

Novelist, revolutionary, cultural historian

By James Reston, Jr.

ANDRÉ MALRAUX towers over the literary and artistic scene today, one of a handful of great writers, like Graham Greene and Nabokov, whose career reaches back into the 1930's. His novel *La Condition Humaine* (or *Man's Fate*) is the best revolutionary novel of modern times, by far. Its characters—the terrorist Chen; the determined, intellectual Communist leader, Kyo; wise Old Gisors—are unforgettable, pitched as they are by the Chinese Revolution of 1927 against the Kuomintang and the colonial French government. The novel avoids the trap of so many political novels: ideology never dominates, never overpowers the storytelling, and *Man's Fate* remains on the deeply human level. Malraux's other books include five other novels and several books on cultural history—more esoteric inquiries into other civilizations, the mysteries of art, the meaning of belief.

Malraux's reputation rests equally on his personality, which has been formed by more adventures per year than any man alive, perhaps more than any writer who ever lived. At the age of 22, he mounted an expedition to steal art treasures from an ancient temple in the jungles of Cambodia. He was caught and tried, and the experience resulted in his novel *The Royal Way*. A year later, he published a savagely critical newspaper in Saigon, attacking the French colonial government in Indochina, and it was soon shut down by the authorities. In his 30's he set off on a much publicized quest for the Lost City of Sheba in Africa and captivated France with his reports of the search.

A Conventional Life?

Four days after the Spanish Civil War began, Malraux flew off to Spain and took command of the *Escadre España*, the Spanish squadron of a few rickety Republican planes which were vastly outnumbered by Franco's air force. Malraux flew 65 missions and was wounded twice. Out of that experience, he got his novel *Man's Hope*. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Malraux joined the French army, was wounded, captured, but escaped. In 1944 he commanded a small group of *maqui* under the name of Colonel Berger. There, too, he was wounded and captured by the Germans, but he was liberated in the German evacu-

Malraux: Past, Present, Future,
by Guy Suarès,
translated by Derek Coltman

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ation. In 1945, he became DeGaulle's minister of information, but after the collapse of DeGaulle's government, he retired to writing books. "He had come at last to the fate reserved for all revolutionaries, if they survive," writes his biographer, Robert Payne. "He was leading a conventional married life."

But no! When DeGaulle took power again in 1959, Malraux became his minister of cultural affairs and did much in his 10 years in the cabinet to bring French art treasures to the provinces. When DeGaulle's government fell in 1969, Malraux resigned, but shortly thereafter he offered to parachute with commandos into Bangladesh to aid the natives in their fight against Pakistan.

So the man is irrepressibly *engagé*. He is the original literary activist, the most successful combination of revolutionary and writer alive. Intrigued by this combination, Guy Suarès, a 40-year-old playwright "at the noon" of his life, requests an interview with his hero. "What strikes me above all," Suarès writes to Malraux, "is that there is no dichotomy between your life and your work." Throughout Malraux's adventures, Suarès says, there is always "the same anguish, the same tension, the same lucidity."

What follows in *Malraux: Past, Present, Future* are two extended interviews between Suarès and Malraux, set beside numerous photographs of Malraux, past and present, all with the haunting eyes that must give off the most penetrating glare in the Western world. Suarès's questions are more for the cultural historian in Malraux than for the novelist or the revolutionary, and this is disappointing, for Malraux's perception of life and work is far more interesting than anything he has to say about other civilizations. But one gets the impression that art, belief, and civilizations are what Malraux wants to talk about and that he would give a more mundane interviewer short shrift.

Once Suarès asks, "What is your hope for the future, as we now



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André Malraux

stand?" And Malraux replies... or snaps, "I have no idea, and I shall systematically eliminate all prophecy from our conversation."

An American Failure

Most Americans will find Malraux's answers ponderous; for we are not used to thinking about the future of our civilization (though well we might, particularly now, after Vietnam and Watergate), or speaking about "man's dialogue with the cosmos," or wondering about whether there is any source of rebirth in our society. But that is our failure, not Malraux's. Rather than the obscurity of this dialogue being a reason to steer away from this book, it is reason for acquiring it. For here is a magnificently furnished mind addressing ultimate questions, and even if Malraux's answers are not always intelligible, one feels uplifted watching him wrestle with essential problems.

Along the way there are startling insights. The world today for Malraux has a "violent sense of transience," with nations more powerful

than ever before, but without values. There have been other powerful civilizations with weak values, like the late Roman Empire, he asserts, but they were dying civilizations. He sees New York as the heir of Alexandria and Byzantium, and then says, "The death throes of any civilization create vast cosmopolitan cities that are the symptoms of its death." And sprinkled through the dialogue are a number of marvelous definitions:

► A hero: "the man who stakes his life for the salvation of mankind."

► Aesthetics (quoting Paul Valéry): "... the technique of establishing a recipe for the infallible manufacture of masterpieces."

► Politics: "the medium of history. . . . A politics without history is without interest."

► Culture: "the heritage left by the world's nobility. . . . The highest culture is perhaps nothing but a knowledge of man's noblest dialogues—even in art."

He has contempt for "trap words" like freedom, God, or happiness—vague, emotive words possessed by every civilization, which have no meaning until they have a context, such as "freedom of expression."

The biggest disappointment of this dialogue is that Suarès does not dig deeper into Malraux's magnificent balance between thought and action. It is merely touched on. Did Malraux pursue his adventures only for the books that they might make? Or did he truly care about the condition of the Vietnamese or the Spanish or the occupied French or even the Bangladeshi? Or is it necessary for the literary activist to define which is more important to him: the struggle or his art?

But the opportunity slips away. As if he is speaking for the generation of the 1960's in this country, Malraux says only that his experiences in Indochina gave him his bond with social justice, where before, there was only indifference. And the matter is left unsatisfactorily with a rhetorical question:

"But do we really know whether the crucial actions of any life are the product of a choice, or whether what seems to be a choice is only rationalization?"

James Reston, Jr., is a novelist. His latest book, *The Knock at Midnight*, will be published this month by Norton.

Charlotte Brontë

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"she must be a woman unsexed."
"To such critics," Charlotte writes to her publisher, "I would say, 'To you I am neither man nor woman. I come before you as an author only. It is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me—the sole ground on which I accept your judgment.'"

Quarrel with Editors

And at another point she quarrels with her editors over a scene in her novel *Shirley*:

"Is it because you think this chapter will render the work liable to severe handling by the press? Is it because knowing as you now do the identity of 'Currer Bell,' this scene strikes you as unfeminine? Is it because it is intrinsically defective and inferior? I am afraid the two first

reasons would not weigh with me—the last would."

In modern times this a heroic stance: the brilliant woman bridling under the unfair confinements of her age and triumphing over them at tremendous cost and against tremendous odds.

Margot Peters admits that "these tensions . . . electrify her fiction." One wonders: When all these tensions are removed, as they should be, will we have as interesting fiction from our "lady authors"? That is the problem with mixing the political and the literary. It just happens that a great deal of very fine fiction has flowed from a great deal of pain.

James Reston, Jr.'s, new novel is entitled "The Knock at Midnight," published by Norton.