

HISTORY AND HIS-STORY IN ANDRÉ MALRAUX'S *LA CORDE ET LES SOURIS*

LAWRENCE D. KRITZMAN

Rutgers University

Si on supprimait l'Histoire, qu'est-ce qu'ils diraient, les artistes-peintres?

C'est seulement à mourir, que l'homme ne s'habitue pas.

Qu'est-ce qu'un passé qui n'est pas une biographie?¹

The second volume of André Malraux's *Le Miroir des limbes, La Corde et les souris*, constitutes a collage, an archeological reconstitution of earlier works such as *Hôtes de passage* (1975), *Les Chênes qu'on abat* (1971), *La Tête d'obsidienne* (1974) and *Lazare* (1974), texts that he combines with his memories of first-hand historical encounters.² Malraux's mirror, the tapestry of translated reminiscences and the fragments of his very own intertextual memory (i.e. the "return to earth" episode in *Le Temps du mépris* [1935] and *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* [1945]), artificially reconstructs "old scenes" both fictional and historical in order to site and re-cite history within the scriptural limbo situated on the precipice between life and death. Underlying these texts, which combine history and fiction, is a common *topos* that relates the anguish associated with human transience and mortality with the desire of history to memorialize the ephemeral through the artifice of writing: "If I tend to confuse men, temples and tombs, it is because they express in like manner 'all that passes.'" ³

Malraux's narrative of the self is mediated by the fragmentary accumulation of past memories and dialogues about artists and

political heroes who attempt to incarnate antidestiny and triumph over death and the corrosive force of time by transforming their stories into a historical myth: "Chiefs of State . . . are born of combat . . . the combat that they call history" (CS, p. 27). Each chapter in *La Corde et les souris* contains dialogues about the course of history, substantive meditations on tombs and cultural mausoleums that emanate from the voice of the historical other: Senghor, de Gaulle, Max Torrès and Picasso. But if Malraux reflects on death and transience in history, it is in order to better reflect on the self.⁴ Throughout the narrative Malraux acts as an interlocutor who transforms history into a dynamically interpreted process that takes on the dimensions of his-story, a self-portrait in which he will attempt to situate himself for posterity before scriptural witnesses to whom he is tied. The Other enters into an uncanny narrative contract: "Everyman addresses the record of his past to an audience that lies beyond his grasp: in the case of the confession, that audience is God, for literature it is posterity. . . . Biographies are created only for others" (CS, pp. 550-51). In essence Malraux's own "story" as *enonciation* is told in the "history" (the subject of the *enonce*) that he represents through somewhat oblique and phantasmatic identifications with legendary Promethean heroes who struggle to transcend death and annihilation:⁵ "Man's formation takes shape by reference to exemplary types: saint, knight, caballero, gentleman, bolshevik and others. Exemplariness belongs to dreams, to fiction" (CS, p. 588). The narcissistic rhetoric of the self-portrait is ostensibly subsumed by a series of exemplary historical references in which the subject fades into a plurality of appearances that mark an overdetermined *universal* history: "In some inexplicable way the character with whom I have on occasion been obsessed—myself—does not interest me here. . . . I do not confuse death with my own dying" (CS, pp. 551, 536). And yet the Malrucian subject is articulated and contextually bound to these other-voiced prophecies about the human condition reverberating within him. History and self-portraiture intersect with one another in a dialogic mode to the point of obfuscating the traditional boundaries between reified document and performative fiction: "History itself was inseparable from historical fictions" (CS, p. 245).⁶

What remains essential throughout *La Corde et les Souris* is the relationship of history to memory as textual archive, a phenomenon achieved through the restoration of artistic form to the ephemeral.⁷ At the beginning of Malraux's text stands an epigraph that functions as a

parable that recounts a fiction of immortality and an escape from death. It is an allegory of the subject's desire for history and the construction of an aesthetic space in which salvation may be represented by the very example of the fulfillment it offers. The epigraph to volume two of *Le Miroir des limbes* tells the story of an artist, who condemned to the gallows with his feet touching the sand, is able to trace out the figure of small mice who come to life and decompose the hangman's noose:

And so the Inflexible Emperor condemned the Great Painter to be hanged. The Painter balanced himself on his two big toes and when he grew weary, on one toe alone. With the other he drew mice in the sand. The mice were drawn so well that they ran all the way up his body and gnawed at the rope. And since the Emperor had stated that he would come by when the Great Painter buckled under, the painter tiptoed away. And he led the mice away with him. (CS, p. 7)

Malraux's text represents here not only a proleptic fiction of survival, of the triumph over life's fatal course, but it also valorizes the opium-like power of art to choreograph a simulacrum of resurrection: "Images do not comprise a biography, and neither do events. It is the illusion of narrative, the biographical process that creates biography. . . . History can justify a life, but it doesn't resemble it" (CS, p. 185). The scriptural act as conquest over death can only be realized in fictions of renewal and restoration that artificially overcome the fatal *telos* of history and offer an antidote to the potential destruction of the self: "The need to create is a drug" (CS, p. 431).

But the inscription of the self in history is indeed a problematic affair. The second part of the text recounts a politico-moral *exemplum* in which the historical hero Alexander the Great's deity is threatened along with the quest for immortality that it implies. Alexander acts as a prototype, an iconic figure, of Malraux's obsession with conquerors and their ephemeral status as historical heroes. Alexander's history, as Malraux's text looks back upon it, tells of the possibility of forgetting, the displacement of historical reality from a transcendental realm into a finite world: "Alexander hears one threat alone; not that of the Indian princess to the hordes of elephants, but the challenge of Callisthenes and Greece: You are not a

God" (CS, p. 83). What is potentially threatened here is the delusion of immortality and omnipotence, the subject's inability to transcend death and display his self-image in the spectacular narrative of history: "every genius must extricate himself from the shadows of the unknown" (CS, p. 87).

Within the Alexander fable Malraux recounts yet another tale. Its subject is the museum, the site of memory, the tomb of history and the temporal extension of life in the form of what Derrida terms a "reprieve" (*sur-vie*) that spatially re-cites the ephemeral in history and triumphs over death: "*Survivre* delays at once life and death, on a line . . . that is thus one neither of clear-cut opposition nor of stable equivalence."⁸ In the narrative account Malraux is brought the photo of an unidentified object which, it is later discovered, represents the blood-stained fragment of a piece of clothing worn by Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. Ironically the director of the Louvre decides not to purchase this synecdochal representation of Alexandrian history: the museum, already a symbolic memory site, refuses this potential resurrection of Alexander's *récit* and reduces the historical detail to indistinctiveness.⁹ The Malrucian anecdote thus thematizes the possibility of history's potential effacement. It tells of the unpredictability of the object's inscription in history as a cultural practice, an antidote for forgetting its original "discontinuity" with the past as well as its subliminal banality: "What sense of truth does the eruption of History impose? . . . What is the relation between man and the myth that he incarnates?" (CS, pp. 73, 99). Writing this fragment out of history therefore prevents it from being recuperated within the museum's space of fabulation, a *locus* which dissimulates the tenuousness of historical remembrance and most certainly promotes the illusion of immortality.¹⁰ To be sure, Malraux's desire for history emerges from the museum sequence as a metaphor for the avoidance of death, as a story told in order to revise the historical into a symbolic extratemporal meditation on the possibility of oblivion: "Let man become the object of a quest and not of revelation. . . . [T]he man that one discovers here is one who gives himself over to the questions that death poses to the meaning of the world" (A, pp. 16-17).

But Malraux's discussion of Alexander is not brought to any absolute conclusion. Instead Malraux's text proceeds through a series of narrative digressions, historical fragments or what he terms the "carrousel of memory" recounting events such as the failed worker-

student “revolution” of May 1968 and de Gaulle’s fall from power one year later. Malraux’s narrative account, as Michael Riffaterre claims, is constructed through a meandering chain of apparently disconnected events, the mark of an associative peripatetic mind that transcends the logic of both time and space.¹¹ The text adheres to the generic constraints of a form that Malraux designates as *antimemories*: an unchronological narrative mode that conforms to the exigencies of an open-ended discursive practice articulated through topological contiguity. Yet this attempt to fragment the temporal linearity of the narrative does not demonstrate a deliberate will to break with historicity, as Simone de Beauvoir and others have claimed.¹² Rather the scriptural space of *Le Miroir des limbes* represents the kinetic energy of a film whose discursive drifting is punctuated by narrative ellipses that imply both analeptic and proleptic structures. Through metonymic juxtaposition Malraux identifies events with one another that are inextricably associated in his mind with the struggle for survival: the Spanish Civil War, the Resistance and his own recognition of the death knell in the combat to extricate himself from the throes of coma: “And here is La Salpêtrière, with the chapel dome that looks like an ace of spades. . . . My car accelerates as it passes through the gate just as the armored Mercedes of the Gestapo did in 1944” (CS, p. 534). The referential debris that constitutes the rhetoric of the self-portrait is but a series of historical images to which the narrative voice attributes its figurative course and through which meaning insists.

The images here are ordered according to analogies, spears of the Ardennes and Djibouti, blindmen of Montmartre and the Spanish night; the dog of Bône in its window and the cat that accompanied me to the line of demarcation—lights where shadows were traced out on the battlefields of the Resistance, and so many aerodromes in the dawn. (CS, p. 55)

Malraux’s text functions, then, as a set of reflecting mirrors; it acts as the site of a mnemonic archeological excavation that recuperates and projects the vestiges of time gone by so as to create a sense of the eternal. Accordingly, the Malrucian scriptural space, like the aesthetic space of the museum, constructs history out of disconnected fragments; it makes possible a narrative conceived as an “imaginary

museum of literature" engendered in "those moments when the fundamental mystery of life appears before each one of us" (A, pp. 10-11).

The many dialogues that emerge out of Malraux's associative meanderings reflect images of his own "lived" history which mirror the fatal drama of historical figures and their ephemeral ideological tenets. Indeed history activates a process of demythification through cultural metamorphosis, a phenomenon that is conceived as an attempt to raise questions about those utopian models for society proposed in moments of lyrical euphoria. In a conversation that takes place between the "cultural minister" Malraux and a Spanish Republican compatriot of the 1930s, Max Torrès, the latter laments the disappearance of the old gods through the power to forget ascribed to each new generation of political radicals. The value of their *agon* is discovered in a new level of political and social consciousness and in the concomitant aspiration to project man into a mythological future. Torrès' students "view themselves as the signposts of the future, for in the arts and sciences of the nineteenth century, the future always triumphed" (CS, p. 115). The references to the antigovernment riots against the Gaullist regime that punctuate the dialogue between Malraux and Torrès function rhetorically to sever the symbolic bonds that bind generations to one another in common pursuits; they illustrate the post-Romantic, Nietzschean view of history as disjunction and discontinuity in the genealogical relation of past and present. The Malrucian text once again represents civilization's power to forget, the ability to interrogate permanency and self-sufficiency at the expense of the discipline associated with the artifice of fabulation, "history as God, pure and simple" (CS, p. 126). The myth of progress generates but a process of cultural amnesia, a symptom of decline: *symptōma*, a sinking in or depression: "The lethargy of the last epoche of power was erased, faded, vanished" (CS, p. 153). History recounts the evacuation of the gods that failed from the Pantheon of cultural supremacy, as the students invoke the death of their former heroes—those *hôtes de passage*—in the name of a newly constituted negative theology. Thus instead of assigning a place in history to the heroes of the past, the Malrucian text narrates a tale of historical decline, a phenomenon that is paradoxically realized in terms of the ideology of progress. Malraux's lamenting comrade Max Torrès put it most succinctly at a moment of "decline" and cultural despair: "My youth in France was taken up with Bergson. He no longer plays any

role for me. . . . The individualism of Barrès and above all Gide has faded. . . . Freudo-Marxisme everywhere. Below the Arch of Triumph, the tomb of unknown Freudo-Marxism . . ." (CS, p. 114).

The dialogue at Colombey with de Gaulle takes place within the sterile *locus* of a Merovingian landscape where the retired general is reminded that the historical drama that he was once engaged in—like that of Saint Bernard—has indeed now passed: "In every way he is the past of France, an ageless face, like the forest behind him blanketed in snow that he has now embraced" (CS, p. 161). Undoubtedly de Gaulle incarnates the self-fashioned political hero whose idea of antidesiny before the menacing spectre of Nazi occupation ironically links him to the tragic refusal of Antigone and Prometheus and to the risk of heroism fading into historical oblivion. As Malraux's discussion and representation of the events of May 1968 strikingly reveal, the memory of the Gaullist past for the young radicals no longer constituted a moment of cultural glory and common greatness, but instead it became a kind of reified "historical monument" in conflict with innovation and the imperative to break with the past and engage in the future. De Gaulle's history has already been eclipsed in the name of another story which, as Malraux ironically reminds us, is also destined to fade into nothingness; it acts as a temporal frontier that hovers at the edge of night: "And now, the last great man to have haunted France is alone with her; agony, transfiguration and dreams. Night falls, a night that knows not history" (CS, p. 283).

Most certainly the great dilemma of modern man is the awareness of no longer having any firm guarantees. But in the conversations between Malraux and de Gaulle a theory of history as "resurrection" is put forth, a temporal fable that binds form to meaning for language alone perpetuates one's victory over oblivion. "He became de Gaulle," declares Malraux, "because he possessed this language. . . . Every great creator became a myth instigated by his work" (CS, p. 290). De Gaulle's conception of his task as historical memorialist was to articulate and preserve "the myth of France" so that it would become intertwined with his-story, a narrative in which he sought to mark and re-mark history and save it from the threat of mere chaos: "My purpose was to set France back on her feet in order to confront the mythical phantoms that paralysed her. The important thing . . . for all men enmeshed in history was not what I said, but the hope that I brought them" (CS, pp. 253, 256-57). The emplotment of a monumental history enabled de Gaulle to transform his life into a

textualized *exemplum*, a scriptural epitaph, that represented his past to future generations and prevented him from being disabused of the illusion of mastery over time: "Great dreams push men to great actions and to epic mythomania" (CS, p. 86). The fiction of history is therefore maintained through a representational memory that textually sustains the inevitable erosion of the self. De Gaulle is able to resist the ravages of time in a book that inscribes him in an "imaginary museum of historical literature" which artificially sustains an arbitrary juxtaposition of unmotivated but paradoxically necessary events: "Nothing is more mysterious than the metamorphosis of a biography into a legendary life . . ." (CS, p. 214). The writing of the memoir thus emblemizes the return of the "political artist" to eternal life: the story of the history of redemption through the framing of his-story in art: "History may justify life, it doesn't resemble it. . . . Writing is a powerful drug . . . but nothing takes the place of a Memorial" (CS, pp. 185, 187). All that remains for de Gaulle to consider, after his fall from power in 1969—a symbolic death at that—is the memoir, the historical mirror portrayed as biographical fragments, a sign that has the same function as the museum or the tomb inasmuch as it sublates the implicit negation of death by its lying against time.

The Lazarus chapter of *Le Miroir des limbes* is typical of the self-reflective nature of the entire work. Throughout the text Malraux claims that the obsession with human transience that characterizes his self-portrait must be inscribed within a universal configuration of thought: "One's history is not written for oneself" (CS, p. 554). However, by an ironic twist Malraux's narrative directly mirrors images of the impending death of the narrator/author and thereby transforms him into a figure of historical cognition; the text reflects his war memories and re-members fragments of his earlier fiction that have as their common *topos* skirmishes with destiny and the escape from death and annihilation: "This is our street of death. Striped pajamas, shadows of the concentration camps liberated in 1945. The enemy is not the ephemeral Reich, it's paralysis which is as old as man himself" (CS, p. 546). The struggle against entropy therefore leads to the desire for his-story—like that of Lazarus—to arise out of the absolute oblivion of death so that it may become History, the artifice through which life resists destiny and attempts to disengage itself from the negation that is the end.¹³ "What is a past that is not a biography?" (CS, p. 552).

The Lazarus episode takes place within another mausoleum, Malraux's hospital room, where on the brink of death he ruminates on his past experience and gazes into the "mirror of limbo," into the twilight zone of death and beyond. As he struggles with the meaning underlying his comatose state, Malraux sees man's suffering as emanating from the spiritual estrangement from the laws of temporality and ontological wholeness: "Few subjects can resist the threat of death. . . . History erases men into oblivion; that withering is dissipated in the nothingness of the days of war" (CS, pp. 483-84). The hospitalized Malraux narrates a death-in-life sequence that ultimately leads to an interrogation of life's Promethean struggles and the self's quest for "resurrection." Through a rush of associative memories marked by dispersal but not by randomness, Malraux's text undergoes a shift in narrative voice from that of dying narrator in hospital to that of historical agent (the World War Two fighter) to narrator historian (recollection of de Gaulle and the Resistance) and finally to "fictional narrator" (recollections of his earlier fiction). In all of these examples the text activates a kind of tautology: the voice that narrates speaks from an observation post situated on the precipice between life and death, in the space or limbo between loss and the reinscription of an ideal state in "life." The subject becomes, in effect, a "me without self" (CS, p. 561).

Yet the dilemma that once again resurfaces is how to transcend and evade the constraints of an essentialized life/death option. Most certainly memory is the principle means of preserving both History and his-story; each mnemonic fragment acts as a kind of historical monument, an archeological signpost that preserves Malraux's very own history and permits him to become more than "a conscience without memory" (CS, p. 552). The Lazarus myth of resurrection thus translates Malraux's desire to repress death's negative quotient through the construction of a textual tomb that reflects in its parameters a memory that lives on in the "limbo" of non-death: "the most profound metamorphosis is the conversion of the empire of death into a museum" (A, pp. 81-82).¹⁴ In essence Malraux's rewriting of fragments of his previously published fiction such as the poison gas scene in *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* acts as an allegory of the process of re-membling the text through scriptural rebirth; it is but a biographical echo, a figural structure of repetition of a previous quest for survival. "I wrote the first part of this story," claims Malraux, "in 1940. Writing, then, was the only way to survive . . . but what

fascinates me in my adventure is the balancing of myself on the wall between life and the great foreboding depths of death" (CS, pp. 530, 562). Malraux's text thus resuscitates itself by the energy of rewriting in order to dress up the dismembered corpse of his textual remains which are given new life thanks to the glue of memory. Similarly, Malraux's dead self—the corpus of his *corps textuel morcelé*—is resurrected through a narrative act that constitutes the fiction of self-transcendence and dramatizes the activity required to disinter his buried stories. Like the museum's imaginary space of fabulation, the apparent discontinuity of his-story miraculously takes shape and yields a scriptural memorial by re-covering the contingency underlying these fragmented fictions of history and making them adhere to the illusion of ontological necessity: "For these *Antimemoirs* I have for the past few years gotten into the habit of seizing, welcoming images from the past. The images that follow here have summoned each other; a biography as false as all the others" (CS, p. 543).

NOTES

1. André Malraux, *La Corde et les Souris* (Paris: Gallimard-Folio, 1976), pp. 424, 526, 552. All subsequent references are from this edition and are indicated in the body of the text as CS. Translations are by Sima Godfrey.

2. The two volumes of the *Antimémoires* appeared together in the Pléiade edition in 1976 under the title *Le Miroir des limbes*. Part I was entitled *Antimémoires* and Part II *La Corde et les Souris*.

3. André Malraux, *Antimémoires* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 17. All references are to this volume and are indicated in the text as A.

4. On the rhetoric of the self-portrait see Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre* (Paris: Seuil, 1980) and Philippe Carrard, "Le Miroir des limbes et la question du genre," *French Review*, 55 (1982), 640-47.

5. Ross Chambers has outlined the pertinent interrelationships between "story" and "history" in *Story and Situation, Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 133-34.

6. "The very opposition between what is inside and what is outside texts is rendered problematic and nothing is seen as being purely and simply inside or outside texts. . . .

The context of the 'real' world is itself 'textualized' in a variety of ways" (Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts Contexts Language* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983], p. 26): "Historians recount true events which have men as actors; history is a true novel" (Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire* [Paris: Seuil Collection Points, 1979], p. 10). On the dynamics of the dialogic mode see M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

7. On the thematics of memory see Francoise E. Dorenlot, "La Corde et les Souris: Les Jeux de la Mémoire et de l'Art," *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Études Françaises*, 33 (1981), 261-76, and the excellent essay of Germaine Brée, "The Archaeology of Discourse in Malraux's *Antimemoirs*," *New York Literary Forum*, 2 (1978), 3-13.

8. Jacques Derrida, "Living On," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et. al. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 136.

9. "Le Miroir functions . . . like Malraux's *Musée* which receives works of art of all time, separated from their socio-historical contexts." Jean Carduner, "Le Miroir des limbes and Its Challenges," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 24 (1978), 389. "Deriding modern civilization for its failure to 'invent' tombs and temples, Malraux pursues that communal image throughout the text, the text becoming in effect his own *tombeau*." James Robert Hewitt, "Figures in the Carpet of Malraux's *Le Miroir des limbes*," *New York Literary Forum*, 3 (1979), 59.

10. On the notion of death defying acts and antidestiny see T. Jefferson Kline, "Deconstructing Death: Malraux's *Lapsus Lazari*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 24 (1978), 372-83. "[Malraux] has eroded the traditional opposition between life and death in order to assert a new realm of absolute otherness to which the imagination will always aspire, but, by definition happily never exhaust" (p. 382).

11. "The *Antimemoirs* are based on a structure of analogy (the method of superimposition is identical in fact to metaphor); for this reason they are poetry." Michael Riffaterre, *Essais de stylistique structurale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1971), p. 296.

12. Simone de Beauvoir, *Tout Compte fait* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 153-56.

13. See Roch Smith, "Malraux's *Miroir des limbes* and the Orphic Tradition," *Symposium*, 32 (1978), 147-55.

14. In an analogous observation Malraux regards an exhibit of Picasso's paintings at Avignon as a self-contained, insular universe: "the criss-crossing of the paintings made each one part of a continuous flow. . . . [T]he paintings brought together formed an entire world" (CS, p. 382).