



André Malraux on the margin

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By: Melinda Camber Porter

"I wanted to destroy the notion of autobiography. The part of oneself that allows one to say 'I' is profoundly irrational", said André Malraux, who has just published *Lazare*, fragments of the second volume of his *Antimemoirs* (Gallimard, 29Fr). One day in the autumn of 1972 Malraux collapsed and was taken to the Salpêtrière; two weeks later the doctors diagnosed sclerosis of the peripheral nerves of the brain. He came close to death and encountered an "I-without-self; a life without an identity".

He considers the fact that he is sitting, alive and well, in his country-house at Verrières-leBuisson as a resurrection. Although *Lazare* is inspired by this encounter with death and intermittently treats the personal experience, Malraux uses it primarily as a basis for meditating upon dilemmas that transcend the individual.

Both in the book and in our conversation he speaks of his personal experience with a wry dismissiveness. "When it happened, the first thing I felt was great surprise, and then a certain irony. I would never have thought that death was of such little importance. But I want to stress the fact that we must never forget that physical suffering is all-important. For someone who had suffered physical pain it would have been a completely different experience. It was an event, but it was scarcely suffering."

The particular form his illness took—helplessness, absence of pain, awareness—made him compare the experience to sleepwalking and led him to explore the nature of death from a very singular angle. At the moment when he thought he was about to face the mystery he lost consciousness; but in the crucial weeks that followed he was in full possession of his faculties. He maintains an ambivalent attitude towards the conflict between consciousness and death.

"I wanted to get across the idea that we can free ourselves from fear of death by attaining the absolute certainty that death is something the mind cannot conceive of. My own death belongs, radically, to the unthinkable. Just as the East believes in reincarnation, so we believe, unconsciously, that we journey onwards in the corpse. What frightens us is that we believe that we will be nothing more than this corpse. And this is meaningless. Here we are the dupes of language. This is much more the case in French than in English. Because in English you can say "I am dying," but the French "je suis mort" is comic. Of course, if you have faith there is no anguish before death. It is the margin, the vacillating uncertainty of the agnostic, that creates anguish."



Malraux moves outwards from his personal experience to consider contemporary civilization. He sees a parallel between his situation and the outside world. “Western civilization has been dying since 1890 and yet we’re still very much alive. We are the first civilization that has a sense of its own disintegration because we have never known decadence. And why? Before us, dying civilizations would die. But we have never been more powerful. It is as if the Roman Empire were dying while still masters of the world.”

There is a lack of arrogance in Malraux's use of self as microcosm; he only talks of self in order to transcend it. His manner is dignified but completely unassuming. Admittedly, his handling of French rhetoric does not allow one to forget that for more than 10 years he was de Gaulle’s Minister of Culture. But the volcanic surge of ideas, the intensity that radiates from his person, is barely contained within the language of ordinary discourse. He says that the task of describing such problems is fraught with difficulties. The discontinuity of his speech and his unwillingness to follow a linear argument reveal the complexity and urgency of his ideas and, perhaps more deeply, a rebellion against the limitations of the language man has at his disposal.

In *Lazare* he juggled with chronological time, mixing fact and fiction, past and present. In *L’Irréel* (Gallimard, 220Fr), the second volume *La Métamorphose des dieux*, published in the same month as *Lazare*, he imposes a temporality and continuity upon the changing forms of art. This preoccupation with time is reflected both in the titles of the recent art books and in his decision to alter the title of the *Antimemoirs* to *Le Miroir des limbes*. “*Les Limbes* means literally the place where unbaptized children, go. But in French the word has a certain, ill-defined connotation; it is almost prepositional, something like ‘beyond’, ‘beyond frontiers’, for example; it also refers to ‘the time of the indiscernible’. I chose the title because I wanted to explain passing time; the whole book is an attempt to become aware of time as flux.”

Malraux has always defined the hero as a man who rebels against his inevitable destiny, in action as well as in words. He tried to embody this ideal in his life. The early art criticism explores an alternative mode of salvation, and in *L’Irréel*, which he has been working on since 1957, he returns to this idea. He says that just as no one could understand Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* until the posthumous publication of *Le Temps retrouvé*, so it will be impossible to understand fully the meaning of the first two volumes of his trilogy, *Le Surnaturel* (first published in 1957 under the title *La Métamorphose des dieux*) and *L’Irréel*, until *L’Intemporel* is published. For both Proust and Malraux see in art a justification and a



denial of the human condition. “The value of art is that it exists outside time. Only art can give a presence to things dead.”

Malraux no longer uses the rebel as a cypher for his own preoccupations. In his autobiography he chooses Lazarus rather than Christ “? of Lazarus is not important in itself. Let us say that it was a useful device. The symbol of Christ is too overloaded with meaning. In Christ you have all symbols all at once (love, resurrection, and so on). The symbol is so vast it no longer symbolizes anything.” And the symbol of Lazarus stresses as well the helplessness he felt. In the book, memories of past encounters with death and of writing about death as well as real and “false” memories of his period of illness in the Salpêtrière seem to impose themselves on the author, bringing him tantalizingly close to the mystery but always receding when he comes too close. “*A l’instant de basculer (j’avais quitté terre) j’ai senti la mort s’éloigner.*”

Personal experience gives the book an incisive, naked quality. None of his previous meditations on death is quite as powerful. For the rhetoric stands in awe of the subject-matter and even at its heights comes close to understatement. Malraux says that the fundamental difference between metaphysical speculation ? death and death itself is the subject of the book. “The word *trepas* expresses the fact of being killed; *la mort* is our metaphysical notion of being dead. For me, the gap is enormous. But I believe that we can somehow rid the notion of ‘being killed’ of its metaphysical implications.”

In *Lazare*, Malraux constantly attempts to approach the fact of dying, trying to go beyond the living man’s speculations about death. Paradoxically, he maintains that his own death belongs to the inconceivable (*l’impensable*) and that this notion alone is able to free him from the fear of death. Lazarus lives on the very frontiers of consciousness, straining to go beyond, while knowing that the limitations of the human condition makes this an impossibility.

Leaving Malraux in the quiet of his country-house at Verrières-le-Buisson, I had the feeling that the young man who had rebelled so vigorously against the limitations of life had been resurrected in order to fight a fresh battle against the most fundamental limitation of man’s estate.

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