedly tease Michael Jordan with caution. Lyotard sometimes kids Malraux, frequently, for example, about dressing like a "dandy" when he was young, but it's always in an admiring manner, as one might joke around with a cool coach after practice.

Plus this is offset by the Lyotard's clear and strong support of Malraux where it counts, and his *close* reading of Malraux's many works.

Lyotard must have either been reading Malraux for his whole life (that would be my guess) or took several years to read Malraux's entire oeuvre several times over before attempting this book. It is informed by not only a reading of Malraux's novels that is comprehensive enough to constantly talk about the characters in them, but also with Malraux's theoretical works to quote from them relevantly, and constantly towards the end of the book. *signed, Malraux* is completely saturated with quotes from Malraux's own books – which shows that Lyotard took his task seriously, and the light-heartedness is a function of his personality. At the same time, the light-hearted tone often comes to Malraux's defense: by mocking his critics. Also, as noted above, at times a tone of high seriousness, even a mystical tone, is adopted by Lyotard, and the feeling of utmost gravity worthy of Malraux's photo on the back cover of *Picasso's Mask* is conveyed.

Malraux's relationship with the Communists in the 1930's is treated in all its complexity by Lyotard. Although Malraux was the avatar of anti-Fascism, he was too smart to get lured in by Stalinism. Lyotard writes, "He's read too many *fatrassiers*, adores carnivals and masks too much, has seen too much Goya to be altogether taken in by the Soviet regime's edifying speeches and moving demonstrations. He knew instantly that Lady Revolution, in her just fervor, also harbors necrophoric intrigues." Malraux always emphasized the separation between art and politics; art, he said, always comes from previous art. Lyotard describes Malraux's admiration for Tolstoy, Faulkner, and Thomas Mann in the 1930's, and he concludes, "one is forced to admit that this is not a very Marxist library". (That is certainly an understatement for the ages.) As a great writer, Malraux enjoyed great writing.

*signed, Malraux* may possibly be in that category, but if not "great" it's certainly good. Someone who has read (and re-read) as much Malraux as Lyotard has may have a quite different outlook on the book than this reviewer, who has read Malraux's major works but is still playing catch up.

For Further Interest:

*Soundproof Room: Malraux's Anti-Aesthetics* by Jean-Francois Lyotard. Translated by Robert Harvey. Stanford University Press, 2001.

*Man's Fate (La Condition Humaine)* by Andre Malraux. Vintage, 1990.

*The Voices of Silence* by Andre Malraux. Princeton University Press, 1978.