



*Art and the Human Adventure*  
*André Malraux's Theory of Art*

*Derek Allan*

FAUX  
TITRE

# *Art and the Human Adventure*

## **FAUX TITRE**

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*Art and the Human Adventure*  
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Derek Allan



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“A form of humanism is still possible but we need to be quite clear that it is a tragic humanism.”

André Malraux, speech for UNESCO, 1946.



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Some of the ideas presented in this book are contained in published articles I have written on Malraux's works. In particular I would like to acknowledge permission to use material which has appeared in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *Journal of European Studies*, *French Forum*, *Nottingham French Studies*, *The Australian Journal of French Studies*, *Literature and Aesthetics*, and *Revue André Malraux Review*.



## English translations of titles of Malraux's works

A number of Malraux's works have not yet been translated into English. This list gives the English titles of those which have been translated (marked with an asterisk) and suggested translations for titles not yet available in English. The list is in order of publication in French and is limited to major works mentioned in this book.

<i>La Tentation de l'Occident</i>	1926	<i>The Temptation of the West*</i>
<i>D'une jeunesse européenne</i>	1927	<i>A Generation of European Youth</i>
<i>Les Conquérants</i>	1928	<i>The Conquerors*</i>
<i>La Voie royale</i>	1930	<i>The Royal Way*</i>
<i>La Condition humaine</i>	1933	<i>Man's Fate or Man's Estate*</i>
<i>Le Temps du mépris</i>	1935	<i>Days of Contempt*</i>
<i>L'Espoir</i>	1937	<i>Man's Hope*</i>
<i>Les Noyers de l'Altenburg</i>	1943	<i>The Walnut Trees of Altenburg*</i>
<i>La Psychologie de l'art</i>	1947-50	<i>The Psychology of Art</i> (in three volumes: <i>The Imaginary Museum, The Creative Act, The Twilight of the Absolute</i> )*
<i>Les Voix du silence</i>	1951	<i>The Voices of Silence</i> (first section also published separately in English as <i>The Museum without Walls</i> )*

<i>Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale</i>	1952-54	<i>The Imaginary Museum of World Sculpture</i> (in three volumes)
<i>La Métamorphose des dieux</i> , subsequently entitled <i>La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel</i> ( <i>The Supernatural</i> ) to distinguish it from the second two volumes – see below	1957	<i>The Metamorphosis of the Gods</i> *
<i>Antimémoires</i>	1967	<i>Antimemoirs</i> * (the first volume of the series <i>Le Miroir des limbes</i> – <i>The Mirror of Limbo</i> )
<i>La Tête d'obsidienne</i>	1974	<i>The Obsidian Head</i> (translated as <i>Picasso's Mask</i> )*
<i>L'Irréel</i>	1974	<i>The Realm of the Imaginary</i> (second volume of <i>The Metamorphosis of the Gods</i> )
<i>L'Intemporel</i>	1976	<i>The Undying</i> (third volume of <i>The Metamorphosis of the Gods</i> )
<i>L'Homme précaire et la littérature</i>	1977	<i>Precarious Man and Literature</i>

## Introduction

André Malraux was a well known name in the field of art theory in English-speaking countries in the 1960s and 1970s, the decades immediately following the publication of the English translations of two of his major works in the field, *Les Voix du silence* (*The Voices of Silence*) and *La Métamorphose des dieux* (*The Metamorphosis of the Gods*). One commentator at the time spoke of the “extravagant praise from some quarters” for Malraux’s philosophy of art and its “wide popularity”, while another, reviewing these two works in a leading academic journal, described Malraux as an “art critic whose influence and renown in recent years is perhaps matched only by that of Sir Herbert Read”.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, however, Malraux’s fortunes in English-speaking countries have shown a marked decline. While he remains a relatively familiar name as a novelist – especially for *La Condition humaine*, which won the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1933 – and as a pioneering Minister for Cultural Affairs under de Gaulle, his books on the theory of art have receded into a penumbra where they remain largely the preserve of specialists, principally, though not exclusively, in France. Today, despite the initial surge of popularity, Malraux is a name seldom mentioned in the deliberations of philosophers of art and aestheticians, and his books on the theory of art are often left unread.<sup>2</sup>

This book is a direct challenge to this state of affairs. In effect, it is a rediscovery of André Malraux’s works on the theory of art which, it argues, represent a vitally important contribution to modern thought, not only in relation to art but also to broader questions about the fundamental meaning of human life. In essence, the following chapters contend that Malraux offers a revolutionary understanding of the nature and significance of art and that, in doing so, he also provides a glimpse of a new humanism – a “tragic humanism” to borrow his own

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<sup>1</sup> The first comment is by Denis Boak, *André Malraux* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 196, 197. The second is by Bertrand Davezac, “Malraux’s Ideas on Art and Method in Criticism,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 22, no. 2 (1963): 177. Neither Boak nor Davezac shared the enthusiasm.

<sup>2</sup> There is, however, a section on Malraux in Chris Murray, ed., *Key Writers on Art: The Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 211–216.



phrase – which, unlike the optimistic idealisms inherited from the nineteenth century, is compatible with the agnosticism and disenchantment of the world in which we now live. Seen in this light, the neglect into which Malraux's writings on art have fallen is much to be regretted, and a central aim of the present work is to reverse this trend and highlight his importance as a thinker about art and its human significance.

Malraux wrote extensively about art. By the time of his death in 1976, his publications in the field included the three volume *La Psychologie de l'art*, a revised one-volume version of this work renamed *Les Voix du silence*, a book-length study of Goya, an illustrated study of world sculpture entitled *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale*, another three volume work, *La Métamorphose des dieux*, which considers developments in art from the earliest times through to the twentieth century, and a study of literature entitled *L'Homme précaire et la littérature* which appeared posthumously in 1977. There are also numerous occasional pieces such as prefaces, interviews, speeches (often connected with Malraux's responsibilities as Minister for Cultural Affairs), and scripts of television programs devoted to visual art.

The present study focuses principally – although not exclusively – on *Les Voix du silence* and the three volumes of *La Métamorphose des dieux*, which are the central pillars of Malraux's writing in this field, containing all the principal propositions on which his theory of art rests. In-depth critical studies of these works are regrettably scarce. Even in French, the number of books devoted to an analysis of Malraux's theory of art is very small, and in English they are almost non-existent. At the time of writing, there is only one book written in English – William Righter's *The Rhetorical Hero* – which is devoted more or less exclusively to Malraux's theory of art, and this was published in 1964, well before the appearance of the second two volumes of *La Métamorphose des dieux*, which are both important to a full understanding of his thinking, and also of *L'Homme précaire et la littérature*. Apart from Righter's book, the occasional journal article, and a chapter or two in works devoted to Malraux's literary *œuvre* as a whole, the English-only reader in search of critical commentary on Malraux's theory of art has simply nowhere else to go.

This situation reflects the general neglect of Malraux's books on art by academic critics and it is useful to look at this matter in a little more detail.

In France itself, where Malraux's name has long been well known as a novelist, the publication of his books on art naturally attracted attention, and commentators over the years have included such well-known names as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Bourdieu, and more recently Jean-François Lyotard. Early reviews were often favourable, one response in 1949 to *La Psychologie de l'art* claiming that the work was "one of Malraux's greatest books, and one of the greatest books in all modern literature".<sup>3</sup> Before long, however, a number of less friendly voices began to be heard. The fiercest opposition came from the field of art history and most notably from the art historian Georges Duthuit who, in mocking reference to Malraux's notion of *le musée imaginaire* ("the museum without walls" as it is often rendered in English), entitled his lengthy and vitriolic attack *Le Musée inimaginable*, accusing Malraux of nothing less than "negligence, ignorance and fraud".<sup>4</sup> Writers in the philosophy of art, where one might have expected keen interest, also showed a lack of enthusiasm, although in this case more by simply ignoring Malraux than by undertaking detailed critiques of his work (leading one French observer – an admirer of Malraux – to comment rather acidly that "academics with chairs in aesthetics exclude [Malraux] from their circle: a style too dazzling to be honest – and not enough academic credentials".<sup>5</sup>) There were, however, some openly hostile voices, easily matching Duthuit in stridency. In a remarkable passage in his book *Distinction*, published in 1979, Pierre Bourdieu announced

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<sup>3</sup> Gaëtan Picon, *L'Usage de la lecture* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1960), 134. The essay originally appeared in the journal *Liberté d'esprit* in 1949.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Duthuit, *Le Musée inimaginable*, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1956), "Avertissement" (Foreword).

<sup>5</sup> André Brincourt, *Malraux, le malentendu* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1986), 13. These comments describe the situation in the mid-1980s but there is little sign it has changed. A collection *L'Esthétique aujourd'hui?* published in 2006 by the University of Pau offers a series of articles on what are seen as key themes in contemporary aesthetics. There is no mention of Malraux. See Bernard Lafargue, ed., *L'Esthétique aujourd'hui?*, vol. 10, Figures de l'art (Université de Pau, 2006).

that the author of *Les Voix du silence* was guilty of tawdry pathos, arrogance, complacency, and insolence, and that his book combined

a cultural patchwork with Spenglerian metaphysical bric-a-brac, imperturbably associating the most contradictory intuitions, hasty borrowings from Schlosser or Worringer, rhetorically exalted platitudes, purely incantatory litanies of proper names, and insights which are called brilliant because they are not even false.<sup>6</sup>

Invective as agitated as this has generally been the exception, but it is nonetheless true that the academic disciplines in France that might have been expected to show the strongest interest in Malraux's books on art – art history and aesthetics – quickly turned their backs on him. He continues, of course, to have admirers, and the recent publication of his collected writings on art in the Gallimard Pléiade series is no doubt significant in that regard; but the unmistakable trend in relevant academic fields – which has no doubt influenced opinion more broadly – has been to treat him as a fringe-dweller. Malraux the novelist, particularly the author of *La Condition humaine*, continues to be more widely read in France than Malraux the author of *Les Voix du silence*, and the number of critical studies devoted to his theory of art remains very small.

In the English-speaking world, there is a similar tale to be told. As indicated, *The Voices of Silence* and the first volume of *The Metamorphosis of the Gods* (the other two volumes have not yet been translated) initially attracted strong interest, but it was not long before there was a marked change of heart. An early straw in the wind was a 1954 review of *The Voices of Silence* by the influential art historian and theorist E.H. Gombrich, which was subsequently reprinted in his widely-read collection *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*. Although Malraux could write with flair, Gombrich conceded, his thinking smacked of “adolescent” attitudes and was “nowhere imbued with that sense of responsibility that makes the scholar or the artist”. Indeed, Gombrich added, there was no evidence “that Malraux [had] done a day's consecutive reading in a library or that he [had] even tried to hunt up a

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 329. The original French version was published in 1979.

new fact”.<sup>7</sup> Others soon began to take a similar line, suggesting that while Malraux certainly wrote with the talent one might expect of a novelist, he offered nothing that one could seriously regard as a systematic theory of art. A review in the academic periodical *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* in 1957 concluded that *Les Voix du silence* was best regarded as a “prose poem six hundred fifty pages long” and as “the personal, emotional reverie of a gifted fiction-writer”;<sup>8</sup> and, in like vein, the academic critic Denis Boak, whose book in many respects reflects the views of other commentators at the time, recommended that *Les Voix du silence* be regarded as a “lyrical and imaginative, rather than rational” account of the world of art.<sup>9</sup> Returning to the fray in the late 1980s, E.H. Gombrich took these ideas a stage further, dismissing *The Metamorphosis of the Gods* as muddled late Romanticism and *The Voices of Silence* as a “dazzling piece of sophisticated double talk”.<sup>10</sup> Comments of this kind seem to have had lasting effects and academic discussion of Malraux’s theory of art soon became much less frequent. There has, it is true, been a fairly steady stream of books discussing Malraux’s *œuvre* as a whole, but the principal focus is usually on the novels and on the volumes making up the semi-autobiographical series, *Le Miroir des limbes*. As a theorist of art, Malraux’s standing in English-speaking environments has, as in France, become decidedly marginal, and the “influence and renown” of which the commentator mentioned earlier spoke in 1963 appears, for the time being at least, to have evaporated. Malraux’s concept of the *musée imaginaire* receives passing mention from time

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<sup>7</sup> E.H. Gombrich, “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 1978), 78–85, 78, 84. The review was first published in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1954 but is still widely quoted. A recent commentator describes it as a “now virtually canonical review of *Les Voix du silence*”. See the entry on Malraux by Geoffrey Harris in Murray, ed., 211. Gombrich’s views on Malraux are discussed at a number of points in the present study.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Munro, “The Voices of Silence,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15, no. 4 (1957): 481.

<sup>9</sup> Boak, 200. A similar view is expressed in William Righter, *The Rhetorical Hero: An Essay on the Aesthetics of André Malraux* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 62–63.

<sup>10</sup> E.H. Gombrich, “Malraux on Art and Myth,” in *Reflections on the History of Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 218–220, 218, 219.

to time, but beyond that he has ceased to be treated as an important figure. The absence of any major study in English since Righter's work in 1964 is, therefore, not at all surprising.

The present study, as intimated, offers a very different account of Malraux. In essence, the chapters to follow will argue that negative assessments such as those mentioned are seriously mistaken, and that far from providing a "personal, emotional reverie" or "sophisticated double talk", Malraux offers us a carefully considered, thoroughly coherent, and highly enlightening theory of art. More than that, and quite contrary to Bourdieu's claim (which he does not in fact support by any argumentation) that Malraux's thinking consists of mere "hasty borrowings", this study will contend that the theory of art presented in *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* is highly original and represents a quite revolutionary challenge to traditional thinking about the nature and significance of art. Finally – and this is perhaps the most important point – the claim will be that Malraux's account, unlike much that is written today in relevant fields such as aesthetics and art history, provides a powerful sense of the *human importance* of art. In an interview in 1952, he commented that "once the question 'What is art?' becomes serious, the question 'What is man?' is not far away".<sup>11</sup> And in fact, as we shall see, the answer he provides to the question "What is art?" is by no means framed simply in aesthetic terms – in terms limited to art alone. For Malraux, the significance of art is intimately connected to questions about the significance of man, and specifically, in the contemporary world, to an understanding of man he encapsulates in the phrase "the human adventure" – a concept which is a key topic in the chapters to follow. In short, the arguments advanced here unambiguously reject the kinds of dismissive assessments of Malraux's books on art mentioned above. Quite to the contrary, the claim will be that these works make a landmark contribution to our understanding of the nature and significance of art.

Why did Malraux's books on art suffer such a severe reversal of fortunes? One possible reason is that some commentators, aware that Malraux was known principally as a novelist, and held no official qualifications in the study of visual art, were predisposed to assume

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<sup>11</sup> André Malraux, "Entretien avec Gabriel Aubarède," *Les Nouvelles littéraires* 3 April (1952): 13.

that he could offer little more than an amateur understanding of his subject matter. There seems at least a hint of this thinking in claims of the kind that he lacked “that sense of responsibility that makes the scholar” and offered a “lyrical and imaginative, rather than rational” account of art. Another reason may be that Malraux’s books on art do not fall neatly into either of the principal academic discipline areas concerned with visual art – art history and aesthetics (the latter often called the philosophy of art<sup>12</sup>). In *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux*, theoretical discussion of the nature and significance of art is often linked closely to descriptions of concrete developments in the history of art, and at first sight this might seem somehow to be a “blend” of art history and aesthetics, thus hindering easy assimilation into either field. In addition, Malraux’s writings on art do not fit readily into either of the prevailing contemporary schools of thought in aesthetics itself – the “analytic” and the “continental” schools – and this may also have tended to marginalise him. Above all, however, it seems unfortunately true that Malraux’s books on art have simply not been read carefully enough – that, in the words of the French writer, André Brincourt, they have been “skimmed a lot but very little read”.<sup>13</sup> Far too frequently, critics have proffered assessments which do not accurately reflect what Malraux actually writes, leaving one with the uneasy feeling that, at best, he has been read in haste. A number of such cases are considered in the course of this study but it may be useful to give one example here.

In the course of a book concerning the relationship between art and time (a crucial topic for Malraux, as we shall see later) the philosopher of art Anthony Savile accuses Malraux of a “lackadaisical conflation of epistemology and ontology” because,

When speaking in [his novel] *La Voie Royale* of the status of succeeding generations’ appraisal of an artist’s work, [Malraux] says that “what interests me

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<sup>12</sup> The terms are used interchangeably in the present study.

<sup>13</sup> Brincourt, 120. Cf. the similar remark by another contemporary critic: “[Malraux’s writings on art] are more famous than familiar. Few people have taken the trouble to read them. They are most frequently admired or disdained from a distance – admired, one might say, at a respectful distance, or disdained at the same distance.” Henri Godard, *L’Expérience existentielle de l’art* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 11.

personally is the gradual change that comes over such work ... Every work of art, in fact, tends to develop into myth".<sup>14</sup>

Now, setting aside the question of whether or not the quoted words are sufficient to substantiate Savile's claim (which is by no means self-evident), the comment is suspect on at least two counts. First, although Savile attributes the statement to Malraux, it is in fact made by one of the characters in his novel, *La Voie royale*, and one cannot, of course, simply assume that a statement by a character in a work of fiction (where the issue in question is, in any case, of only passing relevance) necessarily provides a full and accurate reflection of the author's own views. Second, and most importantly in the present context, Savile makes his assertion *without any reference whatsoever*, here or elsewhere in his study, to any of Malraux's books on art, which were published some two decades after *La Voie royale* (but which predate Savile's own comment by many years, both in French and in English translation) even though it is precisely in those books that Malraux sets out his theory of art at length, and where the question of the relationship between art and time is a central element – and where, in addition, the proposition that every work of art "tends to develop into myth" plays no part at all.

It would be wrong to suggest that all criticisms of Malraux's theory of art are as cavalier – one is tempted to say lackadaisical – as this. Nevertheless, a tendency to base conclusions on skimpy evidence is by no means uncommon. Oddly enough, Malraux may to some extent have been a victim of his own success in this regard. His powerful, evocative style so often results in the striking phrase – the "quotable quote", so to speak – that, as one commentator observed as early as 1957, he "provides an attractive hunting ground for pillaging philosophers, scholars and critics".<sup>15</sup> The temptation has perhaps been to treat such phrases (the frequently quoted *musée imaginaire* is a prime example) as a kind of convenient summing-up of his theory of art as a whole and to neglect the more exacting task of studying his texts

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<sup>14</sup> Anthony Savile, *The Test of Time: An Essay in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 268. Savile's quote is only an approximate translation and omits some important phrases. As we shall see later, the same quote figured prominently in E.H. Gombrich's 1954 review of *Les Voix du silence*.

<sup>15</sup> John Darzins, "Malraux and the Destruction of Aesthetics," *Yale French Studies* 18 (1957): 107.

closely and in their entirety. The present study seeks to avoid this pitfall. Given the sheer volume of Malraux's writings in this field, it will not be possible to provide a detailed examination of every issue he discusses. The objective, nevertheless, is to provide a step by step exposition of the principal elements of his theory of art, supported by evidence from the texts themselves. The discussion will not, of course, be limited to this. It will also include an examination of a range of critical responses to the works concerned and, where space permits, comparisons between Malraux's thinking and that of other theorists. A close study of what he has actually written will, however, be a central element.

A brief word should be said about the way this study is organised. As mentioned, the theoretical question "What is art?" is, for Malraux, never entirely divorced from the history of art – from what art has been in the past and has become today. "There is no such thing as art in itself," he writes in *Les Voix du silence*, implying that art as a purely abstract concept, separable from its specific manifestations over time, is an intellectual fantasy.<sup>16</sup> The reasoning behind this claim is a matter for later chapters but one important consequence is that Malraux's exposition is often closely linked to specific developments in the history of art, and follows imperatives that are not always the same as those that might obtain if one were outlining a sequence of steps in an abstract argument quite separable from historical events. This has immediate implications for the present study, an important aim of which is, precisely, to explain the separate steps in Malraux's thinking, beginning with the fundamental propositions on which it rests. To carry out such an analysis, one is obliged to "dismantle" his account to some extent, and to treat as discrete elements ideas that he himself, following his own imperatives, often strove to keep together. As a general rule, the present study has sought to achieve a compromise between the requirements of a "step by step" analysis and the flow of Malraux's own argument, but the result has been that ideas are not always considered here in the same order as they appear in Malraux's works. Thus, for example, the explanation of his understanding of the

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<sup>16</sup> André Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l'art (I)*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 880. The *Ecrits sur l'art* form the fourth and fifth volumes of the *Œuvres complètes*.



relationship between art and time – his claim that “metamorphosis is the life of art” – is delayed here until Chapter Six, whereas in *Les Voix du silence* it is arguably implicit from the earliest pages; and the concept of the *musée imaginaire* is not discussed here until Chapter Seven although in *La Métamorphose des dieux*, for instance, it occurs in the introductory chapter. There is inevitably a risk that a “dismantling” process of this kind will, in Wordsworth’s phrase, “murder to dissect” – that is, deprive Malraux’s ideas of their strength and vitality by isolating them one from the other – and, wherever possible, attempts have been made to minimise this danger by highlighting the interconnections between the different elements. The reader is, nonetheless, urged to bear this methodological issue in mind and to have regard not only to the separate steps in the argument but also to their *cumulative* effect and their significance within Malraux’s thinking as a whole.

Some comment should be made about the scope of the term “art” in the chapters that follow. In the main, the study concentrates on visual art, as Malraux himself does in most of the works to be considered. It should not be assumed, however, that the theory of art to be examined here applies to visual art alone. There are probably three main reasons why Malraux chose to write principally about painting, sculpture and other forms of visual art. One was simply his own lifelong enthusiasm for these art forms, which dated from his adolescence. While literature was probably his dominant passion (he was, after all, a writer not a painter), visual art was, as his works quickly reveal, a field in which his knowledge was little short of encyclopaedic and his enthusiasm unmistakable. Second, he regarded twentieth century advances in the technologies of reproduction as a landmark development in the history of visual art (with photography, he wrote, “the plastic arts have invented their printing-press”<sup>17</sup>) and part of the attraction of writing about the topic was undoubtedly that it allowed him to take advantage of the possibilities offered by photographic reproduction to illustrate his arguments. And third, important aspects of Malraux’s theory of art are, as already indicated, closely linked to a sense of art’s history – its specific manifestations now and in the past – and visual art lends itself particularly well to an exposition of a theory of this kind simply because, compared with music

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

and literature, there is much more “history” to draw on – that is, more evidence that has survived for longer periods of time.<sup>18</sup>

That said, it should nevertheless be stressed that while *Les Voix du silence*, *La Métamorphose des dieux*, and most (though not all) of the works to be discussed here are concerned mainly with visual art, the theory of art Malraux develops in these works is, in its key elements, intended as a *general* theory, not one limited to visual art alone. It is certainly true that some aspects of Malraux’s account – most notably the historical developments discussed in Chapter Five – cannot simply be transposed without modification into the fields of literature or music. In its essentials, however, the theory he advances applies to art generally, not just to this or that art form. More will be said about this matter at relevant points in later discussion and from time to time attention will be drawn to similarities between propositions advanced in the works on visual art and those found in *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*. The issue deserves preliminary mention here, however, to forestall any conclusion that Malraux regards visual art as more important than other art forms, or that his theory of art has no relevance beyond visual art. Neither view would be correct.<sup>19</sup>

Something should also be said about André Malraux the person. Although he seems to have seen himself first and foremost as a writer, Malraux’s biography bears little resemblance to the stereotype of the French intellectual whose life is confined mainly to his or her study, or to a Left Bank café. His remarkably eventful life included an ill-starred expedition to Indochina in his early twenties in search of bas-reliefs from lost Khmer temples, active involvement in the anti-Fascist Popular Front in the 1930s and then in the Spanish Civil War, service in the French army at the outbreak of World War II, participation in

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<sup>18</sup> In the case of literature, as Malraux points out, there can also be obstacles posed by translation. Cf. his comment in *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*: “A great poetic or religious text *translated* seems to us to have suffered an amputation: poems translated lose what made them poems.” André Malraux, *L’Homme précaire et la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 234. Malraux’s emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> Henri Godard comments aptly: “Neither in *Les Voix du silence* nor in any of the essays that follow does Malraux draw a distinction between the visual arts and literature. He repeatedly goes back and forth from one to the other, confronting the first with the conclusions arrived at in the second.” Henri Godard, *L’Autre face de la littérature: Essai sur André Malraux et la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 11.

the French Resistance ending in arrest by the Gestapo, action in a French armoured brigade in the latter stages of the war, and ministerial posts in de Gaulle's governments, most importantly as a very active Minister for Cultural Affairs. As one might expect, this varied and colourful career has attracted the attention of some writers whose interest in Malraux lies more in what he did than in what he wrote, and biographies have, not surprisingly, become something of a minor industry.<sup>20</sup> This has occasionally had flow-on effects to commentaries on his thought, some critics even suggesting that what he wrote cannot be understood if separated from his life.<sup>21</sup> While agreeing that for Malraux, as for most writers, biographical events can occasionally be illuminating, the present study does not endorse such claims and will have little to say about his life. The reasons are straightforward and can be stated quite briefly. First, reading a writer's works through the prism of his or her biography has long been regarded as a questionable methodology even where works of fiction are concerned, and the caveat seems even more relevant where the issues in question are of a theoretical or philosophical nature as they will be here. Second, this approach would be more than usually hazardous in the present case. Involved as he was in some of the major historical events of his times, Malraux acquired both strong supporters and determined adversaries, and the resultant polarisation of opinion has inevitably coloured much of what has been written about his political commitments and his life generally. As one writer pithily puts it, Malraux can appear, depending on what one reads, as "a Communist, an Existentialist, a neo-Fascist at heart, an aesthete who has turned his back on reality, [or] an

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<sup>20</sup> Book-length studies principally biographical in orientation include: Robert Payne, *A Portrait of André Malraux* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970). Jean Lacouture, *André Malraux* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975). Axel Madsen, *Malraux, A Biography* (London: W.H. Allen, 1977). Curtis Cate, *André Malraux: A Biography* (London: Hutchinson, 1995). Jean-François Lyotard, *Signed, Malraux* trans. Robert Harvey. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Anissa Chami, *André Malraux: une passion* (Casablanca: A. Retnani Editions Eddif, 2001). Olivier Todd, *Malraux: une vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001). This list is not exhaustive; many other books and articles on Malraux include biographical material.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. "It is impossible to divorce Malraux's thought from the concrete situations in which it emerged without running the risk of betraying it." André Marissel, *La Pensée créatrice d'André Malraux* (Toulouse: Eduoard Privat, 1979), 7.

unofficial Catholic”<sup>22</sup> – and this list by no means exhausts the descriptions that have been applied to him. Predictably enough, it has now become quite difficult in many instances to separate fact from speculation – and sometimes from sheer invention – and much of what purports to be accurate biographical information about Malraux is of very doubtful reliability. The principal events of his life, such as those mentioned above, are not in doubt, but there is much that is uncertain and debatable, and possibly likely to remain so. Clearly, these are treacherous waters for a critic seeking to interpret Malraux’s writings in the light of his biography. This is not, of course, to suggest that there is no connection between what he thought and what he did. There is every reason to believe, for instance, that his pre-war participation in the Popular Front, his involvement in the Republican cause in Spain, his support for de Gaulle during the Cold War, and his activity as Minister for Cultural Affairs were expressions of deeply held convictions. (Those underlying his work as Minister for Cultural Affairs will become apparent in the following chapters.) These, however, are instances of the effect of his thought on his life, not the reverse. The present study will have little to say about Malraux’s life from either point of view. The focus here is placed squarely on his *thought* – in particular as it relates to art – which will be analysed and evaluated as it stands, in its own terms. References to Malraux’s biography will be very sparing.

The one important exception to this rule is an event that Malraux himself, in a rare comment about his personal life, describes as having played a “major part in his life”.<sup>23</sup> This episode, which took place in early 1934 and which is analysed in Chapter Two, merits preliminary mention here because it is relevant to the organisation of the present study as a whole.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Hollander, Introduction to André Malraux, *The Temptation of the West*, trans. Robert Hollander (New York: Jubilee Books, 1974), vi. Assessments sometimes vary within the one book. In the space of three pages, Herman Lebovics describes Malraux as a “posturing, often flamboyant artist” with “suspect personal qualities”, and an “amazing man” who as “a leader of comrades” inspired “deep admiration and loyalty”. Herman Lebovics, *Mona Lisa’s Escort: André Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 105–107.

<sup>23</sup> André Malraux, *Antimémoires, Œuvres complètes (III)*, ed. Marius-François Guyard, Jean-Claude-Larrat, and François Trécourt (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 72.

Malraux's published works prior to 1934 include a number of short pieces about particular works or artistic movements, one of which – *Des Origines de la poésie cubiste* – dates from as early as 1920 when he was only nineteen.<sup>24</sup> There is nothing in the works of this period, however, that resembles a general theory of art – a theory about the nature and significance of art as a form of human endeavour. In 1934, returning from a flight over Yemen where he and his aviator friend Corniglion-Molinier had been conducting an aerial search for the ruins of the palace of the Queen of Sheba, Malraux narrowly escaped death when the aircraft was caught in a storm over mountainous terrain in North Africa. This experience and its aftermath, the present study will argue, triggered major changes in his thinking, including his thinking about art, and from 1934 onwards, Malraux began, for the first time, to go beyond the relatively specialised topics addressed in his early essays to offer a fully-fledged *general theory* of art, in effect commencing work on the ideas that were to emerge after World War II in *La Psychologie de l'art* and the major works on art that followed. In short, the year 1934 was – or so this study will argue – a watershed in Malraux's intellectual development, and it was only after that date that his writing began to address the question “What is art?” in a full and comprehensive way.

These developments are reflected in the organisation of the present study. Chapter One briefly outlines certain key features in Malraux's thinking *prior* to 1934 – the period of his first three novels, *Les Conquérants*, *La Voie royale*, and *La Condition humaine*. The discussion of Malraux's theory of art itself does not begin until Chapter Two which analyses the implications of the 1934 experience and the birth of his concept of the human adventure to which his theory of art is closely linked. Readers who wish to proceed directly to these issues could, if they wished, pass over Chapter One, although there are important continuities between Malraux's thought pre- and post-1934 that throw light on his intellectual development as a whole; and, of course, his thinking pre-1934 is interesting in its own right, especially since this is the period in which *La Condition humaine* was written.

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<sup>24</sup> André Malraux, “Des Origines de la poésie cubiste,” *La Connaissance*, no. 1 (1920): 38-43.

All quotations from Malraux's works in the present study are given in English translation and a brief word should be said about the policy adopted in this respect. Three of Malraux's major works on art – *La Psychologie de l'art*, *Les Voix du silence*, and the first volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux* – have been translated into English by Stuart Gilbert. These translations have served an important purpose: they have brought a major part of Malraux's writings on art to English-speaking audiences and have done this in a very readable English which, generally speaking, captures the sense and spirit of Malraux's original. The translations are not, however, without blemish. There are instances where, perhaps out of an understandable desire to render Malraux's prose into idiomatic English, Gilbert strays a little too far from the original, and there is also the occasional clear mistake.<sup>25</sup> Thus, while I have often consulted Gilbert's versions, and have in many cases been happy to borrow his phraseology, the translations given here are in all cases my own, and in certain instances convey a shade of meaning different from those given by Gilbert. In a few instances, where I have considered the original French particularly important or difficult to translate accurately, I have provided it in parentheses. As mentioned earlier, the final two volumes of *La Métamorphose des dieux* have not yet appeared in English and all translations from these texts, together with those from Malraux's other works, are entirely my own.<sup>26</sup> As also noted earlier, Malraux's major writings on art have recently been re-published by Gallimard as part of the series of volumes making up his *Œuvres complètes* and these carefully edited versions, which include useful appendixes of "Notes and Variants", have been used here in preference to the original editions.

In keeping with Malraux's own practice, reproductions of works of art have been included at a number of points to illustrate issues discussed, and in several cases the works are the same as those chosen by Malraux himself. The selection is not, it should be said, intended to be

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<sup>25</sup> One, for example, is the omission of the sentence in Part III beginning "Imagine-t-on le dessin ...". Fortunately the sense of the paragraph remains reasonably clear despite the omission. See *Les Voix du silence*, 534.

<sup>26</sup> This is also the case for quotations from other writers where a French text is the source.

definitive in any way. As Malraux himself readily acknowledged,<sup>27</sup> responses to works of art vary considerably from person to person, and the choice one makes is ultimately one's own, not a rule laid down for others. Readers of this study may on occasion be able to think of works that illustrate the points being made quite as well, or better, than those chosen here.

In 1973, three years before his death, Malraux confided to a friend: "Of all my books, those I've written about art are certainly the ones that have been most seriously misunderstood."<sup>28</sup> The following chapters, which provide a detailed study of Malraux's books on art, together with a brief discussion of his intellectual preoccupations in the years prior to 1934, identify a number of serious misinterpretations of his thought – sometimes by figures as prominent as E.H. Gombrich, Maurice Blanchot, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty – suggesting that his observation was well founded. The argument to be advanced here is that the works in question, such as *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux*, make an extremely valuable contribution to our understanding of the significance of art, and, more broadly, of the contemporary human predicament. If the present study succeeds in giving some sense of the importance of this contribution, and in dispelling some of the misunderstandings, it will have amply served its purpose.

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<sup>27</sup> See page 236.

<sup>28</sup> André Brincourt, "Malraux: L'Art est une conquête", [http://www.andremalraux.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=308:malraux-l-art-est-une-conquete&catid=1:ils-ont-ecrit&Itemid=35&lang=fr](http://www.andremalraux.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=308:malraux-l-art-est-une-conquete&catid=1:ils-ont-ecrit&Itemid=35&lang=fr)  
Confirmed in correspondence from André Brincourt, 25 April 2006.

# Chapter One

## The Years before 1934

“*l’homme est mort, après Dieu*”<sup>1</sup>  
Malraux, *La Tentation de l’Occident*.

As indicated in the Introduction, one of the claims to be made in this study is that Malraux’s thinking about art was powerfully affected by an event that occurred in 1934. The claim is not that he had not thought or written about art before then, but that only after 1934 did he feel in a position to offer a *general* theory of art and to address the question “What is art?” in comprehensive way. The present chapter focuses on the period prior to 1934, and therefore considers a number of issues whose connection with the question “What is art?” may not be immediately apparent. In addition to its interest in its own right, however, Malraux’s thinking during this earlier period forms an important part of the background out of which his theory of art eventually emerged.

Apart from his first three novels – *Les Conquérants*, *La Voie royale* and *La Condition humaine* – Malraux’s works in the pre-1934 period include two important essays in which he analyses the condition of Western civilization – or, rather, of the Western psyche – as he saw it at the time. These two works – *La Tentation de l’Occident* and *D’une jeunesse européenne*, published in 1926 and 1927 respectively – provide a useful point of departure for an examination of Malraux’s thought in his early years and also reveal certain basic preoccupations that were to remain with him throughout his life.

A core claim of both essays is that Western civilization is in the grip of a profound cultural crisis stemming from a disintegration of the fundamental beliefs on which it had previously rested. Echoing

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<sup>1</sup> “*man is dead, after God*”. Malraux’s emphasis.



Nietzsche,<sup>2</sup> Malraux takes it to be self-evident that as a genuine value, as distinct from a pious convention, God is dead. The suggestion is not that religious faith has necessarily become impossible, and Malraux does not, any more than Nietzsche, engage in philosophical arguments designed to demonstrate the non-existence of God. He is simply taking stock of Western culture as he finds it, and concluding that, as a set of firmly held beliefs governing one's understanding of the world, one's own life, and relationships with others, Christianity has ceased to count. The institutions and the rituals survive in various forms, but simply as remnants, not as vital, integral parts of how life is lived.

The crisis is, however, deeper than this. The nineteenth century, Malraux argues, had replaced religious belief with various humanistic ideals. The vacuum left by a defunct Christian faith had been filled by a faith in man's *own* powers – in an unfolding story of human progress leading to a future paradise not in Heaven but here, among men, on earth. Driven largely by hopes placed in scientific advance, this belief in a “new humanity” (“L’Homme à naître”) as Malraux was later to term it,<sup>3</sup> looked forward to a new era of universal peace, freedom and prosperity, and did so, Malraux wrote in *D’une jeunesse européenne*, with

an enthusiasm ... that can only be compared, in its power and importance, to a religion. It manifests itself above all in a powerful attraction, a kind of passion, for Man, which takes the place previously occupied by God.<sup>4</sup>

This passion has, however, been dealt a severe blow. Historical events, particularly World War I, have mocked hopes for a radiant new world, and the “new humanity” has been found to wear a face very different from the one that had been expected.<sup>5</sup> Faith in science

<sup>2</sup> Whom Malraux seems to have read by the early 1920s. Cf. André Vandegans, *La Jeunesse littéraire d’Andre Malraux* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1964), 57, 58.

<sup>3</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 731. Stuart Gilbert’s translates the phrase “L’Homme à naître” as the “Coming Man” which is also a possibility. The French conveys the idea of Man “yet to be born”.

<sup>4</sup> André Malraux, “D’une jeunesse européenne,” in *Ecrits, Les Cahiers verts* (Paris: Grasset, 1927), 135–153, 138.

<sup>5</sup> “I’ve witnessed two or three displays of mass dementia in my time,” comments one of the characters in *La Voie royale* before going to his death on the Marne, “The Dreyfus Affair wasn’t bad, but this one beats them all hands down, in kind as well as size”. André Malraux, *La Voie royale, Œuvres complètes (I)*, ed. Pierre Brunel (Paris:

has been shaken because its potential to *destroy* as well as build has become painfully evident, and dreams of a glorious future have been so comprehensively dashed that, in the words of the Western correspondent in *La Tentation de l'Occident* (which takes the form of an exchange of letters),

There is no ideal to which we can sacrifice ourselves, because we know the lies they all contain, we who have no idea what truth is ... Motherland, justice, grandeur, truth – which of these images is not so soiled by human hands that it does not evoke in us the kind of ironic sadness we feel on seeing faces we once loved overtaken by age?<sup>6</sup>

Other forces have also been at work. In an interview in 1973 in which he described some of the early influences on his thinking, Malraux recalled the “violent sense of transience” he experienced after World War I:

In *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle*, Musset tells us: our parents rode out to do battle and here we are just sitting in a café. But even then there wasn't the feeling we experienced of discovering a world very different from the one that had preceded it, a world that would probably be very different from the one that would later succeed it.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to this acute sense of discontinuity, there had been a sudden broadening of the field of intellectual inquiry, ushering in a radically new attitude towards European civilization. “Our predecessors had lived in a privileged civilization, the Mediterranean civilization,” Malraux commented, “and they looked upon the rest as more or less barbaric. For Hegel, and even for a Marxist ... there is *one*

Gallimard, 1989), 375. Cf. also Malraux's comment in a 1974 interview: “A hundred years ago people said: ‘We won't solve the essential problems, but the twentieth century will.’ They lived in a kind of future *kermesse*: ‘Science will deliver all we need.’ Now all that's finished. People no longer believe that science will sort it all out. We have discovered that science has a negative side. We know that it's powerful enough to destroy humanity but not to furnish a human ideal [“former un homme”]. That's the drama of our times.” Michel Cazenave, *Les Réalités et les comédies du monde* (Paris: L'Herne, 1996), 20, 21.

<sup>6</sup> André Malraux, *La Tentation de l'Occident, Œuvres complètes (I)*, ed. Pierre Brunel (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 110, 111.

<sup>7</sup> Guy Suarès, *Malraux, celui qui vient: entretiens entre André Malraux, Guy Suarès, José Benjamin* (Paris: Stock, 1974), 16. Malraux's emphasis. The English translation of the work is: Guy Suarès, *André Malraux: Past, Present, Future* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974).

History – History with a capital H – just as there is only one civilization”. But all that had changed fundamentally:

A civilization that starts talking about Sumeria, Egypt, about India, Mexico, etc as data among other data, the data on which our understanding of man must be founded, that was certainly the first time. The scope of human knowledge had been vastly extended: ethnography, ethnology, all sorts of things were being brought into play. Art was discovering reproduction, and the totality of all these new techniques and kinds of knowledge was confronting us with civilizations whose very range seemed an enigma.<sup>8</sup>

Faith in an ideal future had thus been undermined not only by the ruinous course of historical events but also by powerful, new intellectual forces challenging the very notion of History as an intelligible unilinear development. Seen in this context, Malraux’s well known interest at the time in Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, which was attracting wide attention, is not difficult to understand. Spengler’s reputation as an historian has diminished greatly over the years and critics have at times referred to Malraux’s interest in him with a note of condescension.<sup>9</sup> It was not, however, the detail of Spengler’s historical account, or his theory of the cyclical rise and fall of cultures, that mattered to Malraux, but the fact that he had sought to construct a “discontinuous” history<sup>10</sup> – an account of the human past that abandoned the idea of a progressive development of one “privileged” civilization and replaced it with the concept of a plurality of

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<sup>8</sup> Suarès, *Malraux, celui qui vient*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Boak, 218, 219. Bourdieu’s reference quoted in the Introduction to Malraux’s alleged “Spenglerian metaphysical bric-a-brac” is another case in point.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Malraux’s comment in *La Métamorphose des dieux*: “‘Discontinuous’ history, the historical study of civilizations that was born in our century, involves a profoundly different idea of their past: for continuous history, Egypt is a childhood of humanity; for discontinuous history it is humanity of another epoch. The substitution of an intellectual discipline for dreams of noble savages, imaginary Persians, and the Chinese of ornaments, turns the very past it questions into a series of insistent questions for us.” André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II)*, ed. Henri Godard (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 34. As Malraux commented in his interview with Suarès, the idea is banal now, but it was not so then. Suarès, *Malraux, celui qui vient*, 16. (As indicated in the selected list of titles of Malraux’s works on page 13 of this study, *La Métamorphose des dieux* was subsequently entitled *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel* to distinguish it from the second two volumes. From this point onwards, the first volume will be referred to simply as *La Métamorphose des dieux*.)

cultures and histories, each viewed as a distinct entity. Whether or not one agreed with Spengler's prognostications about the future of the West (and there is no evidence that, either then or later, Malraux was particularly impressed by this aspect of Spengler's thinking), his book gave expression to a radically new "anthropological" view of human history that was no longer "one History – with a capital H" but which treated each culture, the West included, as "data among other data" thus linking up with the "vastly extended" scope of human knowledge coming from fields such as ethnography and ethnology.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Malraux's interest, as the quotation above suggests, was much less in history *per se* than in the implications of this new outlook for what he calls an "understanding of man". The sheer variety of cultural forms revealed by anthropology, together with the accelerated pace of change in the West itself, had created an all-pervasive sense of impermanence. Where amidst this new profusion of "data" was one to discover the enduring elements on which a general notion of man might be founded? If nineteenth century visions of a "new humanity" had been gravely wounded on the battlefields of World War I, confrontation with this bewildering variety of cultural forms was their *coup de grâce*. Western culture suddenly found itself bereft of any fundamental value. The question was no longer simply the "death of God" but also, and more immediately, the collapse of the optimistic faith in Man that had taken the place of religious belief. As Ling, the Chinese correspondent in *La Tentation de l'Occident*, comments to his Western counterpart,

Absolute reality for you was God; then man. But *man is dead*, after God, and you are now engaged in an anguished search for something to which you can assign his strange inheritance.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> As Armand Hoog has pointed out, one ethnologist who was particularly influential at the time was the German, Leo Frobenius, whose studies of African cultures had stressed the fundamental differences in outlook between African tribal cultures and the West. Malraux told Hoog that Frobenius was the model for the anthropologist, Möllberg, in *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg*, who expresses very similar ideas. Armand Hoog, "Malraux, Möllberg and Frobenius," in *Malraux, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R.W.B. Lewis (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 86–95, 92, 93.

<sup>12</sup> *La Tentation de l'Occident*, 100. Emphasis in original. Malraux's theme of the death of man seems to have been an early influence on Louis Althusser and Michel

There is no mistaking the seriousness with which Malraux views this development. Western culture, he observes, has always valued lucidity: it has constantly striven to “provide an intelligible image of the world”<sup>13</sup> – a characteristic he highlights by a comparison with Chinese culture which “knows and *feels* that every human action, great or small, brings in its train a hidden world of ramifications without number”.<sup>14</sup> The collapse of Christianity, and then of the replacement faith in a “new humanity”, has left the West without any such sustaining image. Reality, the European correspondent in *La Tentation de l’Occident* agrees, has become “anarchic” and Europe “is now dominated by the idea of being unable to grasp a reality of any kind”.<sup>15</sup> This is not just an intellectual problem – an issue of merely philosophical concern. As we shall see throughout this study, Malraux is not, as a rule, interested in ideas simply for their own sake: he is interested in the part they play – for good or ill – in individual human lives. The lack of any “intelligible image of the world” means that men and women lack any fundamental system of belief that might give meaning to their lives, leaving them, as he commented in an interview in 1926, with a world “which has no other aim but its material development”, and “reasons for living of the least admirable kind”.<sup>16</sup> The implications, he argues in *D’une jeunesse européenne* (in a comment that, given that World War II was scarcely more than a decade away, seems more than a little prescient) are essentially destructive. “What do we see,” he asks,

in this young generation scattered across Europe, united by a kind of unacknowledged fraternity? A lucid determination to demonstrate its strength despite its lack of belief; but there is nothing in that but weakness and fear. The present century, which is still haunted by so many echoes of the past, is unwilling to admit that its state of mind is nihilistic, destructive and fundamentally negative.<sup>17</sup>

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Foucault. See David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), esp. 33, 34, 89, 90.

<sup>13</sup> *La Tentation de l’Occident*, 95.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 67. Malraux’s emphasis – which is intended to make it clear that he is not speaking simply of ideas but also of emotional states.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>16</sup> André Malraux, “André Malraux et l’Orient, *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 31 July 1926,” in *Œuvres complètes (I)*, ed. Pierre Brunel (Paris: Gallimard, 1989) 114.

<sup>17</sup> “D’une jeunesse européenne,” 148.

Thus far, this account of Malraux's early thinking has been in general accord with those offered by other commentators.<sup>18</sup> There are minor differences in emphasis, and the notion of Man has not always been explicated in quite the way it has here, but there is broad agreement that the essays under discussion describe a Western civilization in a state of cultural crisis resulting from the collapse of Christian faith and of the belief in Man that had filled the resultant vacuum.<sup>19</sup> Our attention now turns to the closing sections of *D'une jeunesse européenne* and to the first three novels, and from this point onwards critical accounts tend to vary more noticeably, the following explanation itself diverging in important respects from much that has been written about the works concerned.

Critics have often suggested that *La Tentation de l'Occident* and *D'une jeunesse européenne* are both fundamentally negative works which, while offering a diagnosis of the intellectual anarchy afflicting

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<sup>18</sup> The account is also similar to that provided by the novelist Roger Martin du Gard who met Malraux at a conference at Pontigny in the late 1920s. In his journal, Martin du Gard gives a description of Malraux which includes this passage:

“Among the theoretical ideas [Malraux] advanced, I noted this:

‘Nietzsche represents the suppression of the idea of God, which he replaced with the idea of man; and at the time everyone accepted this notion of man. Today, one could go further. There is a form of atheism that can go beyond God and encompass man as well. One can quite sensibly assert that everything up to the present that has depended on the notion of man is now null and void, because the notion is without any real value. The modern mind refuses to base anything on the idea of man, on the idea of human permanence.’

In response to the objection: ‘But every civilization is based on the idea of human permanence,’ he replied:

‘That remains to be seen.’”

Henri Godard, ed., *L'Amitié André Malraux. Souvenirs et témoignages* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 53, 54. Assuming Martin du Gard's report to be accurate, it is interesting to note that Malraux seems to include Nietzsche among the representatives of the idea of man that he considers defunct. The significance of Malraux's reply “That remains to be seen” will emerge in the course of the present study.

<sup>19</sup> Some critics rightly draw attention to the collapse of individualism which Malraux also stresses. Essentially, however, he sees this as a late manifestation of the same belief in Man we have considered. He writes, for instance, that “All the passion the nineteenth century attached to Man ended in a vehement affirmation of the pre-eminence of the self”. Malraux, “André Malraux et l'Orient, *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 31 juillet 1926,” 114. Discussion of this issue has been omitted for the sake of brevity.

Western civilization, offer no alternative – no possible way forward.<sup>20</sup> This proposition is perhaps sustainable in the case of *La Tentation de l'Occident* but it is much less so for the second essay where, in some brief but highly significant closing remarks (which most critics seem to have overlooked), Malraux begins, for the first time, to outline the features of a new direction he believes Western culture to be taking – a new “intelligible image of the world”.

His central claim is that the West is beginning to give priority to the “possible” and the “provisional” over the fixed and the permanent, and that the challenge now is “to find a way of bringing man into accord with his thinking without requiring him to conform to an idea formulated *a priori*”.<sup>21</sup> The world, Malraux writes, is beginning to resemble “an infinity of possibles”, an “immense interplay of relationships, which no one any longer attempts to transform into something static because it is in the very nature of such relationships to change and renew themselves endlessly”. One cannot yet predict where this tendency will lead but

It seems as if the West is beginning to create for itself a metaphysic in which there is no longer any fixed point, like its conception of the physical world.

Elaborating briefly, he adds that such a metaphysic would imply

A mental and emotional outlook constantly moving, changing, establishing new relationships and being born anew, linked to forms of human experience in which anything that cannot be directly translated into concrete action, or into numbers, no longer plays any part ...<sup>22</sup>

Brief and abstract though they are, these remarks provide a vital clue to the next stage of Malraux’s intellectual development. Two key

<sup>20</sup> Some have even suggested that these early essays indicate a desire to abandon Europe for Asia. See for example, David Wilkinson, *Malraux, an essay in political criticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard, 1967), 19, 23. W.M. Frohock, *André Malraux and the Tragic Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford, 1952), 30, 33. The evidence for this conclusion is scant. It is also worth noting Malraux’s comment at the time after his return from South East Asia: “To escape from the rhythm of our own culture and look at with a disinterested curiosity might well seem to signal a condemnation of it ... But such a condemnation is impossible: our civilization is driven by our needs, whether they are commendable or not”. Malraux, “André Malraux et l’Orient, *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 31 juillet 1926,” 114.

<sup>21</sup> “D’une jeunesse européenne,” 150.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 152, 153.

points stand out. First, there is a strong emphasis on the idea of change, recalling Malraux's comment quoted earlier in which he speaks of the "violent sense of transience" he experienced after World War I. Here, in the conclusion of *D'une jeunesse européenne*, he appears to be asserting that, in the face of a world of constant change, Western civilization will require a means of achieving a grasp on things and events (a "metaphysic") that will *itself* need to be free to change constantly – free of any "fixed point". Second, the tenor of the remarks suggests that Malraux is not speaking solely about the realm of ideas – for example, of philosophical or political thought.<sup>23</sup> His "metaphysic in which there is no longer any fixed point" also encompasses man's *psychological* life – his "mental and emotional outlook"<sup>24</sup> – which, no less than the realm of thought, will be "constantly moving, changing, establishing new relationships and being born anew". This immediately explains why Malraux's next step is to develop his thinking through the vehicle of the novel. He is in search of a new "intelligible image of the world" but this will not simply be a set of abstractions; it also calls for a human psychology – an *emotional* life – adapted to a world of constant change. Malraux is, in effect, foreshadowing the features of what one might describe as a new "human type" – a complex of mental and emotional experience no longer based on a fixed ideal (such as the shattered dream of a "new humanity") but which, while ceding nothing of Western culture's demand for lucidity, can live and thrive in a world in which all fixed points of reference have been discarded.

How is this to be achieved? The answer is contained in the remarks just considered. The new mental and emotional outlook will be "linked to forms of human experience in which anything that cannot be directly translated into concrete action, or into numbers, no longer plays any part". Again the statement is brief, and its implications are

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<sup>23</sup> If he were, one might perhaps be tempted to compare his comments here with later thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard, who rejects "grand narratives" in the context of historical and social thought. The compass of Malraux's thinking is, however, broader than this, taking in the realm of individual experience as well. See Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), esp. 31–41.

<sup>24</sup> The French text reads: "un domaine de l'esprit et de la sensibilité".



not spelt out, but the general intent is clear. Meaning and intelligibility will derive exclusively from the transitory perspectives of the practical *act*. The new reality for the West – the antidote to an anarchic state of mind which is “nihilistic, destructive and fundamentally negative” – will be based on a thoroughgoing pragmatism, a rejection of any truth that is not based on what can be seen, touched, and visibly changed.

In 1928, only a year after the appearance of *D'une jeunesse européenne*, Malraux's first novel, *Les Conquérants*, was published. In an article in *Partisan Review* in 1948, which still provides one of the most insightful commentaries on Malraux's early novels, the Italian critic Nicola Chiaromonte described the central character of *Les Conquérants*, the revolutionary leader Garine, as “the man of action unleashed”.<sup>25</sup> Disenchanted with nineteenth century ideals of Man, Garine will have no truck with optimistic dreams of a glorious human future or with a fixed ideal of any kind. He insists, nevertheless, on lucidity – an intelligible image of the world – and finds this lucidity *through action*, the locus of which, in his case, is an uprising against colonial powers in Canton. The character of Garine has been a source of some controversy among Malraux's critics and it is not difficult to see why. He is a committed revolutionary, deeply involved in collective struggle, yet he possesses no “theory of history” and is as indifferent to Marxist “scientific socialism” as he is to more moderate, democratic socialist ideals. The paradox is not, however, difficult to resolve. As Chiaromonte points out, Garine's link to the revolution is not through ideas but through action. He is the revolutionary leader for whom the revolution is, first and last, a *practical* struggle, a world of tangible problems and possibilities, a joint combat against a specific enemy at a particular point in time. His world is certainly transient – a world lacking any “fixed point” – and today's allies may well be tomorrow's enemies if their policies happen to obstruct the continuing

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<sup>25</sup> Nicola Chiaromonte, “Malraux and the Demons of Action,” in *Malraux, A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood, Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 96–116, 102. Chiaromonte included portions of this article in his book *The Paradox of History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970). This work was republished in 1985 by the University of Pennsylvania Press with a foreword by Joseph Frank and a postface by Mary McCarthy.

success of the insurrection.<sup>26</sup> It is nevertheless an *intelligible* world (as Malraux requires) because as long as the struggle continues (defeat, of course, will bring Garine's world to an end<sup>27</sup>), the changing practical situations necessarily have an immediate and concrete significance, for good or ill, which none but the unrealistic dreamer could deny. Action – action *itself* – has become a source of meaning in the sense that it rescues experience from senseless disorder and transforms it into something comprehensible. To borrow Chiaromonte's words again (which echo Malraux's own formulation), Garine has resolved “to reject any proposition which cannot be directly translated into a force, an act, or a series of acts”.<sup>28</sup> Or as Malraux commented when addressing a meeting of intellectuals who had gathered to discuss *Les Conquérants* shortly after its publication,

Garine does not place himself in the service of an ideal [“une image”] but of a concrete revolutionary movement ... He knows nothing about the future of the Revolution, but he knows what will flow from this or that concrete decision. He's not remotely interested in an earthly Paradise. I can't emphasise enough that it's not a question of what I've called the mythology of the end-goal [“du but”]. Garine's task is not to define the Revolution, but to make it.<sup>29</sup>

Malraux had read widely even at this early period of his life and it is possible that the character of Garine owes something to philosophers such as Nietzsche for whom the link between truth and the act

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<sup>26</sup> As indeed occurs, for example, when Garine decides to oppose his former ally, the Social Democrat leader, Tcheng-Daï, when the latter's polices begin to obstruct the progress of the revolutionary movement. André Malraux, *Les Conquérants, Œuvres complètes (I)*, ed. Pierre Brunel (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 203–206.

<sup>27</sup> Which is why he says to the narrator, during a period of sickness which hospitalises him, “When I lose contact with action, when I am separated from it, it's my lifeblood ebbing away.” *Ibid.*, 250. Chiaromonte correctly comments: “In Malraux, when defeat comes, darkness is complete.” Chiaromonte, “Malraux and the Demons of Action,” 106.

<sup>28</sup> Chiaromonte, “Malraux and the Demons of Action,” 114.

<sup>29</sup> André Malraux, “La Question des ‘Conquérants,’” *Variétés*, no. 15 October (1929): 293. The capital letters on “Revolution” and “Paradise” appear in the original version in *Variétés* but have been replaced by lower case in the Pléiade *Œuvres complètes*. The original seems preferable. Malraux is contrasting the revolution as concrete collective action with “the Revolution”, and its promise of an “earthly Paradise”, as pre-conceived ideals.

is a prominent theme.<sup>30</sup> As indicated, however, Malraux's concern in *Les Conquérants* is not simply philosophical analysis. His aim is to build on the abstract formulae contained in the concluding section of *D'une jeunesse européenne* and to reveal, via the characters in a novel, what a life based solely on the test of the act would look like. Garine is the embodiment of a human type who thrives in a world lacking any "fixed point" (such as the earthly Paradise of socialist ideals). He is Malraux's answer – or at least his answer at this time – to a world "dominated by the idea of being unable to grasp a reality of any kind", a world without God and without a substitute faith in a "new humanity". As an expression of a specifically Western frame of mind, Garine insists on lucidity in the sense indicated earlier, but it is the lucidity of someone who has lost all faith in the realm of the *idea*, and who will refuse to place his trust in anything which, as Malraux had written in *D'une jeunesse européenne*, "cannot be directly translated into concrete action". In Chiaromonte's apt words, Garine is the embodiment of "that modern pragmatic impulse which tends to see in the world of action the only reality".<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> There also seem to be affinities between this early period of Malraux's thought and Sartre's existentialism (which, of course, emerged somewhat later) – particularly between Malraux's aim of "bringing man into accord with his thinking without requiring him to conform to an idea formulated *a priori*" and Sartre's argument that "existence precedes essence". However, Sartre's interest is primarily philosophical, and especially, one might argue, ethical. Thus he can write, for example: "If existence really does precede essence, there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom ... So in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses". Malraux's interest, by contrast, is, as we have seen, in exploring the implications of such thinking as a *human psychology* – as a new "human type". See Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism," in *Jean-Paul Sartre; Essays in Existentialism*, ed. Wade Baskin (New York: Citadel Press, 1993), 31–62, 37. Affinities with Kierkegaard and Heidegger are noticeable as well, although there seems to be no evidence of any direct influence at this stage in Malraux's life.

<sup>31</sup> Chiaromonte, "Malraux and the Demons of Action," 114. Since Garine and Kyo (the central character in *La Condition Humaine*) are involved in revolutionary uprisings, some critics have suggested that they are committed to a Marxist theory of history, or at least to some form of socialist doctrine. Dennis Boak writes, for example, that a "socialistic faith" underpins Malraux's earlier novels, an interpretation that is obviously contrary to the account offered in the present analysis. (Boak, 142.) Yet even setting aside the arguments advanced here, such interpretations overlook the

The present study does not seek to provide a detailed examination of Malraux's early novels. They are included here, as indicated, to illustrate the main features of Malraux's thinking in the years prior to 1934. To present a more rounded account of Malraux's intellectual position in these years, and to help explain the nature of the change that took place subsequently, it is, however, useful to say a little more about the next two novels, *La Voie royale* and *La Condition humaine*.

Essentially, these two works are further explorations of the same pragmatic impulse that lies at the heart of *Les Conquérants*. Action continues to be the protagonists' sole source of meaning – one might well call it their “value” in the sense that, at any point in time, it selects and “values” what is important (and disregards what is unimportant) and thus gives shape and meaning to an otherwise chaotic and unintelligible world. In his next two novels, however, Malraux begins to paint a more comprehensive picture by delving more deeply into what one might call action's “negative” aspects. The term requires a little explanation. There is no suggestion in any of the novels under discussion that Malraux somehow concludes that action “fails” as a value and should be replaced with something else. In each of the three novels, he is seeking to delineate the features of a life based solely on the test of the act, and at no point does he resile from that. He is aware, nonetheless, that while the pragmatic impulse in question can certainly make sense of an otherwise senseless world, it can do so

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fact that both Garine and Kyo expressly disclaim belief in any historical doctrine, including Marxism. Their support for Communist uprisings, they explain, derives from what might be termed the “Leninist dimension” of Marxism – the *technique* of revolution, the capacity to create and sustain a mass collective movement. I have discussed this issue in more detail in: Derek Allan, “The Commitment to Action in *La Condition Humaine*,” *French Forum* 6, no. 1 (1981): 64–66, and Derek Allan, “Finding the Battle: History and the Individual in ‘Les Conquérants’ and ‘La Condition humaine’,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* XXVII, no. 2 (1990): 176–177. Apart from Chiaromonte, one of the rare critics to grasp the point at issue was Malraux's friend, Bernard Groethuysen, who pointed out in an early review that the characters in *Les Conquérants* embody a will to “make history” and to “act in a given moment in a specific place ...” Bernard Groethuysen, “Le Roman: Les Conquérants; Royaume farfelu,” *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 32, no. 187 (1929): 559, 560. Like Garine and Kyo, Malraux himself, as he said on several occasions, was never committed to Marxism as an historical doctrine – as a “scientific socialism”. Cf. for example, Michel Cazenave, *Malraux: le chant du monde* (Paris: Bartillat, 2006), 72, 73.

only under certain conditions and within certain limitations. Thus, while central figures such as Garine in *Les Conquérants* and Kyo Gisors in *La Condition humaine*, illustrate the potentialities and strengths of action as a source of meaning, other characters in these early novels provide the vehicles through which the limitations and vulnerabilities of this intensely pragmatic view of life can be revealed. These characters – Perken in *La Voie royale*, the terrorist Tchen, and the “baron” de Clappique in *La Condition humaine* are prominent examples – mark out the *limitations* of action, the kinds of expectations it *cannot* fulfil without radically distorting the meaning it provides. They portray the new metaphysic of action in reverse, so to speak, by exposing its potential, in certain cases, to falsify and negate.

One of these limitations is particularly relevant to the present study because it helps reveal the significance of the change that took place in Malraux’s thinking after 1934. As we have noted, the meaning action confers on things and events is particular and transient. It gives shape and form to the practical “here-and-now” – to the situation brought about, for example, by the threat of an attack by a hostile army (one of the situations in *Les Conquérants*) or by the prospect of a brutal repression at the hands of former allies (a major event in *La Condition humaine*). Action can certainly reveal these truths but – and this is the vital point – they are only “practical” truths, truths “for the present moment”, lasting no longer than the situation that gave them birth. The point is expressed admirably by Albert Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* in a section of that work in which he describes “The Conqueror”, a figure almost certainly modelled on Malraux’s “men of action” such as Garine and Kyo.<sup>32</sup> The Conqueror explains:

... I have no interest in ideas or eternity. The only truths I know are those that I can reach out and touch with my hand. Those are the truths I depend on. That is why you can build nothing on me. Nothing of the conqueror endures ...<sup>33</sup>

It follows from this that while action can give meaning to specific situations, and even (as in Kyo’s case) to an individual’s life as a whole if that life is committed to the action unreservedly, it can never

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<sup>32</sup> Malraux’s early novels appear to have been a strong influence on this section of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Cf. Albert Camus, *Essais, Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 1410, 1445.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

give meaning to *human life as a whole* – to human existence as such. Action speaks only of the world that “I can reach out and touch with my hand”; it has nothing to say about the universal – about life “in general”.

This limitation is vividly illustrated in *La Condition humaine* by the powerfully drawn figure of the terrorist, Tchen, the key feature of whose character is, precisely, a refusal to accept it. Central to Tchen’s character is an attempt to *divorce* action from its ineradicable quality of transience, to force it go *beyond* the immediate situation and compel it to speak of “life as a whole” – of what is true not just here and now but at all times and all places. Portrayed – significantly – as someone who received a religious education but who has subsequently lost his faith,<sup>34</sup> Tchen is unable to rest content with a reality bounded by the limits of the particular collective event of which he is a part, thirsting instead for the meaning of life as an all-embracing unity. Action in his case is no longer called upon simply to illuminate the sense and purpose of what a specific group of men and women are doing in a particular context but to reveal what *all* men and women are doing “in the world” – their very reason for being. The consequence is a profound distortion of the truth action provides, leading in Tchen’s case to a violent fanaticism, and ending, by a strange but inescapable logic, in his death as a suicide terrorist. This is not the place for an extended discussion of Tchen,<sup>35</sup> but his significance for present purposes is clear. The “man of action”, the new human type of Malraux’s first three novels, may certainly build order out of chaos (no small achievement, after all, in a world “dominated by the idea of being unable to grasp a reality of any kind”); but the meaning he discovers will always be inseparable from the particular enterprise – such as the revolutionary movement – in which he acts. Collective action can give him a sense of belonging to a particular shared endeavour, but it will never unite him with *all* men and women at all times – with a larger entity called humanity, or “man”.

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<sup>34</sup> André Malraux, *La Condition humaine, Œuvres complètes (I)*, ed. Pierre Brunel (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 555, 556.

<sup>35</sup> I have analysed Tchen’s character in Derek Allan, “The Psychology of a Terrorist: Tchen in ‘La Condition humaine,’” *Nottingham French Studies* 21, no. 1 (1982): 48–66.

It is in this sense, precisely, that Malraux's thinking changes so significantly after 1934. From then on, for reasons to be considered in the next chapter, he suddenly found himself in a position to formulate a general concept of man, of human life as a whole – of “the human adventure” to adopt his own term. (And the significance of *that* development, to anticipate a little further, was that for Malraux, as noted earlier, the questions “What is man?” and “What is art?” are closely linked.) None of the basic positions described in the present chapter were to be abandoned. There would be no question of returning to nineteenth century teleologies – to the various images of humanity's ideal future – and still less to some form of religious belief. There would be no turning away from the “vastly extended scope of human knowledge” – the data from anthropology, for example, which had so seriously challenged the idea of “one History” and deepened “the enigma” of man. And there would be no question of repudiating the proposition in *D'une jeunesse européenne* that a viable “metaphysic” must henceforth be free of any fixed point – any “idea formulated *a priori*”. The decisive transformation that took place in 1934, however, was that, quite unexpectedly, Malraux encountered a notion of man that fully *accepted* these limitations – a conception of human life as a whole that succeeds precisely where Tchen's aspiration had failed because it is compatible with meaning that is wholly transient. This is the issue to which we now turn.

## Chapter Two

### The Human Adventure

“Tout cela aurait pu ne pas être, ne pas être ainsi.”<sup>1</sup>  
Berger, *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*.

There are two major questions now waiting to be addressed: What was the nature of the change that took place in Malraux’s thought in 1934? And how, precisely, did that change affect his thinking about art? The first question is discussed in the present chapter; the second is reserved for the next. The present chapter describes the event that brought about the change in question, and examines its implications. Suddenly and unexpectedly, as we shall see, Malraux found himself in a position to answer the question “What is man?” and to do so in a way that satisfied the fundamental requirement he had accepted in *D’une jeunesse européenne* – that a new Western “intelligible image of the world” should be compatible with continual change and be able to “[bring] man into accord with his thinking without requiring him to conform to an idea formulated *a priori*”. The previous chapter revealed that action had provided Malraux with a value (in the sense of a source of meaning) that met this criterion. The present discussion will show that the response Malraux found to the question “What is man?” is of the same basic nature: it is a revelation of the significance of man which accepts that his significance is wholly transient.

Sudden, decisive intellectual developments of the kind to be analysed here are probably less unusual than they might at first seem. With little difficulty, one can think of a number of writers whose lives include one particular incident which, more than any other, appears to have exerted a profound and lasting influence on their thought – an experience so powerful in its effects and so fertile in its implications that it seems almost to have the quality of a revelation. For Rousseau, as he relates in his *Confessions*, an experience of this kind occurred

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<sup>1</sup> “All this might not have been, might not have been as it is.”



one day in 1749 as he was walking to the Vincennes prison to visit Diderot. Reading the *Mercure de France* as he walked along, he noticed the subject of the Dijon Academy's essay prize for the coming year: "Has the progress of the sciences and arts done more to corrupt morals than improve them?" "The moment I read this," Rousseau writes, "I beheld another universe and I became another man".<sup>2</sup> For Dostoyevsky, the years of exile in Siberia seem to have had consequences which, while more gradual, were no less far-reaching.<sup>3</sup> For Kant, a pivotal event, albeit of a less dramatic kind, was his encounter with Hume's writings who, he writes, "first interrupted my dogmatic slumber" and gave him his "first spark of light".<sup>4</sup> In André Malraux's case, an experience with similarly profound effects occurred one day in early 1934 after a flight over Yemen in a light aircraft with his aviator friend, Corniglion-Molinier. On the return leg, as they crossed Tunisia, Malraux and his companion were caught in a violent electrical storm and only narrowly escaped crashing. Shortly afterwards, following a safe landing at Bône (now Annaba) in Algeria, Malraux abruptly found himself once again amidst the peaceful, ordinary scenes of everyday life and encountered, for the first time, the experience he termed "the return to the earth" ("le retour sur la terre"). In his *Antimémoires* years later, he described the experience as one "that has played a major part in my life, and that I have tried to express a number of times".<sup>5</sup> It was, he adds, "transposed directly" into *Le*

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions, Œuvres complètes (I)*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 351. Rousseau describes the event in more detail in a letter to Malesherbes where he speaks of his mind being "suddenly dazzled by a thousand lights" and of "hosts of powerful ideas flooding into my mind all at once with such force and confusion that I was thrown into an inexpressible turmoil." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "À M. de Malesherbes," in *Œuvres complètes (I)*, 1135.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lev Shestov, "On the 'Regeneration of Convictions' in Dostoyevsky," in *Speculation and Revelation* (Chicago: Ohio University Press, 1982), 145–170.

<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics," in *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, ed. Henry Allison and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 57. See also, Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 230, 231.

<sup>5</sup> In the original French: "C'est là que j'ai rencontré pour la première fois l'expérience du 'retour sur la terre' qui a joué dans ma vie un grand rôle, et que j'ai plusieurs fois tenté de transmettre. Je l'ai transposée directement dans *Le Temps du mépris*." *Antimémoires*, 72. In the final volume of *Le Miroir des limbes*, (*Lazare*), Malraux com-

*Temps du mépris*, his fourth novel, which was published the following year. In different guises, it was to reappear several times in later works including his final novel, *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg*, and in the *Anti-mémoires* themselves.

Before proceeding to a closer analysis, some preliminary comment is in order. One consequence of the experience in question, we have said, was that in addition to providing Malraux with a response to the question “What is man?”, it also allowed him to answer the question “What is art?” Precisely why this is so forms the subject of the next chapter, but one might perhaps be tempted to dismiss such a proposition out of hand immediately as too far-fetched to warrant serious consideration. What conceivable connection could there be, after all, between a narrow escape from death and a theory of art? A complete answer to this question must await an analysis of the event itself, but some brief, preliminary observations about the general nature of the discipline of aesthetics may help dispel concerns of this kind.

Setting aside Greek precursors, mainstream Western thinking about aesthetics had its beginnings in the eighteenth century, the philosopher traditionally associated with its inception being Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762) who is usually credited with the invention of the term. Aesthetics (or the philosophy of art, to give it its alternative modern name) is therefore a child of Enlightenment thought and owes its origins to that vast re-examination of the foundations and scope of human knowledge that took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries following the collapse of theological explanations. One important consequence of this, as Ernst Cassirer has aptly noted,<sup>6</sup> was that questions about the function of art took their cue from the dominant intellectual concerns of the day – concerns essentially about the nature of human understanding and the part played by the different forms of cognition in the new post-religious models of human nature that were coming into being. Where art was concerned, the answers to

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ments that the encounter with the storm, and certain similar events, including the tank trap episode to be discussed below, played the role of “epiphanies” in his life. André Malraux, *Lazare. Œuvres complètes (III)*, ed. Marius-François Guyard, Jean-Claude-Larrat, and François Trécourt (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 877.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1951), esp. 93–113, 275–360.

those questions were, as is well known, mostly framed in terms of the concept of beauty, and of a particular form of response christened “aesthetic pleasure” which beauty was said to engender. The important point in the present context, however, is that at no time did this vigorous debate – which drew in figures such as Shaftesbury, Hume, and Kant – go beyond these essentially epistemological and psychological concerns to embrace the possible *metaphysical* significance of art: that is, at no time did it address the significance of art in terms of questions about the very purpose of human life and the fundamental meaning of things. If answers were to be given to questions of *that* kind – and it is difficult at times to avoid the impression that the eighteenth century, in open revolt against religion, was doing its best to forget that such questions could even be asked – art, it seems, had nothing at all to do with them. Art might well throw light on the forms of human knowledge and man’s psychological make-up, but it had nothing to do with questions about the ultimate meaning of life.

These origins have left a profound and enduring mark on Western aesthetics. There were further significant developments in the nineteenth century, among which Hegelian and Marxist theories linking art to the flow of history were probably the most important (theories particularly influential in what is now often known as “continental” aesthetics); but it is a rare thing indeed, even now, three centuries later, to encounter a philosopher of art – in continental aesthetics or in the prominent Anglo-American “analytic” school, or elsewhere – who breaks with the tradition adumbrated in the Enlightenment and frames the question “What is art?” in metaphysical terms in the sense in which that term is being used here.

Malraux’s theory of art represents a radical departure from these long-standing patterns of thought. As we shall see, his thinking links art directly with metaphysical questions – questions about the fundamental purpose of human life – and thus signals a decisive break with the tradition we have described. To forestall hasty conclusions, one should add immediately that at no time does Malraux suggest that art is a form of religion, or a kind of substitute religion, and one of the key aspects of his thought, as we shall see, is the clear distinction he draws between art and religious faith. His basic contention, nonetheless, is that art (like religion) responds to a *metaphysical* concern, understood as man’s sense of his significance – or insignificance – in

the “scheme of things”. Which is why the experience in 1934 was so decisive for him, and why an analysis of its elements is of crucial importance for the present study. The experience enabled him to answer the question “What is man?” in the metaphysical sense, and then, as a consequence, to answer the question “What is art?” Puzzling though it may perhaps seem at first sight as a point of departure for a theory of art, the experience of the “return to the earth” therefore merits the closest attention because its consequences for Malraux’s thinking were profound and far-reaching.

In its fictional guise in *Le Temps du mépris* (which was Malraux’s fourth novel), the “return to the earth” takes place when the novel’s central character, Kassner, is flown to safety in Prague after escaping from a Nazi prison in Germany. In a slightly revised form, the episode reappears in the *Antimémoires*, first published in 1967, this time narrated in the first person and located in its real-life setting over North Africa. The following analysis draws on both versions.

The narrative consists of two closely related parts – the encounter with the storm, and Malraux’s (or Kassner’s) reactions shortly after landing when he suddenly finds himself again amidst the scenes of everyday life. The storm is particularly violent, and the light aircraft is quickly enveloped in cloud and battered by wind and hail. Malraux seems to enter a world apart – a world of unrelenting violence sealed off from the earth below. As he writes in the *Antimémoires*,

I felt as if I had escaped gravity, as if I were suspended somewhere between the worlds, grappling with the clouds in a primitive combat, while below me the earth continued on its course which I would never encounter again.<sup>7</sup>

The second part of the episode follows quickly on the heels of this. The pilot manages to force the aircraft below the level of the clouds, and the storm is left behind. The aircraft lands, and Malraux travels into Bône where he abruptly encounters the ordinary scenes of city life. The rapid transition from one context to the other is an important element of the experience that then takes place.

The storm has left a lasting impression which Malraux/Kassner has not yet shaken off. Everything he sees around him, including the most

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<sup>7</sup> *Antimémoires*, 69.

commonplace objects and activities, strikes him as somehow strange and inexplicable. Walking along a street, Kassner, in the version in *Le Temps du mépris*, notices through a window that “a woman was carefully ironing clothes, applying herself to the task”, and he finds himself thinking in astonishment that “there [are] shirts, linen, and hot irons in this strange place called the earth ...”<sup>8</sup> Everything he sees around him arouses the same sense of wonder and incomprehension. Malraux writes in the *Antimémoires*:

I could not recognise these shops, this furrier’s shop-window where a little white dog was playing among animal skins, sitting down, then moving around again: a living being, with long hair and clumsy movements, and which was not a man. An animal. I had forgotten animals.<sup>9</sup>

What exactly is happening here? A key point to bear in mind is that Malraux is encountering the scenes of everyday life after being wholly absorbed into a different world – a world whose memory is still fresh, “whose fading rumble”, he writes of Kassner, “still reverberated within him”.<sup>10</sup> In these circumstances, objects and events no longer appear as *the* world, the familiar world one takes for granted, but as *a* world, a world *of a particular kind* – one that is, for instance, wholly unlike the world of the storm which, only a short time ago, seemed to be the sum of all that existed. In this brief period of “return to the earth”, while the memory of the storm is still vivid and alive, there seems to be no more “naturalness” or definitiveness in the way things are than in any other way they might be. The everyday world – the banal world of shirts, hot irons, people, and dogs – appears simply as one random possibility, a *possible* world among others. As he walks along, Kassner suddenly has the impression that human life is welling up little by little out of nowhere “as condensation and droplets of water appear on a frozen glass”.<sup>11</sup> No longer part of a natural, taken-for-granted scheme of things, the world and all it contains seems to have emerged inexplicably *ex nihilo*. Nothing seems to have any *reason* for being the way it is, or for being at all. The world in all its

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<sup>8</sup> André Malraux, *Le Temps du mépris, Œuvres complètes (I)*, ed. Pierre Brunel (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 825.

<sup>9</sup> *Antimémoires*, 72.

<sup>10</sup> *Le Temps du mépris*, 826.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 827.

forms has ceased to be the familiar “way things are” and seems, in every respect, utterly arbitrary and contingent.

As we have noted, Malraux writes in the *Antimémoires* that this experience was one that he “tried to express a number of times” and before examining its implications more closely, it will be useful to consider one further example.

In this instance, the “return to the earth” occurs one night in 1940 during World War II after a French tank attack on German lines. In its fictional form in *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*, the narrator is Berger, a member of a tank crew who is one of the novel’s main characters. The episode reappears in his *Antimémoires* where Malraux narrates it in the first person, and again the analysis here draws on both versions.

Advancing through the night towards the enemy positions, Berger’s tank suddenly plunges into a tank trap – a large pit shaped to prevent escape which is wired to guns previously trained on it. Acutely aware of the danger, Berger and the other crew members make frantic efforts to free the tank. Shells begin to explode close by, and the sound of the guns seems to Berger like “the very voice of death”.<sup>12</sup> Finally the tank is freed and continues its advance. The German positions are reached soon afterwards but they have now moved on. Completely exhausted, Berger and the crew fall asleep on straw in a nearby barn.

The second part of the episode takes place the following morning. The German lines are now some distance away and Berger awakens to the peaceful sights and sounds of a morning in rural France: farmyard animals, farm implements lying about, clothes pegged out on a line, and two old peasants sitting on a bench in the sun – “all in a morning so pure it seemed as if the war did not exist”.<sup>13</sup> It is the same sudden juxtaposition of two “different worlds” that Malraux had described in *Le Temps du mépris*. Here the storm is replaced by the tank trap, and the streets of Prague by a country farmyard, but the essential features of the situation are the same, and produce the same strange sense of a “return to the earth”.

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<sup>12</sup> André Malraux, *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*, *Œuvres complètes (II)*, ed. Marius-François Guyard, Maurice Larès, and François Trécourt (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 760.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 763.

Everything that Berger – or Malraux in the *Antimémoires* version – sees around him seems, again, strange and inexplicable. “Seeing the sudden, nimble movements of a cat as it ran away,” Malraux writes,

I suddenly felt astonished that this convulsive piece of fur could even exist ... What was it within me that was bewildered that on this well-cared-for earth, the dogs acted like dogs, the cats like cats? Some grey doves flew off, leaving a tom cat crouched at the end of its fruitless pounce; they described a silent arc in the sea-blue sky, broke off, then, suddenly white, flew away in another direction. I was quite ready to see them come back and run after the cat, which would then fly away too.<sup>14</sup>

Once again, as in *Le Temps du mépris*, the familiar scenes of everyday life have ceased to be *the* world, the world one takes for granted. With the tank trap still a potent presence in his mind, as the storm had been for Kassner, Malraux/Berger sees everything around him, as Kassner had, as *a* world, a world of a particular kind – just one *possible* world among others. “All this might not have been ... as it is,” Berger thinks in astonishment. “There are other worlds, the world of crystals, of the ocean depths ...”<sup>15</sup> In fact, nothing seems to have any reason for being *at all*. Just as Kassner had seen human life welling up *ex nihilo* “as condensation and droplets of water appear on a frozen glass”, so Berger looks at the familiar objects around him and feels as if “confronted with an inexplicable gift – an apparition”. “All this,” he thinks, “might not have been”.<sup>16</sup> Once again, as with Kassner, it is a world lacking all explanation, an entirely arbitrary and contingent world. It is a world in which there is no possibility of “going behind” the phenomena of experience to explain or “ground” them, – a world apprehended solely in terms of *appearance*: not appearance in the sense of something behind which one might perceive signs of a hidden, enduring reality (the way things “really” are), but appearance behind which nothing is known; or as Malraux sometimes termed it later, “appearance in the metaphysical sense”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Antimémoires*, 238.

<sup>15</sup> *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg*, 766.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Especially in his books on art. See, for example, Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 29. A more extended explanation is at: *Ibid* 17–19. See also: André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: L'Intemporel, Ecrits sur l'art (II)*, 725, 728.

This, then, is the experience of the “return to the earth” to which Malraux (who, as we have said, rarely made autobiographical comments of this nature) saw as having played a major part in his life. It is an experience found nowhere in his writings prior to 1934 but one that appears several times in different forms after that date (a circumstance, incidentally, to which critics have rarely drawn attention). It is time now to examine it a little more closely.

To begin with, one should be wary of treating the experience as one likely to occur only in atypical “extreme situations” such as those described in the episodes above; or, alternatively, of seeing it as merely an idiosyncratic reaction on Malraux’s part. The circumstances Malraux describes are certainly unusual, and the contrast between the two “worlds” – in these two instances, a world of mortal danger and the world of everyday life – is very pronounced. The *essential character* of both situations, however, is simply a rupture of the links with everyday life followed by a sudden return to it, and this can occur quite commonly in much less dramatic circumstances. Malraux made this point himself in a speech in 1973 concerning the function of art in which he briefly refers to the experience in question. The human reaction at such moments, he contended, is “the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life, beginning with his own”. That emotion, he observed, is closely bound up with the questions “Why does something exist rather than nothing?” and “Why has life taken this form?” He went on:

Anyone who has glimpsed the shores of death has, upon his return, experienced the depth of that feeling. Most of us have felt it, undramatically, when confronted with other cultures: it makes even familiar ones seem exotic. It is, undoubtedly, inseparable from the passing of time; a simultaneous awareness of the strange, the contingent, and the ephemeral.<sup>18</sup>

The reference to the “shores of death” suggests the kinds of extreme situations we have just considered, and anyone, Malraux observes, is likely to experience the fundamental emotion in question under circumstances such as those. But the same response, he suggests, can be aroused by other situations in which one suddenly rejoins the flow of

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<sup>18</sup> André Malraux, “Discours prononcé à la Fondation Maeght,” in *Œuvres complètes (III)*, ed. Marius-François Guyard, Jean-Claude-Larrat, and François Trécourt (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 880–896, 885.



life after an event that has caused a separation from it – such as the moment of a traveller’s encounter with the different sights and sounds of another culture (which is in fact one of the contexts in which the experience occurs in *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*<sup>19</sup>). The experience itself, in other words, is not necessarily uncommon, and certainly not idiosyncratic on Malraux’s part. The circumstances in which Kassner and Berger encounter it give it a special intensity (which is doubtless why Malraux chose them to illustrate it) but it is nonetheless an experience that “most of us” are likely to have known at some time, even if only briefly and perhaps quite “undramatically”. The point is important. Malraux does not regard the emotion in question as somehow “specialised” or likely to be felt only by a select group of people – for instance, those with a certain level of philosophical sophistication. It is an emotion which, under certain circumstances, *everyone* is prone to experience, and which many people *have* experienced, even if only fleetingly and perhaps without paying it special attention.

Second, it is important to note that Malraux speaks of an *emotion* and not simply of an idea – a response of the feelings, not simply of the understanding. The reason for this is quite simply that the experience is one in which the person who encounters it is himself implicated. Berger’s sense that “all this might not have been, might not have been as it is” – or, in Malraux’s alternative formulation, “Why does something exist rather than nothing?” and “Why has life taken this form?” – is not merely an encounter with a philosophical problem (though it has certainly been seen in those terms at times by other writers<sup>20</sup>); it is a response to a world *to which Berger is himself*

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<sup>19</sup> In an episode describing Berger’s father’s first encounter with Europe, at Marseille, after a long absence in central Asia. See Malraux, *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*, 652–655. Cf. also the comment in the *Antimémoires* where, in speaking of “the return to the earth” as having played a major role in his life, Malraux adds that “it is also [the experience] of anyone who comes back to his own civilization after having been involved in another, that of the hero of *Altenburg* after his return from Afghanistan ...” *Antimémoires*, 72. This episode is itself repeated in the *Antimémoires* (35–36).

<sup>20</sup> The first question at least, as Julian Young points out, is found in philosophers as various as Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer, and Aristotle. See: Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109, 110. Indeed, it is perhaps not too much to suggest that the primordial sense of wonder implied by these questions is a thread running through all philosophy – or at least all metaphysics – and through much fictional literature as well, particularly in the

*returning*. This is why Malraux, in the speech quoted above, speaks of “the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life, *beginning with his own*”. The emotion has, of course, no simple, everyday name. It certainly involves wonder and bewilderment, as the episodes discussed above indicate, but it is wonder and bewilderment of a specific kind – evoked not by some particular object or event but by existence as a whole. It is an emotion springing from an astonished sense that everything lacks a reason for being the way it is, or for being at all, thus involving, as Malraux writes, “a simultaneous awareness of the strange, the contingent, and the ephemeral”. The fact that he is speaking of an emotion, and not simply an idea, is no doubt why Malraux chose to explore it via the novel and not, for example, through a philosophical essay. Not surprisingly, the “metaphysical” compass of the emotion results in novels of a quite different stamp from the familiar nineteenth century model – those of Balzac or Dickens, for example – which so often revolve around questions of individual differences, and oppositions between the individual and society.<sup>21</sup> Malraux’s choice of the novel is nonetheless readily understandable: since he was dealing with an emotion, the novel was the vehicle best suited to his purpose.

This brings us to the third point. It is important to see that although Kassner and Berger, as characters in novels, are vehicles for the exploration of individual experience, the emotion they encounter in the “return to the earth” is not one that concerns them exclusively *as individuals* – that is, in virtue of those aspects of their lives that relate to them alone. This emerges clearly in the episodes discussed. As we have noted, both the storm and the tank trap generate a powerful sense of separation, of being in “another world”. As long as this feeling persists – and its persistence is a key element of the experience – the “return to the earth” is not a return to Kassner’s or Berger’s *personal* lives (the details of which play no part in either episode<sup>22</sup>) but rather to

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twentieth century. The important point, however, is to determine the *particular significance* the questions assume in any given system of thought. For Malraux, it is being argued here, they assume a central significance, and not simply in impersonal, philosophical terms.

<sup>21</sup> A contrast to which Malraux drew attention in a preface to *Le Temps du mépris* (776–777).

<sup>22</sup> Kassner begins to take up the threads of his personal life soon after he arrives in Prague (for example, when he begins to look for his wife, Anna) but his experience

“life in general”, to human existence. In this sense – although in this sense only – the experience might certainly be termed exceptional. As long as it lasts, the state of mind it engenders differs markedly from that of ordinary, everyday life, in which personal concerns are usually intermingled with, and difficult to distinguish from, any sense one might fleetingly have of “life as a whole”. In the unusual circumstances Malraux describes (although at times, as we have noted, in less dramatic situations as well), personal concerns are temporarily eclipsed and the individual responds not as someone pursuing the particular path of his own life, nor even in terms of concerns he may share with a particular group of people, but solely in terms of what connects him to human life as a whole. The “return to the earth”, however it may occur, is thus a brief, though clear, glimpse (clear, because no longer confused with feelings of other kinds) of what it means simply to be part of human life. It is an awareness of life – life of which the individual knows he or she is a part – temporarily purged of all elements other than those that apply to everyone.

The final point flows from this. What precisely does it mean in this context “simply to be part of human life” and to be aware only of elements “that apply to everyone”? The answer is contained in what has already been said. The perception of human life revealed in the “fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life” consists of two radically opposing elements. On the one hand, it is an *awareness* of “all this” – of the presence of the human world in its multifarious forms, with its dogs, its birds, its cats, its clothes pegged out on a line, and its peasants sitting on a bench. On the other hand, *and simultaneously*, it is a sense that there are “other worlds” – that “all this” lacks any reason for being the way it is, or for being at all. Life as a whole is apprehended, but apprehended as something lacking all explanation, as “grounded” in nothing – as mere appearance. Thus, at the very moment of its apprehension, human life seems poised on the brink of

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immediately after landing is not itself one in which such concerns play a part. This is even more evident in the version in the *Antimémoires* where Bône is simply the location where the aircraft lands after the storm, not one where Malraux’s personal concerns figure in any way. Similarly, for both Berger in *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg* and Malraux in the corresponding episode in *Antimémoires*, the village in which they awaken on the morning after the tank trap has no personal significance for either of them, then or later.

chaos, and inseparable from incipient meaninglessness – as if, lacking all explanation, it belongs to a realm of utter insignificance. The “return to the earth” thus provides a perception of “man” – in the sense of human life and all it involves – not as enduring essence but simply as *possibility*, as a presence that *could* be more than the chaos of which it seems to be a part but which, in order to be so, stands in need of affirmation against that chaos. In the sense in which a religion or a philosophy might be said to confer a meaning on human life, Kassner’s and Berger’s experience might thus be described as *pre-religious* or *pre-philosophical*: it is a perception of the *possibility* of meaning, but no more than that. It is an awareness of what it means to be part of human life, but an awareness shot through with a deep sense of precariousness (to borrow one of Malraux’s own terms<sup>23</sup>), a sense that the human world – “all this” – hovers on the brink of the void and that, unless somehow affirmed, is as random and meaningless as the chaos of which it seems to be a part.

Given this analysis, it would not be excessive to view the “return to the earth” as an experience of the primary movement of human consciousness – indeed, as a *definition* of human consciousness if consciousness may be understood as a form of *experience* and not as something confined solely to the realm of the intellect. The event Malraux describes is in effect a fleeting re-living of that primordial moment when the human animal emerges from “the kingdom of the blind” (to borrow one of Kassner’s phrases during the experience<sup>24</sup>) – the moment in which it suddenly becomes aware that it might possibly be more than the chaos that engulfs it. In slightly different terms, it is a sudden awareness of the possibility of resisting – of enduring, if only temporarily – in a universe in which blind ephemerality is king. To anticipate a little, this is why Malraux can write in *Les Voix du silence* (where, as we shall see, the ideas we are examining play a fundamental role) of “that first glacial night on which a species of gorilla, looking up at the stars, suddenly felt mysteriously akin to them”, and also why he can assert that “Humanism does not consist in saying: ‘No animal could have done what I have done,’ but in declaring: ‘We have refused what the beast within us willed to do, and

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<sup>23</sup> Most notably in the title of *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*.

<sup>24</sup> *Le Temps du mépris*, 826.

we seek to reclaim man wherever we find that which crushes him.”<sup>25</sup> The recognition of a “mysterious kinship” with the stars – here signifying something that seems to persist in the face of implacable, endless mutability – is the sudden awareness that, despite the merciless indifference of things (the “glacial” is not there by accident), it may be possible to be more than a meaningless piece of flotsam in an interminable, chaotic drift. The definition of humanism – an affirmation of the value of man – suggests, similarly, an aspiration to resist the blind, senseless forces that constantly threaten to reduce man to their level. Malraux is not, of course, attempting to explain the *origins* of human consciousness in a physical or evolutionary sense: he is not, as many studies do, seeking to identify the various human capacities that might make human consciousness possible. (That, indeed, might imply that he is thinking in the terms he rejects: what I can do that no animal could have done.) He is attempting, rather, to convey what human consciousness – the experience of being human at the most fundamental level – simply *is*. And, as we now see, he understands it in frankly metaphysical terms. It is, first and foremost, the perception of the possibility of meaning – “meaning” in this context signifying a resistance, however brief and faltering, to a universe of blind chaos: man’s sudden, if precarious, glimpse of an alternative to “that which crushes him”.

In one of the other experiences of the “return to the earth” described in *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*, Malraux describes human life perceived in these terms as “the human adventure”.<sup>26</sup> The phrase is open to misinterpretation if one takes the word “adventure” in its colloquial, somewhat sensationalist, sense. Malraux, however, intends

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<sup>25</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 893, 899.

<sup>26</sup> *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*, 660, 661. The “return” in this instance takes a somewhat different form. Berger’s father is contemplating the room in which his father has died not long before. The stillness of the room and the traces of the recent death absorb his attention. Gradually, distant noises in the street, such as the sounds of horses’ hooves and human voices, recall him to the world of “the living” outside, which seems to be continuing on its own course. Though the context is different, it is essentially the same juxtaposition of “different words” discussed above, leading Berger’s father in this case to reflect: “The human adventure, the earth. And all that, like the now-settled destiny of his father, might have been otherwise ...” He goes on to link this with his return to Europe which, as we have noted, is another instance of the “return” experience. (See above, note 19.)

it in a much more precise and serious way as our analysis now allows us to see. Eclipsing purely individual concerns, the “fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life” provides a fleeting glimpse of “life as a whole” – of *human* life. Yet, human life thus perceived is without any underlying “explanation”: it is apprehended solely in terms of appearance – not appearance behind which one might hope to discover the true “nature of things”, but behind which nothing is known. To the extent that human life can be affirmed against this chaos of mere appearance (and we have yet to consider how precisely that might occur) it thus assumes the quality of an inexplicable *irruption* into being (like “condensation and droplets of water appearing on a frozen glass” in Kassner’s words). In such a case, one might perhaps be inclined to say, in terminology made familiar by writers such as Sartre and Camus, that Malraux views man as an “alien” or “outsider” (or “stranger”) in the universe,<sup>27</sup> and a number of Malraux’s commentators have in fact adopted this terminology.<sup>28</sup> Tempting as they are, however, such terms are misleading in Malraux’s case. The term “alien” suggests that one knows what one is alienated *from*, just as “outsider” or “stranger” suggests an awareness of what one is outside *of*, or stranger *to*. Man, as Malraux discovers him in the return to the earth, does not even know that. Encountered, as we have said, in a primary movement of human consciousness, man is agnostic in the full sense of the term: he has questions but no answers – not even knowing what, if he were alienated, he might be alienated from. For this “man”, there *is no* identifiable scheme of things – no permanent essence beyond appearances – which one might be outsider to (one’s “true home” so to speak); there is merely the inexplicable “all this”, which may well, as Berger perceives, be a facade concealing endless, unknown “other worlds”. To the extent that it can be affirmed –

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. for example, the well-known statement in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* where “absurd man” describes himself as “étranger à moi-même et à ce monde” [a stranger to myself and to this world]. Camus, 112. In Sartre’s case, the idea of “alienation” often has social or political overtones, especially in his later works. See the useful discussion in Nik Farrell Fox, *The New Sartre: Explorations in Postmodernism* (Bristol: The Bath Press, 2003), esp. 96–101.

<sup>28</sup> See for example: Boak, 149. Geoffrey T. Hartman, “The Silence of the Infinite Spaces,” in *André Malraux’s Man’s Fate*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), 5–11, 10. Geoffrey Harris, *André Malraux: A Reassessment* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 36, 42.

assuming for the moment that this is possible – human life is thus like an *adventure* launched onto the seas of the unknown and the unknowable, as devoid of links with any possible scheme of things as an adventure is with the nameless regions it traverses. Like an adventure, man is an “irruption”: he *has no* “true home”, no “native land” not even, like an alien, one from which he knows he has been exiled.

This is why, in so much of what Malraux writes after 1934, the sense of human life as a whole, when it arises, is as “addition to”, not as integral part – as something standing in need of affirmation in the face of a universe in which its presence or absence seems a matter of complete indifference. This leads to passages such as the following in the *Antimémoires* in which Malraux contemplates the peaceful farmyard on the morning after the tank trap episode:

In front of me were two watering-cans, with their mushroom-shaped sprinklers, like those I loved to play with as a child; and it suddenly seemed to me that man had emerged from the depths of time simply to invent the watering-can.

and

... these barns bursting with grain and straw, these barns with their beams hidden under piles of husks, full of harrows, rakes, wagon-shafts, wheel-barrows ... [these] were barns of Gothic times; our tanks at the end of the street were being replenished with water, monsters kneeling at the wells of the Bible ... O life, how old you are!<sup>29</sup>

The watering-cans, with their mushroom-shaped sprinklers – unusual objects, so obviously products of human invention (and which thus might fascinate a child) – seem to be visible evidence of man’s presence – his presence, that is, as something “added to” the universe he inhabits, not part of it. Seen in this light, man might well seem to have emerged from the depths of time “simply to invent the watering-can” because an object such as this, like any other that bears man’s stamp (such as the “barns bursting with grain and straw”) evokes a sense of his persistent presence. The objects are not significant in themselves, or as proof (for example) of “man’s timeless industry and ingenuity”. (Malraux is not seeking to identify a permanent human essence based, for instance, on a faculty for productiveness or technical prowess.) The objects simply evoke an awareness of an unremitting, if precar-

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<sup>29</sup> *Antimémoires*, 237, 238.

ious, human adventure. Thus, the tanks merge in Malraux's mind with "monsters kneeling at the wells of the Bible", and he becomes conscious of mankind as sheer perseverance across the centuries, provoking the exclamation: "O life, how old you are!" Elsewhere, Malraux writes that the experience of the return to the earth can stir up in us "the entire past of humanity"<sup>30</sup> and these passages illustrate what he has in mind. It is not a question of the past as history: the human adventure is a *metaphysical*, not an historical, concept. It is a simultaneous awareness of duration, specificity, and finitude – of humanity as bounded in time, as having had a particular origin, of having traced a certain course (and not another), and enduring until now, while lacking any underlying meaning or goal. The sight of the farmyard objects evokes what Malraux calls the "drone of the centuries" and it is in this sense only that he discovers a unified "man". It is a unity born not of any sense of permanence – of being in some way an integral part of a timeless scheme of things (such as that discoverable through religious belief or perhaps through notions of an unfolding, intelligible History) – but born simply of a sense of persistence over time. The "drone of the centuries" suggests both activity and lastingness, but also, just as importantly, something that, like an adventure, may perhaps cease, and fade into oblivion. It suggests continuing existence *irrespective of*, not as part of, the scheme of things: "man", but man without eternity, who lives and dies in time.

The central task of the next chapter will be to reveal how these ideas relate to Malraux's theory of art – indeed, how they are fundamental to that theory and underpin all its key propositions. Before moving to that question, however, it will be useful to consider the responses of some of Malraux's commentators to the issues we have just considered.

Oddly enough, critics have seldom commented in detail on the experience of the "return to the earth", and this state of affairs merits a brief word in itself. The neglect is, to say the least, puzzling. The experience, as we have noted, occurs *nowhere* in Malraux's pre-1934 writings but becomes almost a kind of *leitmotiv* in his works after that

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 72.



time. The storm scene and its aftermath is one of the chief episodes in *Le Temps du mépris*, occupying a major portion of this relatively short work. Variants occur in Malraux's next novel, *L'Espoir*,<sup>31</sup> while his final novel, *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg*, (a relatively short work as well) contains three substantial episodes centred on the same experience,<sup>32</sup> one of which – the tank trap incident and its aftermath – occupies a major part of the concluding section. In addition, as we have said, the episodes from *Le Temps du mépris* and *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* analysed above reappear in the *Antimémoires*, together with the description of Berger's father's return to Europe after a long absence, which is another "return" experience figuring in *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg*. Noteworthy also in this context is Malraux's comment in the major speech on art in 1973 mentioned earlier, which clearly ascribes a special importance to the experience. And then, as we have seen, there is his own, unambiguous statement in the *Antimémoires* that the event played "a major part" in his life.<sup>33</sup> Given all this, it would seem reasonable, at least, to acknowledge the possibility that the experience played an important role in Malraux's intellectual development, and to recognize the need to examine it in some detail. The first has occurred only occasionally, the second scarcely at all.

The few critics who have offered comment sometimes suggest that the experience led Malraux to formulate an image of man founded on certain timeless human qualities or values. Denis Boak suggests, for example, that Berger's reactions on the morning after the tank trap imply a recognition of "the beauty and value of simple rustic life",<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> An interesting adaptation in *L'Espoir* is the scene in which a farmer is taken on a bombing raid to help identify a wood in which enemy planes are concealed. The farmer had lived near the wood for twenty-eight years but is reduced to tears when he discovers he is unable to identify the area from the air. Malraux included the scene in his film, *Sierra de Teruel*, which is based on sections of *L'Espoir*. André Malraux, *L'Espoir, Œuvres complètes (II)*, ed. Marius-François Guyard, Maurice Larès, and François Trécourt (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 382–393.

<sup>32</sup> Berger's father's return to Europe (see note 19); Berger's father meditation over his father's death-bed when he suddenly become aware of the distant sounds of life beyond the stillness of the room, and is conscious of the "human adventure" (see note 26); and the tank trap episode.

<sup>33</sup> There is also his reference to these experiences as "epiphanies". See note 5.

<sup>34</sup> Boak, 178. In a not dissimilar vein, another critic suggests that Berger finds "the true face of Man" in the "stubborn patience of the peasant profoundly in harmony

while another commentator writes that the episode contributes “to the overall affirmative answer [to the question]: is there a permanent, eternal notion of mankind?”<sup>35</sup> One critic has even sought to give the event a teleological character, arguing that Berger has a “mystical intimation of an earthly paradise” in which he has “temporal experience prefiguring the resurrection at the end of time”.<sup>36</sup>

Views such as these cannot be sustained. The image of man emerging from the experience in question is not founded on any notion of permanence – any concept of eternal or “essential” Man – but on a perception of man as *possibility*, as a presence that *could* be more than the chaos of which it seems to be a part but which, in order to be so, requires affirmation. If affirmed (and, as indicated, the means by which this is achieved this have yet to be discussed) man endures only “in time”, as precarious irruption and adventure, not timelessly as part of a suddenly revealed, unchanging scheme of things. In themselves, the rustic scene and the watering-can are no more important to Berger than the woman ironing clothes or the dog in the shop window is to Kassner. In both cases, as in Malraux’s other descriptions of the same experience, the objects and events are simply aspects – tokens, one

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with the inexhaustible fruitfulness of the Earth”. Joseph Hoffmann, *L’Humanisme de Malraux* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1963), 280.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Tame, “Fiction and History in ‘Les Noyers de l’Altenburg,’” in *André Malraux, Across Boundaries*, ed. Geoffrey T. Harris (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 141–164, 159.

<sup>36</sup> Violet M. Horvath, *André Malraux: The Human Adventure* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 279–281. Some other comments are worth noting. Axel Madsen’s biography of Malraux describes the Yemen episode in some detail but concludes bafflingly: “The interlude over the desert was just that, an interlude.” Madsen, 154. Jean Lacouture’s biography makes the strangely conflicting claims that the *retour sur la terre* episodes “left a particularly deep impression” on Malraux and “mark the threshold of a second life” but that the event was perhaps included in his novel *Le Temps du mépris* “as if to add a little warmth to this somewhat dry account”. Lacouture, 158. Jean-François Lyotard makes the puzzling suggestion that the terror of the storm would somehow “[authenticate] the archaeological discovery” in Yemen. Lyotard, *Signed, Malraux*, 97. Claude Tannery quotes passages from the tank trap episode, describes the experience as a “revelation” for Malraux, but suggests that its meaning is ultimately impenetrable. Claude Tannery, *L’Héritage spirituel de Malraux* (Paris: Arléa, 2005), 37–39. Olivier Todd, Malraux’s most recent, and perhaps least friendly biographer makes a brief reference to the storm episode but seems, surprisingly enough, unaware of the importance Malraux placed on it. Todd, 192.

might almost say – of the inexplicable “all this”. Their ordinariness does not imply that Kassner and Berger (or Malraux) somehow discover the value of the “simple” things of life – an interpretation that would risk depicting Malraux as a kind of latter-day, semi-Rousseau. The ordinary, unremarkable things are highlighted because the fundamental emotion Malraux is describing encompasses *life as a whole* – that is, it makes *everything* “exotic”, to borrow his term,<sup>37</sup> not just objects and events that may happen in themselves to be striking or unusual. The experience is certainly an encounter with *man* – that is, with human life as a whole, as distinct (as we have seen) from the life of this or that individual or group – but it is human life in which all trace of the eternal is absent: it is man as “temporary” adventure – man without eternity who lives and dies in time.<sup>38</sup>

A teleological interpretation is equally implausible. As noted in earlier discussion, Malraux had rejected notions of an ideal future as early as *La Tentation de l'Occident*, and there is no more trace of it in his post-1934 writing than in his early novels where, as we saw, action revealed truths of a specific and *transient* nature. The image of man that emerges in the “return to the earth” is as devoid of any “fixed point”, to use Malraux’s terminology, as the intensely pragmatic view of life found in those earlier novels, and there is no more a question for Kassner or Berger of a coming “earthly paradise” or a “resurrection at the end of time” than there was for Garine.<sup>39</sup> A teleology, such as a “resurrection at the end of time”, would imply, once again, that human life had an underlying meaning – in the form of an ultimate goal – and this is precisely what it does *not* have for Kassner and Berger because they perceive life as an irruption into being – a

<sup>37</sup> See page 55.

<sup>38</sup> It is interesting here to recall the conversation recorded in the 1920s by Roger Martin du Gard in which Malraux replied “That remains to be seen” to the claim that “every civilization is based on the idea of human permanence”. See note 18, Chapter One.

<sup>39</sup> Of whom, as noted earlier, Malraux says: “He’s not remotely interested in an earthly Paradise. I can’t emphasise enough that it’s not a question of what I’ve called the mythology of the end-goal.” There is certainly a sense of “resurrection” in the experience of the return to the earth – Berger himself speaking of a “resurrection of the earth” he seems to be witnessing (*Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*, 767); but this is a resurrection in the sense of a “return” from what Kassner describes as “the kingdom of the blind” not in the teleological sense suggested by the critic in question.

precarious “adventure” amidst a scheme of things that is unknown and unknowable. For Kassner and Berger (and Malraux) there is no apocalypse, no anticipated “end of time”, nor even a notion of progressive human improvement. Man, as subsequent discussion will reveal, can certainly be *affirmed* as against the chaos in which he seems to count for nothing, but there is no ideal terminus – no paradise, divine or earthly – that might signal definitive victory.

This discussion can be usefully linked to the earlier comments concerning the fragmentation of the nineteenth century idea of Man resulting from the nascent discipline of anthropology and the impact of writers such as Spengler. As noted there, Malraux believed from as early as the 1920s that the Western “understanding of man” needed to take account of the growing body of data from anthropological studies, and of the challenge presented by Spengler who stressed the plurality of cultures and argued that the idea of one, unilinear History was no longer tenable.<sup>40</sup> A number of commentators have suggested that in view of the importance Malraux placed on these developments, his own view of man must be of a similar kind, and in particular that it must closely resemble that of Spengler. Jean-François Lyotard, for example, writes that “in no way does Malraux amend Spengler”<sup>41</sup> and, as noted earlier, Pierre Bourdieu claims that Malraux offers little more than a “patchwork” of “Spenglerian metaphysical bric-a-brac”. It is not immediately obvious which aspects of Spengler these two writers have in mind (and as we have already seen, there is no evidence that Malraux embraced the detail of Spengler’s historical account or his theory of the rise and fall of cultures<sup>42</sup>). If, however, they are implying that Malraux does nothing more than replicate the German writer’s well-known ideas about the plurality of cultures, both comments are quite mistaken. It is certainly true, as we have noted, that Malraux

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<sup>40</sup> See page 34.

<sup>41</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Soundproof Room, Malraux’s Anti-Aesthetics*, trans. Robert Harvey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 22.

<sup>42</sup> Belief in the idea of a cyclic rise and fall of cultures would, moreover, imply adherence to a theory of history, which, as we have seen, is not a feature of Malraux’s thinking. (This issue is discussed in more detail later. See esp. page 287 et seq.) Bourdieu’s reference to “Spenglerian metaphysical bric-a-brac” seems particularly puzzling given that Spengler’s theories, such as they are, are historical rather than metaphysical in nature.

recognised the importance of anthropological findings, and of the challenge posed by the idea of a “discontinuous” history espoused by Spengler. The discoveries of anthropologists had, in Malraux’s view, vastly extended the scope of human knowledge, “confronting us,” as he said, “with civilizations whose very range represented an enigma”, and calling into question the idea that “there is *one* History – History with a capital H – just as there is only one civilization”.<sup>43</sup> Yet it is equally clear that, while he does not seek to “amend Spengler” in the sense of somehow modifying those arguments, Malraux’s image of man as it emerged from 1934 onwards operates on a plane quite different from Spengler’s, and, indeed, from any notion of man – discontinuous or syncretic – that one might base solely on the findings of anthropology or on thinking such as Spengler’s. Any such notion would presumably take the form either of a listing of certain allegedly universal beliefs and behaviours, together amounting to a description of an “essential” or “universal” Man,<sup>44</sup> or, in Spengler’s case, a description of beliefs and behaviours that are regarded as so profoundly different that they resist any such attempt at syncretism.<sup>45</sup> As we have seen, however, Malraux’s concept of the human adventure takes neither of these forms. First, both those alternatives are framed simply in terms of *ideas* – of impersonal propositions (about beliefs and behaviours) – and, as we have seen, the revelation of the human adventure emerges via an *emotion* – a recognition of a predicament in which the individual knows he or she is involved. Second, as we have also seen, “man” as he emerges in the human adventure is man without eternity who lives and dies in time: he is defined by a metaphysical situation in which he appears as an unexplained irruption into

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<sup>43</sup> See page 34.

<sup>44</sup> As in, for instance, attempts sometimes made in anthropology to list “human universals”. See for example, Donald Brown, *Human Universals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Spengler’s comment in *The Decline of the West*: “‘Mankind’ has no aim, no idea, no plan any more than the family of butterflies or orchids. ‘Mankind’ is a zoological expression or an empty word. I see, in place of that empty figment of *one* linear history ... the drama of *a number* of mighty Cultures ... each stamping its material, its mankind, in *its own* image; each having its *own idea*, *its own* passions, *its own* life, will and feeling, *its own* death ... but there is no ageing ‘Mankind’”. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Atkinson (New York: Random House, 1962), 17. Spengler’s emphases.

being, not as part of an intelligible scheme of things (whether it decreed the unity of man, or ruled it out of court). The point is nicely illustrated by a passage in *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* during the oft-quoted colloquium at Altenburg in which a group of intellectuals debates the question of whether or not there is “a basis on which a notion of man can be founded”. A key participant, the anthropologist, Möllberg, who is a Spenglerian in the sense mentioned above (but one who has carried out extensive anthropological research in Africa),<sup>46</sup> argues vehemently that the idea of fundamental man is “a myth” and that “the successive psychic states of humanity are irreducibly different”. “One can conceive of a permanence of man”, he insists, “but it is a permanence based on nothingness”. A voice then interrupts him: “Or on the fundamental?” The text continues:

It was my father [the father of Berger, the narrator] who asked the question. It was no longer a question of the history of man, but of the nature of everyone in the room; and everyone now felt implicated.<sup>47</sup>

The exchange neatly encapsulates the difference between the terms of Möllberg's (Spenglerian) thinking and an awareness of the human adventure. Viewed from the latter point of view, the absence of any sense of permanence is “fundamental” precisely because it *enables* a view of man as irruption, and thus as time-bound and finite. And each person suddenly feels themselves “implicated” (as distinct from simply weighing up historical arguments) because if man is always on the brink of “nothingness”, as Möllberg insists, he exists as a distinct presence only to the extent that he resists that nothingness and affirms himself against it. The suggestion by writers such as Lyotard and Bourdieu that Malraux remains somehow enmeshed in a Spenglerian view of man is thus quite misleading. Malraux certainly recognised the force of arguments that suggest, in Möllberg words, that the “successive psychic states of humanity are irreducibly different”. For the post-1934 Malraux, however, that was simply a stage along the way: it was part of the intellectual background one needed to take into

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<sup>46</sup> As indicated previously, Möllberg was modelled on the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius (see Chapter One, note 11), but in relation to the idea of the discontinuity of cultures (as distinct from their necessary “decline”) Frobenius reflected a Spenglerian point of view.

<sup>47</sup> *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg*, 690, 691.

account, but it was not an answer. Interestingly, as the passage quoted above illustrates, the more determinedly one asserts the Spenglerian thesis, as Möllberg does, the more vivid and insistent the image of the “human adventure” can become (which is perhaps why Malraux presents the episode in this way). Doubts cast on the idea of a “timeless mankind” by data from anthropology, and by writers such as Spengler, simply *strengthen* the sense of being “cut adrift”, of being without a “true home” (in the sense described earlier<sup>48</sup>) out of which an awareness of the human adventure can emerge.

If we compare Malraux’s positions pre- and post-1934 we can now see that the change that took place was more akin to a broadening and deepening of previous thinking than to a rupture. The important element of continuity is that Malraux has not lost sight of his argument in *D’une jeunesse européenne* that the challenge is now “to find a way of bringing man into accord with his thinking without requiring him to conform to an idea formulated *a priori*”.<sup>49</sup> Post-1934, Malraux continues to reject any solution requiring adherence to a predetermined ideal and remains conscious of the need for “a metaphysic in which there is no longer any fixed point”; but the nature of that metaphysic has now changed in a crucial way. In the preceding years, the term had signified a source of meaning or lucidity – a way of transforming chaos into intelligibility – and took the form of a reliance on the pragmatic, transient perspectives revealed by action. After 1934, there continues to be a rejection of any “idea formulated *a priori*” but the focus is no longer simply on achieving lucidity but on revealing what action was unable to provide: an image of *man*, of human life as a whole. In both cases, there is an embrace, or at least a full acceptance, of change, but the important difference is the sudden enlargement in the scope of Malraux’s thought – or, more accurately, its movement onto another plane. The world of action, clearly defined though it may be, is necessarily confined, in Camus’ words, to “truths ... I can reach out and touch with my hand” – those revealed in the course of a revolutionary uprising, for instance. Action confers meaning on given *situations* but never on life as a whole, and any attempt to compel it to

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<sup>48</sup> See page 62.

<sup>49</sup> “D’une jeunesse européenne,” 150. See page 38.

do so, as the character of Tchen in *La Condition humaine* illustrates, radically distorts the meaning it provides.<sup>50</sup> The major shift in Malraux's thought from 1934 onwards is the discovery of a conception of *human life as a whole* – in the form of “the human adventure” – which also dispenses with any fixed point, any idea formulated *a priori*. There is nothing in this new departure that could be said to contradict Malraux's earlier thinking or even, in some way, to supersede it: the point is simply that he is addressing different issues. The world of *La Condition humaine* is as coherent in its own terms as the world of *Le Temps du mépris* and the novels that followed are in theirs, and both accept that the answer to the Western cultural crisis is not to be found in the pursuit of fixed ideals, such as the nineteenth century notions of a “new humanity” discussed earlier. The year 1934 stands, nevertheless, as a watershed in Malraux's intellectual development. From that point onwards, his central concern is the notion of “man”, in the form of the human adventure, which his experience over North Africa had unexpectedly revealed to him, and this continued to be the framework of his thinking for the rest of his life.

We are now in a position to address the central topic of this study and to examine the theory of art that Malraux began to develop from late 1934 onwards. Before doing so, however, there are certain aspects of the critical response to Malraux's thinking about art that call for preliminary attention.

As foreshadowed in the Introduction, a key claim of the present study is that Malraux writings on art prior to 1934 were confined principally to particular works and artistic movements, and that only after 1934 did he begin to address the general question “What is art?” In most cases, commentators on Malraux's theory of art have tended to look for continuities in his thinking rather than highlight any sudden change of this nature. Before proceeding to an examination of his theory itself, it may therefore be appropriate to offer a little more comment on the nature of his writings about art before and after 1934.

Malraux was a quite prolific writer and, apart from the novels and essays so far discussed, his published works over the pre-1934 period

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<sup>50</sup> See page 45.



include numerous articles and reviews on topics as diverse as the origins of cubist poetry, the genesis of Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror*, works by André Gide and Georges Bernanos, Hermann Keyserling's *Journal de voyage d'un philosophe*, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the paintings of Fautrier (whose works Malraux admired throughout his life), William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, an exhibition of Buddhist sculpture, and more besides. These short pieces have naturally attracted critical attention from time to time<sup>51</sup> and it is certainly true, as some writers suggest, that one can discern a number of recurring preoccupations and preferences in Malraux's responses to the works he discusses. Nowhere in this body of work, however, is there anything that could be seriously regarded as a comprehensive and systematic theory of art, or even an attempt to formulate one. True, these reviews and articles occasionally go beyond the particular work or topic under discussion to make a brief comment of a more general nature about art; but they are, without exception, addressed to *specific* issues, not to the broader question "What is art?"<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the closest Malraux comes to a general statement about the nature and purpose of art in these early years is the frequently quoted passage from *La Voie royale*, mentioned in the Introduction, in which one of the characters states that "every work of art ... tends to develop into myth". Yet this passage, too, obviously falls a long way short of a theory of art. At most, it is a brief foray into the question of the relationship between art and time (expressing a view which, in any case, Malraux subsequently revised<sup>53</sup>). Despite the attention it has attracted from various commentators – E.H. Gombrich in particular – the passage could not conceivably be regarded as a serious attempt on Malraux's part to present a comprehensive theory of art.

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example: Pascal Sabourin, *La Réflexion sur l'art d'André Malraux: origines et évolution* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972). Vandegans, *La jeunesse littéraire d'André Malraux*. Jean-Claude Larrat, *Malraux, théoricien de la littérature, 1921-1951* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996).

<sup>52</sup> This is also true of the occasional reference to art in *La Tentation de l'Occident* and *D'une jeunesse européenne*. Art is mentioned occasionally but always as part of a discussion of aspects of Western culture, not as an issue in itself.

<sup>53</sup> See esp. page 217 et seq.

The limits of Malraux's pre-1934 thinking become even clearer if one takes a glimpse – necessarily a very preliminary one at this stage – at subsequent developments. Quite suddenly from late 1934 onwards, he began to compose essays and speeches with titles such as “Art is a Conquest” (October 1934), “The Work of Art” (1935), “Cultural Heritage” (1936), and “The Psychology of Art” (1937).<sup>54</sup> The tenor of all these pieces is markedly different from anything he had written before. It is no longer a question of discussing particular works with an occasional comment on art in general. The position is reversed. Now Malraux is explicitly addressing the general question “What is art?” with incidental comments about particular works. Even more significantly, one now encounters, for the first time, the propositions that will be major themes in later works such as *Les Voix du silence* – propositions such as that “Art is not a form of submission; it is a conquest”,<sup>55</sup> that “A work of art is an object, but it is also an encounter with time”,<sup>56</sup> and that “Art lives for us through its capacity to enable men to escape from the human condition, not through flight, but through possession”.<sup>57</sup> The precise meaning of these statements is a matter for later chapters but the important point here is that the ideas in question do not appear before 1934, but do occur afterwards, again and again. There is, in short, a sudden and very marked change in the nature of Malraux's writing about art from 1934 onwards. For the first time, he has begun to write at length about art *in general*. He did not of course cease writing essays and reviews about particular works. On the contrary, this continued to be an important part of his activity. The crucial point, however, is that he had now begun to address the question of the general nature and significance of art and had, for the

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<sup>54</sup> André Malraux, “L’Art est une conquête: discours prononcé au premier congrès des écrivains soviétiques tenu à Moscou du 17 août au 31 août 1934,” in *André Malraux: La politique, la culture. discours, articles, entretiens (1925-1975)*, ed. Janine Mossuz-Lavau (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 104–108. André Malraux, “Préfaces, articles, allocutions: ‘L’Œuvre d’art,’” in *Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 1188–1191. André Malraux, “Préfaces, articles, allocutions: ‘Sur l’héritage culturel,’” in *Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 1191–1199. André Malraux, “Articles de ‘Verve’: La Psychologie de l’art,” in *Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 910–922.

<sup>55</sup> Malraux, “L’Art est une conquête: discours prononcé au premier congrès des écrivains soviétiques tenu à Moscou du 17 août au 31 août 1934,” 106.

<sup>56</sup> Malraux, “Préfaces, articles, allocutions: ‘L’Œuvre d’art,’” 1190.

<sup>57</sup> Malraux, “Préfaces, articles, allocutions: ‘Sur l’héritage culturel,’” 1192.

first time, begun to elaborate the central themes of his major works on the subject.

Moreover, it is not simply that the same ideas reappear in the later works. A comparison reveals that in fact *whole passages* of certain articles published in the late 1930s find their way, with relatively minor revisions, into those later works. The similarity between (for example) passages in articles which Malraux published in the journal *Verve* in 1937 and sections of *La Psychologie de l'art* leaves no room for doubt that he had in effect *already begun* to write this book – and thus, also, *Les Voix du silence* which, as we have noted, is heavily based on it – in the late 1930s.<sup>58</sup> If further evidence were required, one need only consult the dates of composition which Malraux appended at the end of *Les Voix du silence* which are: “1935 – 1951”.<sup>59</sup> Malraux himself, it seems, was in little doubt about when he began work on his theory of art.

A number of commentators have, nevertheless, advanced the view that if there was an important turning-point in Malraux's intellectual development, it occurred during and after World War II when he published his last novel, *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* and his first major work on art, *La Psychologie de l'art*. Since there were no further novels after that time, Malraux, it is alleged, must obviously have

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<sup>58</sup> Compare, for example: Malraux, “Articles de ‘Verve’: La Psychologie de l'art,” 911, 912, 914 and *Les Voix du silence*, 533, 497, 491, 494. Compare also: André Malraux, “Articles de ‘Verve’: De la représentation en Occident et en Extrême Orient,” in *Ecrits sur l'art (I)*, 931–940, 933, 935 and *Les Voix du silence*, 534, 544. Cf. also Malraux's statement in 1970: “The earliest passages of *Les Voix du silence* were written more than thirty years ago”. Since *Les Voix du silence* is a revised version of *La Psychologie de l'art*, this would imply that the earliest passages of the latter work also date from the 1930s. See André Malraux, “Appendice aux ‘Voix du silence’: préface inédite aux ‘Grandes voix’ (1970),” in *Ecrits sur l'art (I)*, 956. The editors of the second volume of the Pléiade complete works comment that “it was probably at the beginning [of 1936] that Malraux began work on *La Psychologie de l'art*”. See Marius-François Guyard, Maurice Larès, and François Trécourt, eds., *André Malraux, Œuvres complètes (II)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), ‘Chronologie’, XLIX.

<sup>59</sup> Critics seldom comment on these dates. One of the few to do so mistakenly writes “[*The Voices of Silence*], which [Malraux] claims was begun in 1939 ...” Claude Imbert, “The Blue of the Sea: Merleau-Ponty, Malraux, and Modern Painting,” *Modern Language Notes* 115 (2000): 612.

abandoned the novel in favour of the philosophy of art.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, since the novels had often concerned revolutionary struggle, could readers not also conclude that he had in effect retreated from the world of action – that, as one critic phrases it, he had “abandoned the theatre of collective praxis for the domain of art”?<sup>61</sup>

There are obvious chronological problems in these claims. As we have just seen, Malraux effectively began writing *La Psychologie de l'art* as early as 1935. Since he published three novels (*Le Temps du mépris*, *L'Espoir* and *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg*) over the period from 1935 to 1948,<sup>62</sup> there are clear difficulties in asserting that the writings on art occasioned, or even coincided with, a sudden abandonment of the novel. And since Malraux was heavily involved in political and military action after 1934 – including the Spanish Civil War and the French Resistance, not to mention his later work as a Minister in the French Government – it seems equally implausible to suggest that his interest in art was somehow linked to an abandonment of “the theatre of collective praxis”.

Moreover, the proposition that *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* was Malraux's last novel is itself open to question. Certainly, it was his last book *in the form of a novel*, but one could quite plausibly argue that the series of volumes that make up the semi-autobiographical work *Le Miroir des limbes*, which begins with the *Antimémoires*, are in effect novels in the first person, which draw exclusively on real life events rather than a combination of real and imagined events as in the novels. One obvious indicator is the similarity of the material. As we have seen, for instance, a major episode in *Le Temps du mépris* was

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<sup>60</sup> Or, some suggest, in favour of “non-fiction”. Cf. Claude Tannery's comment: “In 1946 [Malraux] gave up writing novels forever, and until his death in 1976 he published only works of non-fiction”. Claude Tannery, *Malraux: The Absolute Agnostic*, trans. Teresa Fagan (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 216.

<sup>61</sup> François Albera, “Que faire des ‘Ecrits sur l'art’ de Malraux?,” *Art Press*, no. 307 (2004): 50. Rather inconsistently, the same writer adds a little further on: “It has been said that Malraux gave up action for meditation with *Les Voix du silence*. This is to forget that, after the Liberation, the writer became a militant Gaullist and a Minister: Information in 1945, Culture in 1958.” *Ibid.* As argued here, this second comment is much closer to the truth.

<sup>62</sup> *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* was first published in Switzerland in 1943. It was published in France for the first time, with some amendments, in 1948.

transposed into the *Antimémoires* with only minor changes. Similarly, the tank trap episode and other events from *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* reappear in the *Antimémoires*. One might argue, in other words, that although Malraux chose the invented term *Antimémoires* as the title of the first volume of *Le Miroir des limbes* – thus making it clear that he was not suddenly beginning a new career as a memorialist – some commentators have, nevertheless, assumed that there was a more substantial change in the nature of his writing than was in fact the case.

The point of this discussion is not simply to correct a biographical mistake, biography, as indicated earlier, being only an incidental concern of the present study. The next chapter will argue that art, in Malraux's view, is one of the ways in which the significance of man is affirmed against chaos, in the sense discussed earlier in this chapter – a claim that will be explained in detail. It is important to stress here, however – since there will be no opportunity to return to the point later – that, for Malraux, art is *not the only way* this can be achieved. The major works he wrote after 1934 that were not directly concerned with art – the three further novels and the works that go to make up *Le Miroir des limbes* – explore the ways in which, *in thought and deed*, man affirms – and also, sometimes, denies – his significance in the relevant sense. An examination of these issues would take us well beyond the scope of the present study and it is not possible to pursue them here. If the point is overlooked, however, there is a risk that the discussion in the following chapters, which concentrates almost exclusively on art, might encourage the mistaken, if widespread, view that Malraux's interests narrowed in the post war years and that art functioned for him as a retreat from the world of action, or, as claimed in an essay in *Le Monde* in 2006, “a refuge”.<sup>63</sup> Early in *Les Voix du silence*, Malraux writes that “an art museum is one of the places that gives us the highest idea of man”.<sup>64</sup> As always, he chooses his words

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<sup>63</sup> Michel Guerrin and Emmanuel de Roux, “Musées à l’heure de la mondialisation,” *Le Monde*, 19 January 2007. Over the period 1945 to 1975, the authors write, “André Malraux took refuge in his *musée imaginaire*”. This comment reveals the persistence of the myths that (a) Malraux's interest in art dated from after World War II, and that (b) it somehow implied a retreat from the world of practical endeavour.

<sup>64</sup> In French: “le musée est un des lieux qui donnent la plus haute idée de l’homme”. Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, 205. Gilbert translates: “one of the places which show

with care and the words “one of” are there for a reason. His post-1934 novels and *Le Miroir des limbes* offer examples of *other ways* in which this “high idea” of man can be realised – such as the episode in *L’Espoir* describing the descent from the Sierra de Teruel – as well as scenes of a different kind in which man *negates* his significance, such as the German gas attack on the Vistula in 1915 described in *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*. Art was extremely important in Malraux’s thinking for the reasons we are about to explore but it should always be borne in mind that he did not regard it as the *only* way in which man “denies his nothingness”, to borrow his own phrase.<sup>65</sup> The remainder of this study is devoted to his theory of art, but if works such as *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* are to be seen in perspective, this broader context should not be forgotten.

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man at his noblest”, which is certainly more idiomatic English but perhaps a little more rhetorical than Malraux intends.

<sup>65</sup> “The greatest mystery is not that we have been flung at random between this profusion of matter and the stars, but that within this prison we can draw from ourselves images powerful enough to deny our nothingness.” Malraux, *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*, 664, 665. The statement is repeated in *La Psychologie de l’art*. See, André Malraux, *La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire* (Paris: Skira, 1947), 140.



## Chapter Three

### Art: A Rival World

“L’art est un anti-destin.”<sup>1</sup>  
Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*.

The previous chapter analysed the pivotal event in early 1934 that ushered in a new phase in Malraux’s thinking, giving birth to a concept of man as “human adventure”. The discussion indicated that, as one consequence of this development, Malraux was, for the first time, in a position to formulate a response to the question “What is art?” The present chapter takes the first steps in describing the nature of that response. At this initial stage, the discussion concentrates on the fundamental propositions on which Malraux’s thinking depends and will necessarily, at times, be of a somewhat abstract nature. The aim, however, is to pave the way for an examination of the concrete implications of these basic propositions, which is the subject of subsequent chapters.

A central issue in the previous discussion was Malraux’s encounter with what he termed “the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life, beginning with his own”. The analysis, we recall, showed that the apprehension of “man” – of human life as a whole – revealed in that emotion is inseparable from an equally powerful sense of the arbitrariness and contingency of all things – a sense, in Berger’s words, that “all this might not have been, might not have been as it is”. It is an apprehension deriving solely from *appearance*, not appearance in the sense of something behind which one discerns an underlying, enduring reality, but appearance behind which nothing is known. The awareness of life in question thus consists, as we noted,

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<sup>1</sup> “Art is an anti-destiny”.



of two opposing elements: at the very moment of its apprehension, human life seems on the brink of a boundless chaos – the “chaos of appearances” as Malraux sometimes terms it for brevity.<sup>2</sup> The individual is aware of being part of human life but also, simultaneously, of a sense of precariousness, a sense that “all this” of which he is a part is grounded in nothing and that, unless somehow affirmed is as ephemeral and insignificant as the chaos in which it seems engulfed.

Now, for Malraux, art is one of the ways in which man combats this menacing sense of futility and meaninglessness – one of the ways he affirms himself against the chaos of appearances. Art, therefore, has a fundamentally *metaphysical* significance. It is one of the ways in which the precarious opposition between man and “that which crushes him” – the opposition sensed, as suggested earlier, in the primary movement of human consciousness – is shifted in favour of the former. To quote Malraux’s formulation again, it is one of the ways in which man “denies his nothingness”.

How is this achieved? Malraux’s answer is quite straightforward. Art combats the fundamental sense of chaos in question by creating *another* world, a *rival* world, “not necessarily a supernal world, or a glorified one”, he explains, “but one *different in kind from reality*”.<sup>3</sup> Different in what way? Different because, in the same sense – the same metaphysical sense – that the reality to which art is addressed is poised on the brink of chaos, the world created by art is *unified*. Puzzling though the proposition may perhaps seem on first encounter, there is nothing arcane or mysterious about it as long as one keeps its frame of reference well in mind. As discussed earlier, the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life reveals an “all this” – human life in all its forms – in which nothing seems to have any reason for being the way it is, or for being at all. Art, by contrast, brings into being a world constructed solely of elements that are the way they are, and are present, *for a reason* – that is, a rival, unified world. Art, Malraux

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 35. The idea should not, however, be taken out of context. Malraux is not suggesting that everyday, *practical* perception is necessarily chaotic. Indeed, this claim would be difficult to reconcile with his first three novels where, as we have seen, practical action serves as a source of lucidity.

<sup>3</sup> In the original French: “... un monde *irréductible à celui du réel*”. Malraux’s italics. *Les Voix du silence*, 538, 539.

writes, expressing the point in slightly different terms, creates a world “scaled to man’s measure”.<sup>4</sup> It “wrests forms from the real world to which man is subject, and makes them enter a world in which he is ruler”.<sup>5</sup>

We are dealing here with the fundamental elements of Malraux’s theory of art and these initial explanations, as foreshadowed, are necessarily somewhat abstract. They can be made less so, however, if one contrasts his position with the thinking behind some of the more familiar claims of Western aesthetics. Many traditional accounts of the nature of art, and most obviously those based on the popular idea that art is a form of representation, imply that the reality to which art is addressed operates as a kind of pre-existing reference point or guide. This, for example, is the meaning often ascribed to the term “nature”, which functions within such conceptual frameworks as a kind of lode-star, or ideal model, to which the artist, aided by his or her particularly perceptive eye, must remain the faithful servant and interpreter – whether this fidelity finds expression through the “naturalism” of, say, a Chardin or a Courbet, or through the quite different style of, say, a Cezanne or a Picasso (choosing examples from visual art). Now Malraux rejects this traditional account entirely and we can now begin to see why. Where art is concerned, bare reality, or “nature”, whether seen with a perceptive eye or not, is merely the chaos of appearances – the teeming, ephemeral multiplicity which seems to lack any reason for being the way it is, or for being at all (or in Berger’s words, which “might not have been, might not have been as it is”). Far from being a reference point or guide, therefore, bare reality for Malraux is that *against which art seeks to provide a defence*, and a key feature of his theory of art is his consistent and unambiguous rejection of traditional thinking of the kind just mentioned.<sup>6</sup>

This being so, art for Malraux has nothing to do with the representation of reality even when the representation of particular objects is

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<sup>4</sup> André Malraux, “De la représentation en Occident et en Extrême Orient,” in *Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 933.

<sup>5</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 539.

<sup>6</sup> Even if proffered by artists themselves. “Whatever the artist may say on the matter,” Malraux writes in *Les Voix du silence*, “*never* does he let himself be mastered by the world; always he subdues the world to something he puts in its stead”. *Ibid.*, 541. Emphasis in original.

one of the techniques it employs.<sup>7</sup> Where art is concerned, “reality”, “the world”, or “nature”, is, at most, he argues, a “dictionary” – an assemblage of disparate elements individually *capable* of being invested with meaning but combined in a manner that renders them incoherent.<sup>8</sup> The task of the artist (whether painter, writer or composer) is thus not to “follow nature” but to construct a rival, coherent world, “nature” functioning at most as a catalogue of forms – a “dictionary” – of which the artist may at times make use. Thus, all artistic styles, Malraux writes,

are significations ... always we see them replacing the unknown scheme of things by the coherence they impose on all they “represent”. However complex, however lawless an art may seem to be – even the art of a Van Gogh or a Rimbaud – it stands for unity as against the chaos of mere, given reality.<sup>9</sup>

To argue that the significance of art is fundamentally metaphysical is not, of course, to suggest that each individual artist addresses himself or herself to questions of a metaphysical nature. Dostoyevsky often seems to do so, we might concede, but hardly Jane Austen or Dickens. Nevertheless, Malraux is claiming, understood *generally*, as a specific form of human endeavour, art exists as a response to a metaphysical reality – to the primordial sense of arbitrariness and contingency sensed in the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life. At this basic level, all art – whether it be that of Dickens or Dostoyevsky, Fragonard or Goya, Telemann or Beethoven – shares the same metaphysical objective. Its purpose is not epistemological, perceptual, psychological, or ideological – such as instantiating “beauty”, providing “aesthetic pleasure”, representing the world, affording an avenue for self-expression, communicating feelings, or interpreting social or political experience (to mention some familiar explanations). Art is a response to man’s incipient sense of insignificance in the face of a scheme of things in which his presence seems to count for nothing. While it varies immensely in its manif-

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<sup>7</sup> This question is explored in more detail in the next chapter. See especially page 112 et seq.

<sup>8</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 570. Malraux is borrowing the term “dictionary” in this context from Delacroix, as he acknowledges.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 544. Cf. *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, 289, where Malraux speaks of “the coherence of style, which becomes the rival of universal chaos” (“la cohérence du style, qui devient rivale de l’insaisissable universel”).

estations, its fundamental achievement as a form of human endeavour – as a specific kind of creative act – is to “deny man’s nothingness”.

Although we have not yet gone beyond the general principles underlying Malraux’s theory of art, there are certain possible objections to his position which it may be useful to consider at this point. One might, for instance, take exception to his reliance on the notion of unity or coherence in the explanation just provided. Certainly, one might concede, there is a lengthy tradition in aesthetics and in certain schools of literary criticism (such as the so-called “New Critics” of the mid-twentieth century) that stresses unity, or “order” as it is sometimes called, as a necessary element in a work of art.<sup>10</sup> But this idea has been challenged by a number of twentieth century thinkers, such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, who seek to dissolve the boundaries of a work and highlight interconnections with its social, linguistic, or “discursive” contexts. Foucault’s essay “What is an Author?”, for instance, argues that the notion of the author imposes a spuriously restrictive range of meanings on a literary work because it is “the principle of a certain unity of writing”, a principle through which “in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses” and by which “one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning”.<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, certain theorists influenced by Derrida have argued that all texts (in the broad sense of the term which is sometimes extended to visual images and music) ultimately resist the kinds of final determinations of meaning, or “closure”, implied by the notion of unity. Meaning, it is said, is inherently unstable, “undecidable” and, in principle at least, inexhaustible.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a relatively recent example in aesthetics, see Ruth Lorand, *Aesthetic Order: A Philosophy of Order, Beauty and Art* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rainbow (London: Penguin, 1991), 101–120, 111, 119.

<sup>12</sup> One source of this thinking is Derrida’s essay “Différance” where he speaks of language as a “play of forms without a determined and invariable substance ... a spacing and temporization, a play of traces ...” Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Critical Theory since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 120–136, 128. This also seems to be part of his argument in *The Truth in Painting* where he critiques Heidegger’s interpretation of Van Gogh’s *Old Shoes with Laces* and Meyer Schapiro’s response to Heidegger. Derrida rejects what he terms “one of those reading exercises with magnifying glass which

Yet, whatever the strengths or weaknesses of these arguments (a question beyond the scope of the present study), they imply a notion of unity quite different from the one Malraux has in mind. Propositions of the kind mentioned revolve around relationships between meaning and what are often termed “signifying” or “discursive” practices, especially language. Malraux’s thinking, however, as our analysis reveals, is not based on *any* particular account of these relationships. Indeed, for Malraux, the very notion of meaning has a resonance quite different from that suggested by the propositions in question because he is not concerned with how, or to what extent, “signifying practices” have meaning but how, and to what extent, *human life* can have meaning. The arguments in question operate, in other words, on quite different planes. For Malraux, the unity of art is metaphysical in nature and a response to an “unknown scheme of things”. For writers such as those mentioned, considerations of this kind have no significant place, and a notion such as the “unknown scheme of things” plays little or no part. An interesting measure of the difference between the intellectual schemas under discussion is the contrast between their approaches to the question of the “inexhaustibility” of meaning. In Malraux’s eyes *also*, as we shall see later, the meanings of works of art are in principle inexhaustible. But, as we shall discover, this is so *even though*, in his view, unity is one of art’s essential features. Indeed, the matter can be stated more strongly. Far from thinking that unity might impose a limitation on the meaning of a work, Malraux regards the work’s unity, or coherence, in the sense in which he employs the terms, as *the very condition* of its endless possibilities of meaning – the source from which its power of endless “metamorphosis”, to employ his own term, emerges. The reasoning behind this claim is a matter for a later chapter<sup>13</sup> but it clearly suggests, as indicated, that one is dealing here with systems of thought operating on quite different planes, and that to interpret Malraux’s thinking through the categories of the writers mentioned would do little more than breed confusion.

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calmly claim to lay down the law, in police fashion indeed”. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 326.

<sup>13</sup> Chapter Six which examines Malraux’s account of the temporal nature of art.

Needless to add, the familiar claim that a work of art must possess “structural unity” is equally beside the point. Malraux is not arguing, in the vein of the “New Critics”, or of a traditional classical aesthetic, that a work of art must exhibit “order”, “balance”, or “harmony” among its different parts. These are questions of form and structure, and there is no evidence anywhere in Malraux’s writings on art, or in the choice of works he admires,<sup>14</sup> that he intends the notions of unity or coherence to be understood in that sense. Once again, one needs to stress that unity for Malraux is a metaphysical idea. A work is unified to the extent that it replaces the chaos of appearances with another world – a world in which it is no longer the case that “all this might not have been, might not have been as it is”. There is no trace in Malraux’s theory of art of an attempt to identify formal or structural rules that art might be called upon to obey.

One might still object, however, that the concept of art as “rival world” could suggest a somewhat discreditable attempt to escape from reality or, as the critic Denis Boak claims, to “refuse life”.<sup>15</sup> This again would be a misinterpretation, resting on a confusion about the notion of “reality” or “life”. For Malraux, art is certainly an escape from an arbitrary and contingent world (or “reality” or “life”) in which man seems to count for nothing. It is an escape, but one achieved through an affirmation – a transformation that “wrests forms from the real world to which man is subject, and makes them enter a world in which he is ruler”. Or as he writes elsewhere, it is an escape “not through flight (“*évasion*”), but through possession”.<sup>16</sup>

Boak is not the only critic to have misconstrued this point. In an essay on *La Psychologie de l’art*, Maurice Blanchot writes:

If art [for Malraux] is defined and constituted by its distance from the world, by the *absence* of the world, it is natural that everything that calls the world into question – which is now called by the highly imprecise term, transcendence – everything that surpasses, denies, destroys, threatens the complex of stable, comfortable, reasonably established, and hopefully durable relations, all these forces, whether pure or impure, proposed for man’s “salvation” or destruction,

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<sup>14</sup> Which in visual art include many in which the “aleatory” plays a significant role, such as certain Oceanic and African masks.

<sup>15</sup> Boak, 198.

<sup>16</sup> Malraux, “Préfaces, articles, allocutions: ‘Sur l’héritage culturel’,” 1192.

insofar as they shatter the validity of the everyday world, work for art, open the way for it, summon it.<sup>17</sup>

As we can now appreciate, this comment misses the point. While Blanchot is a little unclear, he appears to be suggesting that, for Malraux, “the world” to which art is addressed consists of a combination of social, political and ideological factors – which is presumably at least part of what he means by a “complex of stable, comfortable, reasonably established, and hopefully durable relations ... proposed for man’s ‘salvation’ or destruction”, and by “the everyday world”. If that reading were correct, there might perhaps be some grounds for claiming that Malraux views art, somewhat negatively, in terms of its “distance from the world ... the *absence* of the world”. And portrayed in that light, art might also, presumably, be characterised as an escape from practical realities – an escape in the sense of flight. As we have seen, however, art for Malraux does not function as a response to social, political, or ideological factors. Its frame of reference is meta-physical and its response is to the “unknown scheme of things”. It is not a “surpassing” of a “complex of stable, comfortable, reasonably established, and hopefully durable relations” but a surpassing of the transient world of appearances in which man counts for nothing; and its purpose is not to “shatter the validity of the everyday world” – the very notion of “the validity of the everyday world” making little sense in the context of Malraux’s thinking – but to replace the unknown scheme of things with a rival world scaled to man’s measure. Like Boak, in short, Blanchot places Malraux’s theory of art within a conceptual framework in which it does not belong – reading it as a response to a “world” quite different from the one Malraux has in mind, and thus misinterpreting his thinking at a fundamental level.

A further issue that merits brief comment in the present context is Malraux’s use of the word “destiny” (“*destin*”) which he occasionally employs in connection with the basic ideas we are considering, and

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<sup>17</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “Le Musée, l’art et le temps,” in *L’Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 21–51, 33. Italics in original. It is not clear why Blanchot claims that Malraux “calls” art “transcendence”. It is certainly true, as we shall see later, especially in Malraux’s account of the temporal nature of art, that art, for Malraux, *involves* a form of transcendence. Nowhere, however, does he describe art simply as transcendence.

which critics have frequently misconstrued. In the closing stages of *Les Voix du silence*, for example, he writes that

In those dark regions which the spectator of *Œdipus* is invited to explore, what fascinates him more than the vengeful satisfaction of seeing kings rolled in the dust is the simultaneous consciousness of human servitude and man's indomitable capacity to make this very servitude testify to his greatness.

For when the tragedy is over, Malraux continues,

the spectator decides not to put out his eyes but to see it again; for when he sees the Eumenides foregather on the tawny rocks of the Greek theatre, like the man who sees an image of the Crucified Christ, or a painted portrait, or landscape, he senses, even if obscurely, that man has intruded into a realm in which he had previously been without significance – that consciousness has intruded into the realm of destiny.<sup>18</sup>

Here the potentially ambiguous term “destiny” – a “suspect word” as Malraux himself acknowledges<sup>19</sup> – takes on a well-defined meaning. It is not the colloquial idea of a predetermined “fate”, but Malraux's shorthand, as it were, for the element within “the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life” that involves a sense of man counting for nothing – of being nothing more than flotsam in a universe of indifference and chaos. Thus, although the play *Œdipus* tells a tale of unremitting misfortune – of man as helpless victim of forces beyond his control – the spectator chooses to see it again (and not yield to despair) because, despite the bleak image of a man crushed by sorrows, its *portrayal* by Sophocles – its incorporation into the domain of art – seems to crush something more important: the sense of belonging to a blind, chaotic universe in which man is of no consequence. The play, like all works of art, gives the spectator a sense that destiny in this sense has been resisted and that “man has intruded into a realm in which he had previously been without significance”.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 886.

<sup>19</sup> Malraux, “De la représentation en Occident et en Extrême Orient,” 932.

<sup>20</sup> Malraux uses *Œdipus* to make the same point in *La Psychologie de l'art*, but he also includes another example. He writes: “What kind of hold does the novel exert on us? For a real, living Anna Karenina the events Tolstoy describes would be *undergone*. For the reader, despite a tendency to put herself in Anna's place, they are *mastered*. The difference between life and its representation in art is the suppression of destiny”. André Malraux, *La Psychologie de l'art: La Création artistique* (Paris: Skira, 1948), 144. Malraux's emphasis. An earlier version of the same passage, again



The claim should not be misunderstood. Malraux is not suggesting that the power of a work of art – its capacity to fascinate an audience and make them wish to see it again – springs from a capacity to solve the mysteries of human behaviour. Art is not a conquest of human psychology (or a reaction to *social* questions, as Blanchot implies) but a conquest of the fundamental human *situation* – of being subject to a destiny-ridden world in the sense in which the term is being used here. And destiny, Malraux writes,

is not overcome by being subject to analysis; in *Tristan* the poet gives us no explanations, yet its effect is quite as potent as Stendhal's novels in which the author sets out to explain so much. Destiny is vanquished to the extent that life is portrayed in terms of art; that things are scaled to man's measure; that the world loses its *autonomy*.<sup>21</sup>

This is the thinking behind Malraux's well-known claim that "Art is an anti-destiny" ("anti-destin").<sup>22</sup> The claim would doubtless seem puzzling if the notion of destiny were taken in the more colloquial sense mentioned above. In what way, after all, could art significantly affect a human destiny understood in that sense – assuming one accepted such a notion?<sup>23</sup> This, however, is not the meaning Malraux has in mind. Art is a revolt against, or escape from, destiny in the sense that, in place of a world in which man has a sense of utter insignificance – a sense of being crushed by indifferent, "autonomous" forces – the artist creates, and the audience then experiences, a rival,

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referring to *Œdipus* and *Anna Karenina*, can be found in one of the articles on art Malraux wrote in 1938 (again indicating the pre-war genesis of *La Psychologie de l'art*). See Malraux, "De la représentation en Occident et en Extrême Orient," 931.

<sup>21</sup> "De la représentation en Occident et en Extrême Orient," 931, 932. Malraux's emphasis.

<sup>22</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 897. Stuart Gilbert translates the statement as "All art is a revolt against man's fate". The translation is satisfactory enough as long as one observes the same caveat for the word "fate" that we have entered for the word "destiny". See André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 639.

<sup>23</sup> The claim would be equally puzzling if Malraux were conceptualising art in the more traditional sense, mentioned earlier, as the perception of some underlying reality which serves as the artist's ideal model or guide. In what way could art be *opposed* to a reality understood in that way? As this analysis suggests, interpreting the term "reality" in that traditional sense would quickly render Malraux's theory of art unintelligible.

coherent world – a world scaled to man’s measure, a “humanised” world to borrow Malraux’s term.<sup>24</sup> Destiny is not the idea of a pre-determined fate, and signifies more, even, than the vicissitudes of fortune or the inevitability of death. Death and misfortune are among its outward manifestations, so to speak, because they appear, like so much else, to pay no heed to man’s wishes; but destiny is the deeper sense of complete subjection, of counting for nothing, inherent in a universe which, lacking any underlying explanation, is experienced simply as chaos and indifference. Art is an anti-destiny not because it can *alter* this “sorry scheme of things” but because it creates a rival world that man recognises as his own, even if, like that of Œdipus, it is one of unremitting disaster. As Malraux phrased the point later in life in *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, it is “the replacement of destiny undergone by destiny mastered”.<sup>25</sup>

Malraux’s theory of art does not stand or fall by his use of the term destiny. As we have seen, he has other ways of expressing the same idea. The term merits a little more comment, however, because critics have at times dealt with it in ways that do little to clarify its meaning. Some, surprisingly enough, make no serious attempt at all to explain the term, despite employing it quite frequently in their expositions of Malraux’s thinking – a procedure that risks fostering the impression that his own usage is equally ill-defined. Others offer hasty explanations in the mould of an early commentator, Rémy Saisselin, who writes: “What then is art for Malraux? Art is anti-destiny ... It is, so to say, man’s fist held up in defiance of the heavens, and held in vain, for man knows he shall eventually be vanquished”.<sup>26</sup> A more recent critic, Edson Rosa da Silva, toys with a political interpretation, writing that “this concept [of art as *anti-destin*] risks falling into a facile idealism leading to the idea that art is, for Malraux, a utopian solution to the sufferings of humanity: despite the inevitable death of men, art is there

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<sup>24</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 883.

<sup>25</sup> *L’Homme précaire et la littérature* 274. In French: “La littérature apporte, au plus haut degré, la substitution du destin dominé au destin subi.”

<sup>26</sup> Rémy Saisselin, “Malraux: From the Hero to the Artist,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16, no. 2 (1957): 259.

to sing their praises".<sup>27</sup> And William Righter, the author, as we have said, of the only book on Malraux's theory of art written in English, suggests that *destin* is one of a series of words that Malraux "[repeats] in an incantatory style which produces an atmosphere of rhetorical intoxication, almost of mystery," and that here readers are dealing with language "where the obscure echoes and overtones are the most important thing about it".<sup>28</sup>

Comments such as Saisselin's are manifestly inadequate: destiny for Malraux signifies much more than "the heavens", and anti-destiny much more than a "fist held up in defiance". Rosa da Silva's suggestion is also erroneous, reading what is clearly a metaphysical idea as a semi-political proposition. And Righter's contention that the term "destiny" is chosen principally for rhetorical effect is equally mistaken. Although, as we have noted, Malraux himself is not entirely comfortable with the word (doubtless because he is aware of its ambiguity), it is difficult to think of any other *single word* that would convey his meaning quite as well. The emotive overtones, which were presumably the trigger for Righter's remark, are fully justified because Malraux is, after all, arguing that art is a response to a fundamental *emotion*: the notion of destiny is not simply an abstract concept – an idea – but the *individual's sense* of human servitude. And once separated from its more colloquial meaning, the term can certainly suggest the awareness of an apparently arbitrary and indifferent scheme of things which, as we have seen, is integral to that emotion.

Ultimately, one cannot fully explicate the issues at stake here, whether one makes use of the term "destiny" or not, without reference to the sense of life as "human adventure" discussed in Chapter Two. Essentially, as indicated there, this involves an apprehension of human

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<sup>27</sup> Edson Rosa da Silva, "Le musée et la bibliothèque: Un dialogue culturel" in *André Malraux: Quête d'un idéal humain et de valeurs transcendantes*, ed. Anissa Chami (Casablanca: Editions La Croisée des Chemins, 2006), 203–211, 210.

<sup>28</sup> Righter, 72. The other words on Righter's list are "the Eternal, conquest, metamorphosis, triumph, appearance, the Absolute, and Man". As we have already seen, "appearance" has a quite specific meaning for Malraux, and the term "Man", like human adventure, is employed in well-defined ways. Most of the other words in his list, and especially "metamorphosis" and "the Absolute", are discussed later in this study. As we shall see, the suggestion that they are employed principally for rhetorical effect is quite incorrect.

life minus any sense of an underlying goal or meaning – an image of human life as inexplicable “irruption” into being. Central to this is a simultaneous *awareness* of the human world, in all its multifarious forms, *and* of the precariousness of that world – a sense that, lacking any reason for being, or being the way it is, it seems poised on the brink of chaos and insignificance. “Destiny” is in essence Malraux’s term for the negative side of this equation. It is the ever-present sense of that which appears to deny man’s significance – the “sorry scheme of things” in which he is inescapably enmeshed but which seems utterly indifferent to his needs and desires. Art is an *anti*-destiny in the sense that it affirms human life understood in this sense and denies destiny: it creates a world in which everything has a reason – not, as indicated above, in the sense that everything is explained, but in the sense that, whether in the form of the dark, remorseless universe of *Œdipus*, or (for example) the quiet stillness of a Vermeer interior, it is a humanised world – a world that man recognises as his own, a world in which he is no longer mere, powerless subject, but ruler.

As a footnote to this discussion, one should perhaps add that in describing art as an *anti-destin*, Malraux is speaking of all art (in all art forms) irrespective of style or subject matter. The point deserves mention because critics have at times suggested that he is claiming that any work of art worthy of the name must necessarily be suggestive of struggle or revolt. One commentator writes, for example, that “What Malraux looks for in the art of the past are the aspects which evoke emotions similar to those which Kant analysed as arising from the contemplation of the sublime in nature”,<sup>29</sup> while another comments that “Goya fits Malraux’s metaphysical view of the artist perhaps better than any other, and stands out as the tormented challenger of destiny”.<sup>30</sup> Such claims are misleading. It is certainly true that a number of works Malraux admires evoke a sense of revolt – Goya’s *Third of May* is one clear example – but as a reading of *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* quickly reveals, he also has immense

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<sup>29</sup> Davezac: 178. Galen Johnson suggests, by contrast, that Malraux looks for the sublime in *modern* painting. He writes: “Malraux finds in modern painting a return to the worship of the sublime and exotic that characterised primitive religion.” Galen Johnson and Michael Smith, eds., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 20.

<sup>30</sup> Boak, 195.



Fig. 1. Georges de La Tour, *Saints Sebastian and Irene*

Paris, Louvre. © Photo Scala, Florence.

“... No other painter, not even Rembrandt, suggests so well this vast, mysterious silence. La Tour alone is the interpreter of the serenity that can be found in the midst of darkness.” Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, 620.

enthusiasm for many artists of a quite different stamp such as Braque, Cézanne, Vermeer, and Georges de La Tour (Fig. 1), not to mention non-European examples such as Buddhist sculpture. Equally groundless is the somewhat similar claim by Stefan Morawski that “Malraux has taken from Nietzsche the idea of two fundamental artistic orientations: Apollonian and Dionysian”.<sup>31</sup> The proposition that there is a Dionysian art, or art of “intoxication”, as against an Apollonian category of “measured restraint, free from the wilder impulses” (to quote Nietzsche’s description<sup>32</sup>) is quite alien to Malraux’s thinking. He is certainly keenly aware of differences in artistic *styles* and also, as we shall find, of the different purposes to which art has been put; but at the fundamental level, all art in Malraux’s eyes is a manifestation of the *same* creative act – the replacement of the chaotic world of appearances by a rival, coherent world. The revolt represented by art is not confined to this or that artistic period or style; it is fundamental to art in general.

The reader who has reached this point might perhaps be forgiven for concluding that Malraux’s theory of art is, like much modern aesthetics, a rather abstract affair with little to say about the concrete world of art itself. This, as the reader of *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* quickly discovers, is decidedly not the case. As mentioned in the Introduction, however, the aim of the present study is to analyse Malraux’s theory of art step by step, beginning from the foundations on which it rests, and this, as indicated earlier in this chapter, necessarily entails commencing with propositions of a somewhat abstract nature. Having considered these fundamental ideas, however, we are now in a position to explore their more concrete implications, and in a sense, therefore, we now come to the acid test. Does Malraux’s thinking help us make sense of the world of art as we know it today, or does it not? Does it have a major explanatory value, or does it not? The question is not so much about interpretation of particular works, although that issue does arise from time to time. The

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<sup>31</sup> Stefan Morawski, *L’Absolu et la forme, l’esthétique d’André Malraux*, trans. Yolande Lamy-Grum (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972), 101.

<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21, 22.

question is whether Malraux helps us understand the kinds of major issues a contemporary theory of art needs to address – issues such as: the nature of artistic creation; the function art serves for us today, and the different functions it has fulfilled across the millennia; the vital question of art’s temporal nature; the fact that the world of art today (unlike that of only a hundred years ago) is made up of an unprecedented *range* of works from cultures from the four corners of the earth and as far back as prehistory; the relationship between art and religious beliefs; the puzzling fact that much of what we today regard as art was created in cultures in which the very notion of art was non-existent; the vexed question of the relationship between art and history; and the emergence over the past 150 years of visual, literary and musical forms that enlist the techniques of art for purposes of a quite different kind – forms which Malraux sometimes terms “anti-arts”. These are the concrete issues to which our attention now turns, taking care in each case to observe whether or not the positions Malraux adopts emerge as direct and natural implications of the fundamental principles we have now considered – that is, whether we are dealing with a coherent theory of art, or whether, as E.H. Gombrich alleged in his early review of *Les Voix du silence*, Malraux is offering us “a mere string of accumulated *aperçus*”.<sup>33</sup>

The first issue to be considered – the nature of artistic creation – is a key element in Malraux’s thinking. It is a topic about which modern aesthetics has had relatively little to say, but to which Malraux makes a major contribution and where, in addition, one begins to perceive with increasing clarity the revolutionary nature of his theory of art.

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<sup>33</sup> “Malraux’s text ... looks like a mere string of accumulated *aperçus*, sometimes brilliant, sometimes vacuous ...” Gombrich, “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” 78

## Chapter Four

### Art and Creation

“... le peintre ne peut que copier un autre peintre – ou découvrir.”<sup>1</sup>  
Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*.

In the Introduction to a collection of essays published in 2003 entitled *The Creation of Art*, written mainly by aestheticians of the Anglo-American analytic school, the editors comment that “although the creation of art is a topic that should be a central one for aesthetics, it has been comparatively neglected in recent philosophical writings about art”. Neglect of the topic, the editors continue, “can only impoverish aesthetics” and their collection therefore seeks to show that “issues surrounding the creation of art deserve far more sustained attention than they have generally earned within the field of contemporary aesthetics”.<sup>2</sup> We shall have occasion later in this chapter to examine some of the arguments advanced in these essays. For the present, they are worth noting for drawing attention – correctly – to the neglect of the topic of artistic creation in the philosophy of art, but also as an interesting example of an issue mentioned in the Introduction to this study – the widespread neglect of André Malraux’s writings on art. For although *Les Voix du silence* includes a major section entitled “Artistic Creation” and although one of the three volumes of *La Psychologie de l’art* is wholly devoted to the topic – and although both titles have been widely available in English translation since the 1950s – nowhere in any of the essays in the collection in question is there any reference to Malraux.

In fairness, it should be added that this neglect is not uncommon even among Malraux’s own commentators. Despite the prominence he

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<sup>1</sup> “The painter can only copy another painter – or make discoveries.”

<sup>2</sup> Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingstone, eds., *The Creation of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1, 2, 26. The neglect of the topic seems, nevertheless, to persist. A more recent collection of essays purporting to describe important contemporary debates in analytic aesthetics includes no article or even index reference concerning creation in art. See: Matthew Kieran, ed., *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).



gives to the subject of artistic creation, nowhere in the critical literature, in French or in English, is there a reasonably comprehensive account of what he has to say, and still less a serious attempt to explain how his thinking links up with the other elements of his theory of art. There are, certainly, occasional, passing references to the topic in various books and articles, but it is nonetheless fair to say that this component of Malraux's theory of art, although one of the most important, is also one of the most seriously neglected.<sup>3</sup>

The present chapter seeks to remedy this state of affairs. The objective is not to provide a comprehensive coverage of everything Malraux has to say about artistic creation – his account being quite lengthy, as indicated – but to outline the key elements of his argument, showing why they are important, and why they flow naturally from the fundamental propositions we have now examined. In doing so, we will also consider a number of possible criticisms that might be made, and look briefly at certain other accounts of artistic creation.

One way of approaching Malraux's position in this context is to compare it with more conventional modes of thinking. According to one familiar view, the impulse to be an artist – the basic desire to paint, write or compose – springs initially from a response to some aspect of "reality" or "life", such as a picturesque scene for a painter, an interesting person or incident for a writer, and perhaps a certain sequence of everyday sounds for the composer.<sup>4</sup> Viewed in this light,

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<sup>3</sup> Some essays whose titles suggest they concern this aspect of Malraux's thought are in fact of a more general nature and have little to say on the topic. See for example: Jean Leymarie, "Malraux and the Creative Process," in *Malraux, Life and Work*, ed. Martine de Courcel (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 184–203. Antoine Terrasse, "André Malraux et le mystère de la création en art," in *Malraux*, ed. Hachette Réalités (Paris: Hachette, 1979), 159–191. Marissel, *La Pensée créatrice d'André Malraux*. André Marissel's book focuses mainly on Malraux's technique as a novelist.

<sup>4</sup> In the case of music, the logic is sometimes abandoned and it is suggested that a composer is inspired by scenes or events rather than sounds. This perhaps reflects an uncomfortable feeling that a sequence of everyday sounds seems an unlikely origin for a symphony or concerto, for example. As Malraux puts it (also describing the conventional view), "A composer seems less likely to have become one out of a love for nightingales than a painter to have become a painter out of love for landscapes." *Les Voix du silence*, 502.

the artist is, first and foremost, someone who reacts to “the world around him” in an unusually sensitive way, and is then fired with an urge to respond through some form of artistic expression. Biographers might, of course, disagree about which experiences were decisive, but the basic assumption remains that the urge to be an artist, whether one succeeds or fails, springs in essence from a response to people, objects or incidents – to “reality”, or “life”.

As one might expect, given the ideas outlined in the previous chapter, Malraux firmly rejects explanations of this kind. For Malraux, as we saw, “reality” *tout court* is, where art is concerned, merely the chaotic world of appearances – at most a “dictionary” consisting of elements *capable* of being invested with meaning but combined in a manner that renders them incoherent. Thus, Malraux argues, it is not mere contact with “reality” – the chaotic realm in which man counts for nothing – that first fires an ambition to be a painter, writer or composer, but the artist’s encounter with those objects *in which that chaos has been overcome*, those in which man is “ruler” – that is, *existing art*. The painter, in other words, is first inspired by *paintings*, the novelist by novels, the poet by poetry and the composer by music. Malraux neatly encapsulates the point in a comment on a well-known legend about Giotto. “An old story goes,” he writes,

that Cimabue was struck with admiration when he saw the shepherd-boy, Giotto, sketching sheep. But, in the true biographies [of artists], it is never the sheep that inspire a Giotto with the love of painting; but rather the paintings of a man like Cimabue.<sup>5</sup>

Malraux is not, of course, the first to suggest that the works of previous artists play a role in artistic creation. What is new and important in his case, however, is that the idea is not simply an isolated observation but an integral part of a theory of art. For as one can readily see, his argument here flows directly from the basic propositions outlined in the previous chapter. If reality, or “the world around us” – of which the real sheep are a part – is, where art is concerned, the incoherent world of appearances in which man counts for nothing,

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 497. Cf. “No shepherd became a Giotto by looking at his sheep”. *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, 125.

and if great art<sup>6</sup> such as that of Cimabue is a world – a rival world – in which that incoherence has been overcome and man is ruler, then it is the world of *art*, not the world *tout court*, that will arouse the enthusiasm of someone with an aptitude for artistic creation – just as it will, also, for the viewer, reader or listener who is developing a love of art. Malraux finds ample evidence for this claim in the history of art. “It is a revealing fact,” he writes,

that, when explaining how his vocation came to him, every great artist traces it back to the emotion he experienced at his contact with some specific work of art: a writer to the reading of a poem or a novel, or a visit to a theatre; a musician to a concert he attended, a painter to a painting he once saw. Never do we hear of the man who became an artist by suddenly, out of the blue, so to speak, responding to a compulsion to express some scene or startling incident.<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly then, Malraux rejects the familiar view, often associated with Romanticism,<sup>8</sup> that the artist is essentially the man or woman who is “more sensitive to life” than others, and that the urge to be an artist derives from this sensitivity. “An artist is not necessarily more sensitive than an art-lover,” he writes, “and is often less so than a young girl”. He or she possesses, however, a sensitivity “of a different order”. The artist is sensitive above all to *art*: “Just as a musician loves music and not nightingales, and a poet poems and not sunsets, a painter is not primarily a man who is thrilled by figures and landscapes. He is essentially one who loves pictures.” There is, in other words, no necessary correlation between “being sensitive” in the everyday sense and being an artist; and just as the supremely gifted artist is not necessarily unusually sensitive in that sense, so, Malraux argues, “the most sensitive man in the world is not necessarily an artist”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> There is no implied attempt here to draw a distinction between art and great art. The phrase is being used simply to indicate that we are discussing art that is widely regarded as such.

<sup>7</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 497.

<sup>8</sup> A number of Malraux’s critics have described his thinking about art as Romantic, the epithet usually intended somewhat pejoratively. There is no space in the present study to discuss this charge in detail but a number of important differences between Malraux’s position and Romanticism are noted at relevant points in the discussion.

<sup>9</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 494.

Malraux then takes his thinking a step further. Given that art, not “life”, is the artist’s point of departure, every great artist, he argues, “starts off with the pastiche”<sup>10</sup> – that is by *imitating the style* of the artist or artists he most admires, even if he is only vaguely aware of doing so. Again, Malraux argues, the evidence is abundant:

Goya’s path led through Bayeu,<sup>11</sup> the Impressionists’ path led through traditional painting or Manet; Michelangelo’s through Donatello, Rembrandt’s through Lastman and Elsheimer (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3); El Greco’s through Bassano’s studio – and precocity is simply the ability to copy at an early age.<sup>12</sup>

Genuine artistic creation – as distinct from the pastiche – occurs only when the artist begins to feel that copying will no longer suffice. No longer content with imitation, he begins to see, Malraux argues, that he is a prisoner of a style and that speaking in someone else’s language “involves a servitude peculiar to the artist: a submission to certain forms and to a given style”.<sup>13</sup> Gradually glimpsing the possibility of a *different* coherent world he might bring into being, the artist starts to break free from the style or styles that had initially exerted such a powerful influence and begins, often haltingly, to develop another. Thus “it is against a style that every genius has to struggle,” Malraux writes; and “Cézanne’s architecturally ordered landscapes” (for example) “did not stem from a conflict with trees and foliage, but from a conflict with painting as he knew it”.<sup>14</sup>

The ideas of “struggle” and “breaking free” are important here and the vocabulary Malraux employs in this context regularly suggests a striving to overcome, a search for deliverance requiring a breaking of

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

<sup>11</sup> Francisco Bayeu (1734-1795), one of Goya’s early mentors.

<sup>12</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 526. Cf. *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, 155: “Rimbaud did not begin by writing a kind of vague, formless Rimbaud, but with Banville; and the same is true, if we substitute other names instead of Banville, for Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Nerval, Victor Hugo. A poet does not begin with something vague and formless but with forms he admires.”

<sup>13</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 582.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Malraux uses the term “genius” simply as a synonym for “great artist”. He does not intend it in a specialist “Kantian” sense.



Fig. 2. Rembrandt, *The Prophet Balaam and the Ass* (1626)

Paris, Musée Cognacq-Jay. Photo: Félicien Faillet. Distribution: bpk Berlin.

“In his *Prophet Balaam* of 1626, Rembrandt is not setting out to represent life, but to speak the language of his master, Lastman ...”

Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, 532.



Fig. 3. Pieter Lastman, *Balaam and the Ass* (1622)

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Photo © Israel Museum, Jerusalem/David Harris.

bonds. Paradoxically, he argues, the artist's discovery of his or her own style involves a form of destruction. "What differentiates the man of genius from the man of talent, the craftsman and the dilettante," he writes,

is not the intensity of his responses to the world around him, nor only the intensity of his responses to the works of other artists; it is the fact that he alone, among all those who are fascinated by these works, *also* seeks to destroy them.<sup>15</sup>

This claim, initially puzzling though it might seem, flows naturally from the basic propositions we have considered. If, for the artist, "reality" or "life" is merely the chaos of appearances – at most a "dictionary" of forms – the painter (or composer or poet) has only two choices: as Malraux puts it, either to "copy another painter – or to

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<sup>15</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 582. Emphasis in original.

make discoveries”: to follow an existing path or to blaze new trails.<sup>16</sup> In fulfilling a desire to create – to emulate the achievements of the artist or artists he most admires – the painter, composer or poet must therefore, paradoxically, *eradicate* from his own work all trace of the styles of those very artists. In bringing a new, coherent world into being, he must struggle against, and eventually *destroy*, in his own work, the very styles that elicited so much admiration and gave birth to the desire to be an artist in the first place.<sup>17</sup> There is no middle way, no neutral path such as a “styleless” representation of the world, or “copying nature in her own style”,<sup>18</sup> in which the artist might take temporary refuge. The options are simply the pastiche or discovery – to copy or to blaze new trails.

The proposition that there is no such thing as a “styleless” representation of the world leads to further important implications of Malraux’s thinking which we shall pursue in a moment. This may, however, be an appropriate place to pause and consider certain possible criticisms of the points made so far. One objection might be that in placing so much emphasis on the impact of existing art, Malraux is giving the impression that the artist somehow works in a vacuum, oblivious to the shapes and colours in the world around him. Surely, one might reply, the world of objects and events must play some part in the creative process? This objection would oversimplify and distort Malraux’s argument. While rejecting the conventional account that sees art as a direct response to “life”, he fully accepts, as we have seen, that “life” – the world of appearances – can serve as a resource, a dictionary of forms, which may on occasion be an important source of suggestions and intimations. The issue, however, is one of priorities. “The world of things and events,” he writes,

can be rich in suggestions – of colour, of line, and of the form the artist “is after” – for the artist who is looking for them, and on condition that he is not looking for them as for a pre-synthesised whole but in the same sense that great wellsprings, their levels having built up, look for a watercourse to follow as a river. Under

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 537.

<sup>17</sup> The point can, however, be exaggerated. One critic claims that for Malraux “the artist ... is essentially demonic, and his demonism is directed against the forms of his predecessors, which he is trying to devour ...” Darzins: 108. This distorts Malraux’s idea.

<sup>18</sup> One of Malraux phrases for this idea. *Les Voix du silence*, 539.

these conditions, the part played by living forms can be immense; a vast Delacroix's "dictionary" will emerge out of limbo.<sup>19</sup>

And illustrating the point by a concrete example, he adds:

It was perhaps when he noticed that a meditative look comes over a face when the eyelids are lowered that a Buddhist sculptor was moved to impart that look of meditation to a Greek statue by closing its eyes; but if he noticed the expressive value of those closing eyes, it was because he was instinctively seeking amongst all the living forms a means of metamorphosing the Greek face.<sup>20</sup>

What the artist rejects, in other words, and what the art he admires incites him to reject, is not "the world" *per se* but the relationships within that world, or more accurately the *absence* of relationships – their arbitrary and contingent nature. The world of objects, shapes and colours is by no means irrelevant; it can play a major role – but as servant not master. The *sine qua non* if it is to play that role, however, is the artist's pursuit of a new coherent world as he strives to break free from the style or styles that had initially impressed him. "There are rich treasures in the cavern of the world," Malraux writes, summing up the point, "but if the artist is to find them he must bring his torch with him".<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting in this context to consider certain comments by Maurice Merleau-Ponty on this aspect of Malraux's thinking. In the course of a lengthy essay on *Les Voix du silence*, Merleau-Ponty takes Malraux to task for, among other things, "[not getting] inside the functioning of style itself" and for suggesting that style "could be known and sought after outside all contact with the world, as if it were an *end*". In reality, Merleau-Ponty argues, the work "is not brought to fulfilment far from things and in some intimate laboratory to which

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 570. As indicated earlier (see Chapter Three, note 8) Malraux borrows the term "dictionary" in this sense from Delacroix. As the discussion in the present chapter has implied, this account of artistic creation is not limited to visual art. Cf. *L'Homme précaire et la littérature*, 157 where Malraux uses the concept of a "Delacroix's dictionary" in the context of literary creation.

<sup>20</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 573. One of the sections of *Les Voix du silence*, entitled "The Metamorphoses of Apollo", describes *inter alia* the emergence of the Buddhist style from Greek models in post-Alexandrian cultures in regions such as Bactria and Gandhara. Aspects of this analysis are considered in another context in Chapter Five. See page 181 et seq.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



the painter and the painter alone has the key". One must, he claims, "put the painter back in contact with the world", understand that "there are no supermen" and that

there is no one who does not have a human being's life to live, and that the secret ... of the writer, or of the painter, does not lie in some realm beyond his empirical life, but is so mixed in with his mediocre experiences, so modestly confused with his perception of the world, that there can be no question of meeting it separately, face to face.<sup>22</sup>

In large measure, these comments seem to reflect Merleau-Ponty's own theoretical views about art which there is no space to examine here; but to the extent that they purport to provide an accurate account of Malraux's understanding of artistic creation, they are, one has to say, more than a little muddled. Malraux certainly sees the search for a new style – a new coherent world – as the prime mover of the creative process (once the artist has moved beyond the pastiche), and this is most certainly the artist's "end";<sup>23</sup> but Malraux does not, as we have seen, regard this as a process taking place "outside all contact with the world" or "far from things" (although since it is necessarily a somewhat solitary search, one might perhaps say that it does take place in an "intimate laboratory to which ... the painter alone has the key"). In a sense, Malraux does, certainly, suggest that the artist's "secret", to use Merleau-Ponty's term, lies "in some realm beyond his empirical life", if we take that statement to mean that the artist's aim is to create a rival world different in kind from the realm of mere appearance; but nowhere does Malraux suggest that this transforms the artist into a "superman" who "does not have a human being's life to live". Nor does he deny that the artist's discoveries, to the extent that they spring from the "dictionary" of the world, might, on occasion, spring from his "mediocre experiences", whatever, precisely, that phrase might mean. Broadly speaking, Merleau-Ponty, not unlike Blanchot,<sup>24</sup> seems intent on suggesting that Malraux sees the artist as someone who has turned his back on the world, or on what Merleau-Ponty terms "empir-

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<sup>22</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le Langage indirect et les voix du silence," in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 49–104, 67–72. Merleau-Ponty's italics.

<sup>23</sup> As we recall, Malraux defines styles as "significations" which impose coherence on the unknown scheme of things. In his eyes, therefore, the invention of a new style is certainly one way of describing the artist's "end". See page 82.

<sup>24</sup> See page 86.

ical life". This view is mistaken. Since the artist is necessarily in pursuit of a rival world – a world which, in Malraux's words quoted earlier, "stands for unity as against the chaos of mere, given reality" – he or she is certainly not, in Malraux's eyes, content *simply* with "empirical life"; but, at the same time, like the imagined Buddhist sculptor searching for a means of metamorphosing the Greek face, he or she never loses sight of empirical life and of the potential for "rich treasures in the cavern of the world".

One might perhaps object, however, that Malraux over-dramatises the creative process. Surely, it might be said, terms such as "struggle", "break free", and "destroy" are excessively emotive, and Malraux is simply indulging in the kind of needless rhetoric of which critics such as Bourdieu and Richter have accused him. This, however, would be to forget the foundations on which Malraux's theory of art rests. Art for Malraux is a response to the fundamental *emotion* man feels in the face of life; it is not the mere solving of an intellectual problem. And just as the artist's creative impulse is, on Malraux's account, first fired by responses to that fundamental emotion – that is, by encounters with other works of art – so the *eradication* of the style of those works in his own is also an emotional, and not merely an intellectual, experience. The style or styles from which the artist is seeking to break free had, after all, created a deep impression and evoked strong admiration – strong enough to awaken the creative impulse in the first place – and the process of eliminating them, Malraux is suggesting, is no less charged with feeling. Viewed in this light, terms such as "struggle", "break free", and "destroy" seem very much to the purpose and by no means excessively rhetorical.

This terminology should not, however, be misunderstood. As indicated in the previous chapter, Malraux is not suggesting, as some have claimed, that great art must always be overtly concerned with struggle or revolt – that his preference will always go to a Goya, for example, over a Vermeer or a Georges de La Tour.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in the present context, he is not suggesting that the *artist* is always bent on destruction or revolt in some wider sense, or simply for its own sake. One critic describes Malraux's characterisation of the artist in these terms:

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<sup>25</sup> See page 91.

It is as though in a spirit similar to that of the exploited proletarian who hopes to overcome his frustration and economic alienation by politically winning the right to destroy the social order under which he has suffered, that Michelangelo rebelled against Masaccio and felt obliged to make drawings after Masaccio's frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel; Byzantium rebelled against the Hellenistic stagnancy; Manet, too, revolted, thus laying the foundations of modern art ... Each significant feature results from deliberate, aggressive volition.

Such views, this critic continues, would be mistaken, and in fact "there have been very few full-fledged revolutionaries in art so far, because all the essential characteristics of a revolution have not been present in a given situation".<sup>26</sup>

These comments are misconceived. Certainly, the artist is, in Malraux's view, "rebellious" in the sense that he is struggling to break free from the style or styles that fired his ambition to be an artist, but this, as we have seen, is a rebellion of a *metaphysical* nature – an attempt to discover a rival, coherent world in the sense discussed earlier. Likening the artist to the "exploited proletarian" or a "full-fledged revolutionary" bent on "destroying the social order", serves merely to obscure this point. Nor, one should add, need the artist's revolt have the character of "deliberate, aggressive volition". The discoveries leading to the creation of a new style, Malraux argues, are often – perhaps more often than not – achieved after years of patient labour and experimentation. "Frequently," he writes, "the artist has to expel his masters from his canvases bit by bit; sometimes their hold on him remains so strong that he seems, as it were, to insinuate himself into odd corners of his picture".<sup>27</sup> Nothing in Malraux's account, in short, suggests that the personality or attitudes of the artist must necessarily be "aggressive", or that he should be intent on "destroying the social order", if that is what the comment quoted above is intended to imply. This is not, of course, to suggest that the artist may not *also* be a social or political revolutionary; but his or her revolt *as an artist*, Malraux is arguing, is of a quite specific kind, and one that might well be quite compatible with a marked conservatism in other areas of life. (Speaking of Cézanne – obviously a revolutionary in the artistic sense – Malraux writes: "He does not necessarily want to change the world, or man's relationship with God; he wants to challenge existing pic-

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<sup>26</sup> Davezac: 182, 183.

<sup>27</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 570.

tures with pictures that do not yet exist. His efforts are focused in a specific domain ...”<sup>28</sup>) Nowhere does Malraux suggest that the artist must necessarily be opposed to the established order. Indeed, as we shall see later, he considers the artist, at certain historical periods, to have been a potent force in *nourishing* the beliefs of the social order to which he belongs.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps, however, one might object that Malraux is ignoring the artist’s freedom to *choose* the artist or artists he or she will adopt as models. Could one not argue that the artist is far less a “prisoner” struggling to break free than Malraux would have us believe, because there is, after all, a variety of styles from which he or she is always free to *select*? Malraux deals with this point quite directly. In this context, he contends, the notion of free choice is misleading. The word “choice”, he writes, “suggests the weighing-up of comparable significances and qualities: the attitude of a buyer at a market”. But, he continues,

Have we forgotten the first contacts of our early youth with genius? Essentially, we never deliberately chose anything; we had successive or simultaneous enthusiasms, even if they were incompatible with each other. What young poet ever chose between Baudelaire and Jean Aicard (or even Théophile Gautier)? What novelist between Dostoyevsky and Dumas (or even Dickens)? What painter between Delacroix and Cormon (or even Decamps)? What musician between Mozart and Donizetti (or even Mendelssohn)? Tristan did not choose between Isolde and the lady beside her. Every young person’s heart is a graveyard containing the names of a thousand dead artists, but whose only real denizens are a few mighty, and often antagonistic, spirits.<sup>30</sup>

Here again, one sees the importance in Malraux’s theory of art of the underlying idea that art is a response to a fundamental *emotion*. One is not dealing with the realm of impersonal ideas but with an apprehension of life of which, as discussed earlier, the individual knows he or she is a part. The artist’s relationship with art, which is a response to that emotion, is necessarily of the same order. It is not a detached “weighing-up of comparable significances and qualities” but a res-

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 568.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. below, page 140.

<sup>30</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 535. Jean Aicard (1848-1921), minor French poet, dramatist, and novelist. Fernand Cormon (1845-1924), French Academic painter. Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps (1803-1860), French Romantic painter.

ponse manifesting itself in the form of enthusiasms and strong attachments (or of their absence where the art in question makes little impression). “The painter may spend his time choosing and preferring (as he thinks)”, Malraux goes on to say, “but once his attitude to art takes a definitive form, much of the freedom has gone out of it”.<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere, Malraux makes the same point in connection with the viewer. Speaking, in the introduction to *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale*, of the reasons why he has chosen the particular images included in the three volumes, he writes:

Let us be wary of the word “choice”, so equivocal when it comes to art. It suggests a freedom to do more or less as one pleases. I have shown elsewhere [the reference is almost certainly to the section of *Les Voix du silence* just considered] how unsatisfactorily the idea of choice describes the artist’s relationship with his masters, and how much, on the contrary, he seems to respond to their bidding. Do we ourselves choose the art we admire any more than that?<sup>32</sup>

The Introduction to this study suggested that Malraux’s theory of art represents a radical challenge to much traditional thinking in the philosophy of art and here we see one of the specific ways in which this is so. Since the eighteenth century – especially since Kant – one of the most widely held and firmly entrenched notions of Western aesthetics has been that the individual’s response to a work of art takes the form of a *judgment*, often characterized as a “disinterested” judgment. The precise meanings of these terms, even in their Kantian context, have often been matters of debate,<sup>33</sup> and some writers have also been uncomfortable with the idea that a response to art needs to be seen as “disinterested” (as “without any interest” in Kant’s formulation<sup>34</sup>).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 535, 537.

<sup>32</sup> André Malraux, *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale: La statuaire, Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 973.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 148–162.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, the First Moment of the “Analytic of the Beautiful” in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*: “Taste is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction *without any interest*.” (Emphasis in original.) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 96. The judgment in question is, of course, associated with the idea of beauty (and Kant adds: “The object of such a satisfaction is called *beautiful*”) but the issue at stake in the present discussion is the judgment itself.

Broadly speaking, nevertheless, one of the central tenets – one might almost say one of the central *assumptions* – of Western aesthetics over the past three centuries, and certainly over recent decades in the Anglo-American context, is that in some essential way our response to a work of art takes the form of a judgment, or as one writer phrases it, referring to Kant's view in particular, “a peculiar exercise of reflective judgment in the estimation of an object”.<sup>35</sup> In addition, many agree that the judgment should be understood as “disinterested”.

As we are now in a position to see, Malraux's theory of art challenges these ideas in a quite radical way. At the fundamental level, he is saying, our response to works of art is not a judgment at all, if, to borrow his words, that idea implies a “weighing-up of comparable significances and qualities” – that is, a decision based on a dispassionate balancing of reasons for and against. Our response to works of art, like that of the artist himself, is fundamentally a question of enthusiasms (or the lack of them) – that is, a response of an essentially *emotional* nature. And since, to employ Malraux's formulation, we are speaking of “the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life beginning with his own,” the response is scarcely one to be described as “disinterested”. This does not, of course, imply that Malraux is somehow encouraging an “emotional”, or worse, a sentimental, approach to art. Equally, he is not referring to the successive emotional states – sadness, hope, or joy, for example – that a play or novel, for instance, might arouse in its audience or readers. Nor, importantly, is he denying that one might express a judgment *post facto* about a work – to decide to see Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* again, for example, or to purchase a copy of *Hamlet* but not of some other play one has seen. Malraux's claim concerns the nature of the “hold” a work of art exerts on its audience at the fundamental level, whether it be a florid, Romantic opera – a *La Traviata* – or a work in a more restrained idiom such as a Braque abstract or a Sung landscape. The different works we admire may well be “antagonistic” in that sense, Malraux acknowledges, but the nature of their hold on us – their fascination, to employ the term he uses in the remarks quoted earlier in relation to *Ædipus*<sup>36</sup> – is always fundamentally the same. Essentially, it is of an emotional

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<sup>35</sup> Guyer, 7.

<sup>36</sup> See page 87.

kind, not one based on a reflective judgment, because at bottom the fascination the work exerts on its audience, as on the artist himself, is due to the response it makes to the fundamental emotion to which all art is addressed – the sense, even if only obscurely felt, that “another world” has been brought into being, and that, in the terms Malraux employed in that earlier discussion, “consciousness has intruded into the realm of destiny”. “We need only recall,” he writes, “the admiration, and the other less definable emotions, evoked by the first great poem we encountered; they stemmed not from any judgment but from a revelation”.<sup>37</sup> One may certainly make judgments after the event, but fundamentally, Malraux is saying, the *psychology* of the individual’s response is not based on detached judgments and reasoned choices at all but on the power of that revelation – the power of the work’s response to the fundamental emotion in question. None of Malraux’s commentators has previously drawn attention to the sharp contrast between his thinking on this matter and the traditional view based on the notion of a judgment (an omission which may in part be due to the general neglect of his account of artistic creation, mentioned earlier), but it is clear that in this respect – as in many others, as we shall see – Malraux’s theory of art represents a challenge to some of the most deeply entrenched assumptions of Western aesthetics.<sup>38</sup>

None of the objections to Malraux’s arguments considered so far has directly questioned his claim, mentioned earlier, that the artist has only two options: to “copy another painter – or to make discoveries”: to follow an existing path, or to blaze new trails. This proposition, we recall, arose from his argument that the artist begins with the pastiche,

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<sup>37</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 532.

<sup>38</sup> A modern aesthetician – one belonging to the school of “analytic” aesthetics, for example – might perhaps object that the “emotional response” of a given viewer might turn out to be shallow and unreliable, and that this would hardly seem a sound basis for distinguishing art from non-art. Two points should be made in reply. First, Malraux is not attempting to establish rules by which such distinctions might be made (assuming this were possible). His aim in the present context is to explore the *psychology* of the individual’s response to works of art, assuming that there are at least *some* objects that can be appropriately so described. Second, even if the psychology of that response were *explained* as a “reflective judgment”, it does not follow from this that in any given case the judgment will necessarily be sound.

and that in bringing a new coherent world into being, he must struggle against, and eventually destroy, the style or styles that had originally impressed him and given birth to the initial desire to be an artist. On Malraux's account, it was pointed out, there is no middle way – no intermediate position such as a “styleless” representation of the world, or “copying nature in her own style”, in which the artist might take temporary refuge.

In response to this, one might perhaps argue (although no critic seems yet to have raised the point) that it presents an unduly restricted account of the artist's options. Surely, one might reply, there are other alternatives apart from, on the one hand, the style of some previous artist (or some combination of more than one existing style), and on the other, a new style that the artist has himself discovered? Is there not some neutral position – an “extra-stylistic” option, so to speak, that can, if only temporarily, provide another alternative? Malraux addresses this point directly and his response throws valuable light not only on his understanding of artistic creation but also on his account of the nature of art more generally. In particular, it allows one to gain a more concrete understanding of what he has in mind when he speaks of art as the creation of “another” – or “rival” – world.

If the objection in question were well founded – if there were a neutral, intermediate position – different styles would, Malraux points out, need to be understood as “successive varieties of ornament added to an immutable substratum”<sup>39</sup> – a kind of “surplus” which, in theory at least, could be jettisoned altogether if the artist so desired. This he terms the “fallacy of the neutral style”. In visual art, he writes, it is the notion

that there exists a styleless, photographic kind of drawing (though we know now that even a photograph has its share of style) which would serve as the foundation of a work, style being something added.

The basis of this view, he continues, is the idea that a living model can be copied “without any interpretation or expression”. In reality, he argues,

No such copy has ever been made. Even in drawing this notion can be applied only to a small range of subjects: a standing horse seen in profile, but not a

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<sup>39</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 540.



galloping horse ... Can one imagine a drawing of a rearing horse, seen from in front, in a style that is not that of any school, or of any innovator?

The notion of the neutral style, he adds,

springs in large measure from the idea of the silhouette: the basic neutral style in drawing would be the bare outline. But any such method if strictly followed would not lead to any form of art, but would stand in the same relation to drawing as an art as the bureaucratic style stands to literature.<sup>40</sup>

The reasoning here follows directly from Malraux's basic propositions. If, for the artist, bare reality (the so-called "visible world" for the painter) is at most a "dictionary" – an assemblage of elements combined in a manner that renders them incoherent – and if the artist replaces this with a rival, unified world, the creative act in art will always involve a process of sifting, selection, exclusion, and re-ordering – in short of *transformation*. A "neutral style" – that is, a procedure which, in the name of a supposed "objectivity", or thoroughgoing realism, for example, *refused* to transform, would thus not be a "styleless" art but no form of art at all. It would simply be an abandonment of the processes on which art necessarily depends.

Here we see once again how far Malraux's understanding of art differs from the view that art is essentially a form of representation.<sup>41</sup> This popular idea, which encounters obvious difficulties in the case of music, but which is often invoked in relation to visual art and literature<sup>42</sup> can readily foster the belief that the artist's task essentially

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 534.

<sup>41</sup> See page 81 where Malraux's position on this matter was introduced in a more abstract way.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. for example Peter Kivy's comment: "Most philosophers would agree, I think, that if anything is an established fact in their discipline, it is that literature is largely, and in an important way, a 'representational' art"; and later: "the physical, painterly, or sculptural medium of the visual arts of representation ... is a medium of representation, and we can neither value nor enjoy it, *qua* medium, apart from what it represents, *qua* medium." (Kivy himself argues that literature is not always representational art and seeks to limit the idea to "performed literature" only. He also argues that music is not a representational art.) Kivy, 55, 180. Cf. also the comment by another writer of the analytic school: "Depiction, or pictorial representation, is a type of representation – this is one of the few bedrock truths approved by all philosophers who have worked up opinions on the matter." Dominic McIver Lopes, "The Domain of Depiction," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 160–174, 160. A substantial proportion

involves a kind of a “transposition” or “transcription” of the outside world onto the surface of a canvas or into the pages of a novel (a transcription which might, of course, be said to involve “stylistic effects” but which might, nonetheless, still be conceptualised essentially in those terms). From there, it is but a short step to suggest that a prime virtue of the true artist is “faithfulness to reality”, and then, going a step further, that a neutral style, which would transcribe reality with minimum stylistic “interference”, or none at all, might be a real possibility. Malraux’s analysis implies that these ideas rest on a serious misunderstanding. To the extent that it is even conceivable, a neutral style would be a form of depiction that had abandoned all but the last vestiges of the procedures available to art. In visual art it would be at best (and then only in a limited number of cases) the bare outline or the silhouette. In literature, it would lead to the commercial or bureaucratic style where, similarly, language tends towards a limited range of standard, “lifeless” forms. To the extent it were possible, a neutral style would, in other words, lead merely to the *sign* – that is, to those limited uses of visual forms or language that merely suggest, or “point to”, living forms (as a silhouette of a standing horse might be used to indicate the presence of horses), but it would stop well short of *portraying* any such form.<sup>43</sup> The artist, Malraux is arguing, is not involved in transcribing anything, but in transforming.<sup>44</sup> Certainly, representation, in the simple sense of including in a picture forms resembling real objects, is one of the *tools or techniques* available to art – like the varied uses of line or colour – but, on Malraux’s account, it is no more than that. As a form of endeavour – as a human activity –

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of modern aesthetics, particularly in the Anglo-American arena, revolves around the idea that art is largely explicable in terms of the idea of representation.

<sup>43</sup> As this analysis suggests, Malraux’s theory of art provides no support for the claim advanced in certain “semiotic” theories – of which there are several variants – that art is essentially a system of signs. Malraux agrees that art sometimes *makes use* of signs, but in itself the sign is, on his account, only an embryonic form of art. (See *Les Voix du silence*, 534, 543, 544.)

<sup>44</sup> Cf. “Whatever he might say, [the artist] *never* submits to the world, and always submits the world to that which he substitutes for it. His will to transform is inseparable from his nature as artist.” Malraux, *La Psychologie de l’art: La Création artistique*, 156. Emphasis in original. This why Malraux can also write: “There is no realistic style as such; only realistic orientations of existing styles.” *Les Voix du silence*, 519.

he is contending, art is never representation. (“It is for the non-artist, not the artist,” he writes, “that painting is only a form of representation”.<sup>45</sup>) Art is the creation of a *rival* world, a world that depends for its very existence on a process of transformation of the “real world”. As noted earlier, Malraux defines an artist’s style as his or her means of creating this rival, unified world, and “we are beginning to understand,” he observes, “that representation is one of the devices of style, instead of thinking that style is a means of representation”.<sup>46</sup> “Great artists,” he writes, summing up this view, “are not transcribers of the world; they are *its rivals*”.<sup>47</sup>

This is why Malraux insists that art always involves a process of *reduction*, and that “this reduction is the beginning of art”.<sup>48</sup> For if one understands the task of the painter (for example), who is obliged to reduce three dimensional forms to two dimensions, not as an attempt to represent the world, but as means of creating *another* world – a world whose creation requires a process of selection, exclusion, re-ordering, and thus of transformation – this apparent obligation is in fact much more akin to an *opportunity*. The very possibility of being able to do so makes art possible, and is almost, one might say, a happy accident of human existence that affords the painter the means through which a transformed world can be brought into being. One might perhaps object that the argument does not hold good for sculpture since here the artist is not obliged to reduce three dimensions to two, and exact replicas of real objects are quite possible. Malraux’s rejoinder is that sculpture too involves a process of reduction – that of “movement, implicit or portrayed, to immobility”. And although, he writes, “we can imagine a still life carved and painted to look exactly like its model, we cannot conceive of its being a work of art. Imitation apples in an imitation bowl are not a true work of sculpture”. Which is why, he adds, “colours applied to sculpture so rarely imitate those of

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<sup>45</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 538.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 553.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 698. Emphasis in original. Malraux uses this same statement as the epigraph for his final volume on art, *L’Intemporel*. Cf. also: “Like the painter, the writer is not the transcriber of the world; he is its rival.” *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, 152.

<sup>48</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 491. The French reads: “L’art compte alors avec cette réduction” which might also be translated: “Art comes into play with this reduction”. I have used Stuart Gilbert’s translation which seems satisfactory.

the real world; and why everyone feels that waxworks (the only forms in our time that are completely illusionist) have nothing to do with art".<sup>49</sup> Transformation – and not representation – is thus no less essential in the case of sculpture.<sup>50</sup> Malraux is not, of course, claiming that the *mere fact* of reduction results in a work of art. Reduction is “the beginning” of art: it is a *sine qua non*, not a sufficient condition. In reality, the individual artist may never go beyond the pastiche. He or she may always, consciously or unconsciously, be the imitator of a style, or of a mixture of styles: he or she may never blaze new trails. The essential point, however, is that these are the only alternatives. There is no neutral style, no intermediate position, no “purely objective representation” to which styles might be added as “successive varieties of ornament”. Style is not an added extra, or embellishment; it is, Malraux argues, the very substance of the transformational processes required by art, “no less necessary”, he writes, “when the artist is aiming at unlikeness than when he aims at life-likeness”.<sup>51</sup>

One might still object that while Malraux’s account of artistic creation may seem to apply well enough to the history of European art since the Renaissance, when changes in style have often been quite pronounced and “blazing new trails” a relatively frequent occurrence, it seems much less persuasive in cases such as ancient Egypt or Byzantium where the dominant styles appear to have remained almost static over long periods of time. Is Malraux is offering us a Eurocentric account of art and generalising from too narrow a base?

A complete response to this question will need to await discussion of historical issues in later chapters, but one important point can be made here. Even in cultures such as Egypt in which the reigning style

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. This would not of course preclude certain real objects – “objets trouvés” – being regarded as art, either as parts of a sculpture or as the “sculpture” itself. A piece of driftwood displayed as art is not viewed as a representation of a piece of driftwood (as a wax model is of a particular person).

<sup>50</sup> It is reasonably straightforward to see how the idea of reduction also applies in the case of literature, which involves a selection of incidents, kinds of characters, vocabulary etc. Malraux does not explore the idea in relation to music but it is not difficult to see how it applies there as well. Music “reduces” the world of sounds to its separate constituents – pitch, rhythm, etc. It thus enables the creation of “another world” of sound.

<sup>51</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 491.

appears to have remained unchanged over long periods, there is, nonetheless, Malraux argues, a vital difference between works that simply follow conventional formulae and those which, while not challenging tradition in conspicuous ways, nevertheless represent true creative achievements. Malraux discusses this issue in some detail in an early chapter of *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale* where he draws a distinction between the sculpture of “production” (or “convention”) and sculpture involving a genuine act of creation. Using ancient Egypt as his principal example, he illustrates the point through reproductions of sculpture of both kinds – convention, for example, by a lacklustre statue of Sesostri II, and creation by a much more striking statue of Queen Nefert.<sup>52</sup> The first, he writes, obeys “a stereotype that endured for millennia” – an “invincible academism” – while the latter belongs to a quite different category of works – “a series of discoveries”.<sup>53</sup> The phenomenon of an art of “production”, he continues, is by no means limited to Egyptian art, or even just to ancient civilizations (one of his comparisons juxtaposes images of Michelangelo’s *Day* and a copy of this work in the Bargello Museum in Florence attributed to Vincenzo Danti<sup>54</sup>). Nor does it necessarily occur only in periods of artistic decadence. It seems to arise, he suggests, as a “corrosive” accompaniment to every major artistic style, dragging it back to conventional formulae (essentially to pastiches of existing works) or to the sign, or simply to the copy.<sup>55</sup> As indicated, Malraux has more to say about this issue, and later discussion will factor in his account of the relationship between art and historical forces where he argues, *inter alia*, that the impact of historical change on art has been more pronounced in certain periods than in others.<sup>56</sup> The

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<sup>52</sup> *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale: La statuaire*, 978, 979. Malraux provides further illustrations of the point in subsequent pages, which include reproductions of a statue of Tuthmosis III in the Egyptian Museum of Turin (convention) and of a statue of Akhenaton in the Cairo Museum (creation). Unfortunately, the contrast could not be shown here because most of the images proved impossible to obtain.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 976–983.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 989.

<sup>55</sup> “A style is not merely an idiom or mannerism,” he writes elsewhere. “It becomes these only when, ceasing to be a conquest, it settle down into a convention”. *Les Voix du silence*, 541.

<sup>56</sup> See page 293 et seq.

essential point in the present context is that he is fully alive to the issue at stake, and an important part of his response is that major artistic styles often generate imitative works – products of an “academism” – that emerge in their shadow.

A further objection to Malraux’s account of the creative process might be that he begs the question of first causes. If all art starts with the pastiche, how then did art begin in the first place? How did the “first artist” begin? Or to adapt his account of the Giotto legend, how was the first “Giotto” inspired if there *were no* “Cimabue”? Malraux does not see the objection as compelling. On the one hand, he points out, “problems of first causes are not peculiar to art”.<sup>57</sup> He does not elaborate, but the point seems well taken since it is not difficult to think of other examples: there is, for instance, no consensus among paleoanthropologists or linguists about how, or even when, language began; and the origins of human consciousness are, if anything, even more obscure. In reality, Malraux writes, “we have no means of knowing how a great artist who had never seen a work of art but only living forms, would proceed”;<sup>58</sup> and research has not solved the mystery. “Delving into the past,” he writes,

our quest for primitivism has reached the threshold of protohistory. But what painter, when he sees an Altamira bison, fails to recognise that this is a well-developed style? ... Always, however far back we travel in time, we guess at other forms behind those that impress us. The figures in the Lascaux caves (and so many others!), too large to have been drawn in one gesture, and so oddly placed that the painter must have worked either lying down or awkwardly bent backwards, were very probably “enlargements”; in any case, they are not just flukes or instinctive creations; and nor were they copied from models the artist had in front of him.<sup>59</sup> (Fig. 4)

In short, the origins of art are irretrievably lost in the mists of time, and no matter how far back we manage to go, we do not encounter a “proto-art”<sup>60</sup> but simply other *styles* which, as Malraux observes, often

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<sup>57</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 501.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 501, 502.

<sup>60</sup> We do of course find *signs*, such as hand prints and “stick” figures (which of course are still made today). But unless one is prepared to say that art and the sign are the same – which, as we have seen, Malraux is not – this does not explain the emergence of *art*; and appealing to a process of “transition” simply begs the question. It is worth noting also that, given the nature of the archaeological evidence, dating the emergence



Fig. 4. Bull, Caves of Lascaux, France (c.17,000 B.C.)

The Bridgeman Art Library.

seem well-developed and hint at an existing tradition of some kind – “other forms” that preceded them. Art, he suggests elsewhere, is an invention of a specific kind made by an animal whose long history bears witness to its inventiveness – which is why he sometimes speaks of it in the same breath as the tomb and the use of fire.<sup>61</sup> None of this, of course, explains how art began: it does not solve the problem of the “first Giotto” – and nor is it intended to. It does, however, place the

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of art, even with an accuracy of tens, or perhaps hundreds, of thousands of years, seems virtually impossible. Lascaux is usually dated to about 17,000 BC; the caves at Chauvet to about 30,000 BC. Yet these may well be quite late developments. As one specialist points out, there is evidence that the Achuleans, between about 400,000 and 300,000 years ago, were making use of ochres which they brought back to their habitats, and even that they transformed them by firing – although the purposes for which they were being used remain a matter of conjecture. See Michel Lorblanchet, *Les Origines de l'art* (Paris: Editions Le Pommier, 2006), 74.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. *Les Voix du silence*, 883. *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 37.

issue in a realistic context, and also reminds us that the problem of origins is by no means limited to art alone.

One should bear in mind also that plausible solutions to this problem are extremely rare, if not non-existent. One quite well known attempt to provide an answer is Ellen Dissanayake's book *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* which merits brief comment here – although principally because it reveals some of the perils of venturing into these obscure regions.

Dissanayake seeks to explain the origins of art in terms of what she calls “the long view of human biological evolution”, arguing that certain “aesthetically special” activities – art being a prime example – have been “selected-for” in human evolution for their emotional, perceptual and cognitive benefits. The key characteristics of the “aesthetically special”, Dissanayake contends, are that it indicates that “something is wholesome and good: for example, visual signs of health, youth, and vitality such as smoothness, glossiness, warm or true colours, cleanness, fineness, or lack of blemish, and vigor, precision and comeliness of movement”.<sup>62</sup>

The argument has obvious weaknesses. Even within the field of Western art, there are many widely admired works, such as the crucified Christ in the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (Fig. 5), that scarcely seem to be exemplars of the “wholesome and good”. Similarly, African and Oceanic art include many masks and carvings whose qualities appear to have little to do with those listed in Dissanayake's formula. Moreover, one would need to know what, precisely, is meant by the notion of “selected-for”. If intended in the strict biological sense – in the sense, for example, that bipedal motion and a particular kind of binocular vision were “selected-for” in *homo sapiens* – Dissanayake would seem committed to the view that the ability both to create and appreciate “aesthetically special” objects would, like bipedal motion, be present in equal measure in every human being, and, presumably, be a kind of routine, quasi-automatic activity – a claim which, even setting aside the vagueness of “aesthetically special”, seems, to say the least, controversial. If, on the other hand, “selected-for” is intended metaphorically, and in fact refers to cultural change, Dissanayake would

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<sup>62</sup> Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus - Where Art Comes From and Why* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), xvi, 54.





Fig. 5. Grünewald, *Christ on the Cross*, *Isenheim Altarpiece*  
Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar. Giraudon. The Bridgeman Art Library.

seem to be implying that art has always been a significant contributor to human improvement (itself a notion which would, of course, need definition). That argument would obviously call for good historical evidence, which, unsurprisingly, she does not provide.<sup>63</sup>

One should add, finally, that the problem of first causes in art does not become any the less puzzling if one rejects Malraux's concept of art and espouses one of the more traditional theories. If, for example, one held the view that art is a form of *mimesis*, or representation, the "first causes" question would still require one to explain why, in the case of painting, for instance, humankind chose at a certain moment in prehistory to "imitate" objects by depicting them in two dimensions. The answer is by no means self-evident. The same problem arises if one holds that art is essentially expression. Why, at a certain point in time, would humankind have chosen to "express" itself through the two dimensional medium of painting or, for example, in music? The question of first causes is, in other words, not peculiar to Malraux's theory of art and nor, as he reminds us, is it limited to art alone. He readily concedes that we are faced with a mystery, and, given the complete absence of reliable evidence, he (unlike Dissanayake, for

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<sup>63</sup> Given that art has often been associated with religious belief, and that religious beliefs have quite frequently been linked to human conflict, there seem to be some obvious difficulties in the claim. In a subsequent book, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began*, Dissanayake advances the rather different thesis that the origin of "the arts" is to be found in love, especially love between mother and child. Like somewhat similar claims, once popular in art history, that art originated in magic or religion, the idea has a vague, superficial appeal. If it is to have serious explanatory value, however, one would need to establish *precisely how* the gap is bridged between love (or magic or religion) and art, a task, which apart from anything else, would call for a clear definition of the concept "art". Dissanayake's argument is notably deficient at these key points. Like her previous volume, which suggests that art should be understood as making something "aesthetically special", the later work contents itself with elusive propositions of the kind that "the arts ... are ways of treating the inner life seriously", or that they are "special kinds of elaborative behaviors, usually called rituals or ceremonies, but in essence and in fact composed of rhythmic-modal behaviors". Ellen Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), 131, 192. Dissanayake's emphasis. Given such hazy definitions, it is of course not impossible to establish a moderately plausible case that art might have originated in maternal love (or indeed magic or religion) since the possibility that there may be a major qualitative difference – a difference in *kind* – between the two has been largely obscured. Since that possibility can scarcely be excluded, however, Dissanayake's argument is clearly open to serious question.

example) resists the temptation to speculate. Precisely because one is dealing with an area of pure conjecture – and one likely to remain so – it would, however, scarcely be a compelling objection to his theory of art to say that he does not provide an explanation.<sup>64</sup>

A key element of Malraux's account of artistic creation, as we are now in a position to see, is that it is closely tied to – in fact inseparable from – his view of the *nature* of art. That is, he begins with an understanding of the nature of *the thing created*, only then drawing conclusions about the nature of the creative process. The advantage of this procedure can be appreciated more fully by comparing his account with approaches adopted in the volume *The Creation of Art* mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. There is no space here for an analysis of all the essays in the collection but a brief discussion of two of them, both by prominent writers in the field of analytic aesthetics, is instructive.

In one contribution, the aesthetician Berys Gaut sets out to examine what he terms “the traditional link between creativity and imagination”. For present purposes, there is no need to follow the steps by which he seeks to establish this link, but his treatment of the notion of creativity itself is of interest. Like many writers who follow the methodology of analytic aesthetics, Gaut relies in part on a consideration of the ways in which terms are employed in ordinary English usage (how “we use” terms) and an analysis of the various implications of these usages. He eventually reaches the conclusion that “creativity is ... the kind of making that involves flair in producing something which is original (saliently new) and which has considerable value”. The notion of “flair” is introduced to exclude cases in which something new and valuable might be produced by accident; “saliently new” is designed to exclude the “wider application” in which “even destruction can be creative”; and the notion of

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<sup>64</sup> Some writers in the analytic aesthetics tradition have used the term “ur-art” to designate the first manifestation of art. The term is, however, simply a label, not an explanation of the origin of art: it is at best simply a “place-holder” in the words of one writer. See Jerrold Levinson, “Defining Art Historically,” in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition* ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 35–46, esp. 42.

“considerable value” is a response to Kant’s point in relation to genius that since there can be “original nonsense”, mere originality is not sufficient to constitute creativity.<sup>65</sup>

An article by Noël Carroll in the same volume, entitled “Art, Creativity, and Tradition”, is essentially a defence of the view that artistic creativity requires an awareness of the tradition in which the artist works, and that “the value of a creative artwork is the contribution it makes to the tradition either by its influence ... or through the way in which it clarifies the tradition”. Creativity is defined “descriptively” as “simply the capacity to produce artworks that are intelligible to appropriately prepared and informed audiences”; and an artwork is said to be creative in an “evaluative” sense if it has “recombined elements and concerns of the tradition in an especially deft, original or insightful way”.<sup>66</sup>

In both accounts, there are key phrases, such as “of considerable value”, “appropriately prepared and informed audiences” and “especially deft, original or insightful” which beg obvious questions. (How valuable is “of considerable value”? When and how is an audience “appropriately” prepared? How deft is “especially deft”? etc.) There are, however, more substantial problems. Despite its ostensible concern with art, Gaut’s account, as the definition quoted above implies, turns out to be essentially a discussion of the idea of creativity *in general*, and ultimately has nothing significant to say about creation *in art* specifically. Not surprisingly then, there is nothing in the argument that establishes that creativity is a necessary ingredient of art. That necessity is simply assumed, not demonstrated. Carroll’s account, although apparently somewhat different on first encounter, because it refers to art more frequently, suffers from the same defect. The importance of creativity (as well as “tradition”) is asserted, but there is nothing in the logic of the argument that indicates why it should be important. In both cases there is, in effect, a basic assumption that art requires creativity, the focus of the arguments then resting on what the notion of creativity might mean (the analysis often revolving around

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<sup>65</sup> Berys Gaut, “Creativity and Imagination,” in *The Creation of Art*, ed. Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingstone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 148–173, 149–151.

<sup>66</sup> Noël Carroll, “Art, Creativity, and Tradition,” *Ibid.*, 208–234, 212, 228, 230, 231.

questions of English usage), and how it might relate to other issues such as imagination or tradition that are deemed relevant in some way.

It is important to stress, however, that, strange though it may seem, the view that creativity is a necessary ingredient of art is by no means universally accepted. As the editors of *The Creation of Art* themselves note in their Introduction,<sup>67</sup> one of the reasons for the neglect of their topic in recent times is that its importance has been seriously questioned, most notably in structuralist and poststructuralist thought. A statement by Roland Barthes in his well-known essay “The Death of the Author” exemplifies this view:

a text is ... a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. Similar to Bouvard and Pécuchet, those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them ...<sup>68</sup>

Barthes’ statement, it is worth noting, is not without its own problems. There is a disconcerting lack of clarity, for example, in suggesting that a text is merely a “tissue of quotations” and “never original” while at the same time implying substantial fluidity and change by asserting that writings are “mixed”, that they “blend and clash” and that the writer “never [rests] on any one of them”. What, precisely, is the author’s role? one is tempted to ask. Is he or she a mere “copyist” or does the “blending” process imply a creative input of some kind – and if so of what kind? Our concern here, however, is not to critique Barthes, or even to adjudicate between his views and those of writers such as Gaut and Carroll. His statement, nevertheless, highlights the fact that the connection between art and creativity has been seriously *challenged* in recent decades and cannot, as Gaut’s and Carroll’s accounts appear to assume, simply be taken for granted. A signal advantage of Malraux’s explanation, by contrast, is that he does not make this assumption. As we have seen, Malraux’s account of artistic creation is based on a prior argument about the nature of art – the *kind*

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<sup>67</sup> Gaut and Livingstone, eds., *The Creation of Art*, 1–5.

<sup>68</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977) 146.

of thing art is – which is the crucial element lacking in accounts such as those of Gaut and Carroll (and, one might argue, of Barthes as well<sup>69</sup>). If one accepts the basic proposition outlined in the previous chapter – that art addresses itself to the chaos of appearances as there defined, and replaces this with a rival, coherent world – it follows necessarily, as we have seen in the present chapter, that art *must* be creative or fail to be art and remain simply at the level of the pastiche. This is why Malraux can say that the artist “can only copy another painter – or make discoveries”. There is no middle way, no neutral position, except that which, as we have seen, leads at best to the mere sign. Simply to assert, with Gaut, that creativity is “the kind of making that involves flair in producing something which is original (saliently new) and which has considerable value”, or, with Carroll, that an artwork is creative if it “[recombines] elements and concerns of the tradition in an especially deft, original or insightful way”, without grounding such claims in an argument showing that creativity is a *necessary feature* of art, is to risk falling easy prey to arguments such as those of Barthes, or of those advanced by certain theorists of post-modernism who suggest that all art today is necessarily pastiche.<sup>70</sup> In response to Gaut, such writers might simply say that while his definition of creativity may be correct in a general way, it has no necessary relevance to art; and to Carroll the reply might simply be that he has mistaken the “deft recombination” of different elements for creativity. If, however, the task of the artist is as Malraux describes it, he cannot *but* be creative if art is to be the result: he cannot *but* eradicate from his work all trace of the style or styles that originally evoked his admiration, so as to bring a new, coherent world into being. Seen in this light, art cannot possibly just be pastiche or, in Barthes’ phrase,

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<sup>69</sup> Barthes offers no definition of art – or literature – in the essay in question. Indeed, any such definition would presumably sit uncomfortably with his apparent wish to replace the idea of a literary work with the more general notion of “text”. See Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 155–164.

<sup>70</sup> Fredric Jameson, for example, speaks of “the omnipresence of pastiche” and of “producers of culture [having] nowhere else to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture.” Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 17, 18.

the “[imitation of] a gesture that is always anterior”. *To be* art it must be creative.<sup>71</sup>

One should also note in this context that Malraux’s account of the creative process confers on the work of art (as distinct from the pastiche) the quality of a creation *in the full sense of the term* – that is, of something that seems to emerge “out of nowhere”: an inexplicable “irruption” into being. This is not, of course, to deny that *in practice* the process of artistic creation is usually preceded by a long and often laborious apprenticeship, and we have seen that Malraux himself speaks of the artist’s “struggle to break free” and of his need sometimes “to expel his masters from his canvases bit by bit”.<sup>72</sup> That said, however, the true work of art is, on Malraux’s account, a creation in the full sense of something that appears *ex nihilo* because its achievement depends on the complete destruction of the style or styles from which it originated, with no “intermediate position” to occupy. It is for this reason that Malraux has so little enthusiasm for histories of art that are, to use his words, “only chronologies of influences”<sup>73</sup> (or histories based on notions of artistic progress<sup>74</sup>). For Malraux, art, as

<sup>71</sup> This, of course, is not an attempt to establish rules for the purpose of judging particular works. Malraux’s argument concerns the *nature* of art in general, as an activity, not “rules of thumb” designed to distinguish individual works of art from non-art (assuming this were possible). In passing, it is interesting to compare Malraux’s position in this context with that of Jean-François Lyotard in his discussion of “avant-gardes” and the “postmodern” artist. Lyotard writes that the avant-garde painter and the novelist “must question the rules of the art of painting or of narrative as they have learned and received them from their predecessors”, and that the works of a postmodern artist or writer “are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work”. As we have seen, Malraux does not think in terms of “judgments” and “rules” (an approach that Lyotard appears to borrow from Kant); but importantly, he would also argue, as we can now see, that breaking free from “pre-established” styles is an indispensable requirement of *all* artistic creation, not just of a particular period or movement such as an “avant-garde”. See: Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 74, 81.

<sup>72</sup> See page 106.

<sup>73</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 879. Cf. also: “The history of art is the history of forms invented in place of [“contre”] those inherited.” *Ibid.*, 582.

<sup>74</sup> Malraux’s use of the terms “discoveries” and “inventions” does not imply an *accumulation* of knowledge – a progressive growth of skill. As we have seen, each artist *destroys* the style or styles on which he builds. There is no question of an accumulation, or a teleology. Malraux always speaks of an adventure, never a quest.

distinct from the pastiche, begins precisely where influences cease. While acknowledging that every great artist begins by imitating, and that influences in *this* sense are the crucible out of which art emerges, he is claiming, nonetheless, that only when those influences have been eradicated does art come into being. This is why *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* are studded with phrases such as “decisive break” (“rupture décisive”), “for the first time”, “without precedent”, “discovery”, and “invention”. These terms are Malraux’s acknowledgement that the intrinsic nature of the work of art – the *kind* of thing it is – is creation in the full sense: it is a world (whether realised through painting, literature or music) that emerges “as if from nowhere”. A history of art that spoke of artistic creation solely in terms of influences – either on, or by, the art it sets out to describe – would, in Malraux’s eyes, tell us everything except the essential – the essential element being what the artist has invented, not what he or she has inherited from another. As we shall see later, this point has important implications for Malraux’s understanding of the history of art.

Finally, this analysis allows us to see more clearly how Malraux’s account of art links up with the concept of the human adventure. That concept, as we saw in Chapter Two, involves a perception of man as “addition to”, not part of, the scheme of things – a perception of human life minus any sense of an underlying significance or goal (in contrast, for example, with the notion of Man the eventual inheritor of a golden future). It is human life as inexplicable irruption into being – “an apparition, an inexplicable gift” in Berger’s words.<sup>75</sup> The present chapter has shown that the affirmation of man achieved through art (its creation of a rival, coherent world) is of precisely the same kind – an irruption into being: creation in the full, metaphysical sense. The rival world of art thus affirms man *as human adventure*. The artist is not the “unraveller of the mystery of things”, to quote Malraux’s characterisation of the Romantic concept of the artist,<sup>76</sup> because “the mystery” – the nature of the underlying scheme of things – remains as impenetrable to the artist (*qua* artist) as it is to Kassner and Berger (and Malraux) in the experience of the return to the earth where they

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<sup>75</sup> See page 54.

<sup>76</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 562.



perceive that “all this might not have been as it is”. Yet art, nonetheless, affirms man as “addition to” – as human adventure. The point will be explored more fully in later chapters when we have considered Malraux’s notion of an absolute which, by contrast, does involve an explanation of the scheme of things. For the present, it is sufficient to notice that Malraux’s account of artistic creation throws further light on the link between art and the human adventure because it reveals that the affirmation of man that art provides is of the same kind – an affirmation without grounding in any underlying reality.

This discussion has by no means exhausted what Malraux has to say about artistic creation. The sections of *Les Voix du silence* and *La Psychologie de l’art* dealing with this topic cover a range of other matters, including the significance of children’s art and “naïve” art, the role of studios and schools (in the artistic sense), the feeling of “malaise” aroused by the expert forgery once it has been unmasked, and the changed meaning of the notion of a “masterpiece” in the modern world. Malraux also illustrates his account by what are in effect case studies in artistic creation, one examining El Greco’s transformation of Tintoretto’s style, another studying Georges de La Tour’s transformation of the then influential style of Caravaggio. The present chapter has, however, discussed the key ideas in Malraux’s account of artistic creation, highlighting in particular his central argument that art is born not from “life” but from the artist’s enthusiasm for the works of one or more predecessors. As part of this analysis, we have noted other important aspects of his thinking, including the proposition that the psychology of the artist’s, and the audience’s, response to a work of art does not take the form of a judgment – disinterested or not – as traditionally argued, but involves a particular kind of “hold” or fascination elicited by the work’s revelation of “another world”. Scarcely less challenging to traditional thinking is the related claim that art is never in any fundamental sense representation, since, as Malraux writes, “artists are not transcribers of the world; they are *its rivals*”. We have also seen that, for Malraux, artistic creation is creation in the full, metaphysical sense, and that despite the initial importance of the pastiche, genuine creation begins where influences cease.

This analysis has thus begun to draw out some of the concrete implications of the basic propositions underlying Malraux's theory of art as outlined in the two preceding chapters, and with these ideas in mind it is now possible to turn to further issues of a similarly tangible nature. As mentioned earlier, Malraux's thinking about art is ultimately inseparable from the history of art – from what art has been in the past, and is now – and his answer to the question “What is art?” can only be fully understood once his ideas are viewed in that light. The present chapter has touched briefly on the question of the history of art and it is now time to investigate this matter in more detail.



## Chapter Five

### The Emergence and Transformation of “Art”

“... la nature même de la création artistique [me contraint]  
souvent à suivre l’histoire [de l’art] pas à pas.”<sup>1</sup>  
Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel*.

A casual reader leafing through one of Malraux’s books on art might perhaps be excused for thinking that he or she had picked up a *history* of art rather than a work concerned with the theory of art. The three volumes of *La Métamorphose des dieux*, for example, describe developments in art across a time span of several millennia ending with the late twentieth century, and each volume is generously illustrated with reproductions of artworks. The same concern with history is evident in *Les Voix du silence* and *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale*, and even – though the time span is much shorter – in Malraux’s study of literature, *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*. Our casual reader would, however, be mistaken. Malraux is not writing a history of art, and early in *La Métamorphose des dieux* he expressly denies any intention of doing so.<sup>2</sup> His concern is not art’s history but its nature and purpose, and his aim is to address the basic theoretical question: what is the function of art in human life?

Why, then, does Malraux devote so much attention to the various phases art has traversed in the past? Why do ancient Egyptian and Buddhist sculpture, Byzantine mosaics, and Giotto’s frescos seem to matter as much to him as, for example, Cézanne or Picasso? And why does he not, like most contemporary writers on the philosophy of art, confine himself principally to the general concept of art, leaving the history to art historians? The question is a large one and it would be premature to offer a complete answer at this stage; but since a major part of the present chapter will concern historical developments vital to Malraux’s thinking, some initial explanation should be offered here.

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<sup>1</sup> “... the very nature of artistic creation often obliges me to follow the history of art step by step.”

<sup>2</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 37.

The first point to make is that, as indicated in the previous chapter, Malraux is not interested in the history of art simply as an account of artistic *influences* – that is, in terms of explanations that attempt to account for painter A in terms of the influence exerted on him or her by painter B and/or C. As the previous chapter explained, Malraux argues that while all art *begins* with the pastiche – and thus with influence in a very direct and powerful form – art itself *as distinct from the pastiche* is creation in the full sense of the term, and begins precisely where influences cease. The “history” of art that matters for Malraux is therefore an account of a series of *creations*, which implies an essentially “discontinuous” history consisting of a series of decisive breaks and discoveries. His focus is not on what is continued – on what might (hypothetically) endure from work to work – but on what is invented.

But why history *at all*? Why not focus, as we have said, simply on the general idea of art, setting its history to one side? The answer is implied in the point just made. If art is a series of creations in the full sense, it can exist *only in and through* its specific manifestations. Certainly, art, for Malraux, is always the realization of the same fundamental creative impulse: it is always the creation of a rival, unified world acting as a defence against the chaos of appearances. In the absence of any specific creative act, however, that formulation merely describes a possibility – just as the human adventure it affirms is, as we have seen, mere possibility until affirmed. Depending as it does on creation *ex nihilo* – creation that carries nothing over from what has gone before – art can move from possibility to existence only to the extent that it is embodied in concrete works of art. Art, in short, is a series of inventions or it is nothing; or, as Malraux phrases the point, “there is no such thing as art in itself”.<sup>3</sup> Hence the importance – in fact the necessity – of the history of art in Malraux’s theory of art: art is inseparable from its history because it exists only in and through its particular discoveries – its inventions. Hence also the superficial resemblance of a work such as *La Métamorphose des dieux* to a history of art. For these discoveries have occurred in historical sequence, and consequently, Malraux explains, “the very nature of artistic creation

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<sup>3</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 880.

often obliges me to follow the history [of art] step by step".<sup>4</sup> Thus, while he has no interest in writing a history of art for its own sake – and certainly not in terms of artistic influences – art in Malraux's eyes can never be divorced from its history. In the same sense that an adventure is defined by the region it traverses – while the rest remains nameless and unknown – so art is defined by its discoveries, its "history" in that specific sense.

Shortly, we will consider certain key events in Malraux's account of the history of artistic creation – in particular, the emergence and subsequent transformation of the notion of art in Western culture. Before embarking on that analysis, however, it is necessary to introduce one further idea that plays a central role in the events to be discussed and in Malraux's thinking generally. This is his concept of an "absolute."

For Malraux, as we have seen, art is a response to the "fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life". That emotion, we recall, involves an apprehension of things and events solely in terms of appearances, a sense that "all this might not have been, might not have been as it is". Life as a whole is apprehended, but as something lacking all explanation, as grounded in nothing, and thus, at the very moment of its apprehension, poised on the brink of chaos and meaninglessness. Art, as discussed earlier, responds to this "chaos of appearances" by creating a rival world in which everything *has* a reason for being and for being as it is – a world scaled to man's measure. Art affirms man by creating a world in which man, not chaos, is ruler.

Art, however, is not the only possible response to the sense of bewilderment and insignificance at the heart of the fundamental emotion in question. From the earliest times, Malraux argues, humanity has also possessed another form of defence: the absolute – the term he employs for belief systems such as the major religions of the past that *see through* the chaos of appearances (in this context better described as the "veil" of appearances) to *grasp the underlying nature of things*. Cultures with a strong religious sense, or even a strong

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<sup>4</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 37.

attachment to a secular absolute of some kind, respond to the questions “Why does something exist rather than nothing?” and “Why has life taken this form?” by providing an *explanation*. The Christian, for instance, replies that the world is, and is the way it is, because it is God’s Creation. A believer in a secular absolute, such as the ultimate perfectibility of Man, might find the explanation in the preordained unfolding of an historical Idea (leading, for example, to some form of ideal “new humanity” as discussed earlier). The specific content of the responses is not important here. The crucial point is that once an explanation is provided (and of course believed), existence in general, including the existence of man, is rendered “natural” in the sense of being there, and being the way it is, *for a reason*. The “chaos of appearances” and its menacing void of meaning are overcome. The world is the only way it *could be* – the way it was “intended” to be (by God, for example) – and man is “at home” in it, even if, as Christianity and many other religions taught, the home is only temporary, and frequented at times by various malevolent forces.

Hence, Malraux argues, the links with the cosmos that are so often a feature of religious faiths throughout the ages. This is not simply a primitive susceptibility to superstition; it follows as a natural – indeed vitally important – consequence of a belief in an absolute because a cosmos with meaning (even if intermittently hostile and requiring frequent propitiation) is a cosmos transformed into a “home”. The more powerfully and comprehensively the features of the world, such as the heavens, the seasons, the topography, the way the social order is organised, and even the passing days and hours, bear the imprint of the faith – the absolute – the more obvious and persuasive the evidence that all things are the way they are “for a reason”. (Or, to express the point in reverse, the fewer the features that bear this imprint, the more the world and all it contains belong merely to the void.) Thus, “Greek civilization,” Malraux comments,

is inseparable from the fact that it was linked to the cosmos through the gods. Any Greek god one cares to name is a mediator between a particular group of forces, the cosmos and man. For example: Man, love, and even fertility; Aphrodite, the cosmos.

Similarly, he argues, “Christian civilization at its height established strong links between man and the Christian cosmos” in which the passing of time played a leading role:

God made the evening and the morning, but the church bells linked good Christian folk to God. The Angelus was a time of day, but it was also the Angel of the Annunciation ... Christianity is a religion in which commemorations have played a decisive role. Christianity without Christmas is inconceivable. And though Christ's birth was a unique event, that event is reproduced by every commemoration of it.<sup>5</sup>

The Angelus is not merely a passing hour like any other. Christmas Day is not just one more day in an endless, pointless succession of days. An absolute puts an end to the void – the sense of incipient meaninglessness and futility – intrinsic to a world of mere appearance because everything now has a clear *reason* for being, and for being as it is. There *can only be* one world, not a bewildering infinity of "other worlds", and the links with the cosmos are the daily, even hourly, evidence that this is so. They attest to the world as "home", as distinct from a world that might, just as readily, "not have been as it is".

The idea is a powerful one. In particular, it is clear that, like art, an absolute, as Malraux understands it, is not simply a solution to an intellectual problem. The fundamental awareness of human life to which an absolute (again, like art) responds – the awareness Malraux first encountered in 1934 in his experience of the "return to the earth" – is one in which, as stressed earlier, the person who encounters it knows himself to be implicated. It is not simply a concept; it is a fundamental *emotion* at the heart of which lies the bewildering, life-negating sense that "all this might not have been as it is". Thus, an absolute in the sense in which Malraux uses the term not only sets its seal on the nature of things, removing all possibility of "other worlds"; it also *connects* the individual to the world and makes it one to which he knows he belongs. The issue here, as indicated, is independent of the specific nature of the beliefs in question. Those beliefs may, like Buddhism, call for a life of contemplation and a search for inner peace, or they may, like the beliefs of the Aztecs or the Assyrians, draw their strength from blood and combat. The key point is that, to the extent that they reveal an enduring Truth *beneath* the fleeting world of appearances, they put an end, once and for all, to the all-encompassing sense of randomness and ephemerality inherent in the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life, and rescue him

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<sup>5</sup> Suarès, *Malraux, celui qui vient*, 18.



from the profound sense of futility that entails. The point merits emphasis because it is a key aspect of Malraux's thinking and one that his critics too often neglect. An absolute, as Malraux uses the term, is not simply a philosophical proposition: it is not an "hypothesis" as he writes in *Les Voix du silence*.<sup>6</sup> Setting art aside, it is that without which man loses out to a "destiny-ridden world" in the sense defined earlier.<sup>7</sup> It is that without which man's most ambitious endeavours ultimately count for nothing – since nothing, great or small, can otherwise be more than a random, fleeting event in an indifferent universe. It is, in Malraux's words, that without which man becomes merely "the most favoured denizen of a universe founded on absurdity".<sup>8</sup> As we shall see as we proceed, the notion of an absolute plays a vital part in Malraux's thinking. In particular, it is crucial to his account of the history of art (in the sense in which "history" has been defined above) which is the question to which we now return.

The historical developments to be discussed require some brief, introductory remarks. Although the following account is, for the reasons explained, an integral part of Malraux's theory of art (and not just an incidental illustration of it), the version given here will be an abbreviated one. There are two reasons for this. First, Malraux's books on art cover a vast span of time and a wide range of cultures, *La Métamorphose des dieux* alone, as we have said, covering several millennia and filling three volumes. There could be no question of dealing satisfactorily with such a large amount of material here, even in summary form. Very little will therefore be said, for example, about Malraux's comments on the art of Africa, India, China, or the Middle Ages. Nor will it be possible to consider his comments on many

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<sup>6</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 846. Cf. also: "A religious civilization that regarded its absolute as an hypothesis is unimaginable". André Malraux, *La Psychologie de l'art: La Monnaie de l'absolu* (Paris: Skira, 1950), 119. As we saw earlier, Malraux used the idea of "absolute reality" as early as *La Tentation de l'Occident* (see above, page 35). However, while its general meaning there is clear enough, it lacks the substance it acquires in Malraux's later writings. In particular, the earlier usage might perhaps be construed as simply denoting an intellectual construct. Here again, one sees the effects of the pivotal event in 1934.

<sup>7</sup> See page 87.

<sup>8</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 769.

individual artists such as Donatello, Titian, El Greco, Georges de La Tour, Goya, and a number of others. Fortunately, however, Malraux deals with much of this material – notably those aspects involving an “absolute” of some kind – in terms of the same basic framework of ideas to be examined in the present chapter, so the omissions will not seriously affect the general line of argument. The second reason is that the aim of the following discussion is to examine Malraux’s account of the emergence and subsequent transformation of the concept of art in Western civilization, and that aim can be satisfactorily achieved by focussing on a limited period of time. In particular, it will be sufficient to concentrate on the period of Western art running from Byzantium to the twentieth century by way of a number of key figures, taking account of certain major historical developments along the way. Aspects of what is said are certainly relevant to the broader canvas Malraux covers in his books on art. He argues, however, that the changes over the period to be considered in this chapter have had decisive effects on our contemporary relationship with art, which is why they merit the more detailed attention they will receive here.

The events to be discussed principally concern visual art and this also calls for brief comment. It is clear that Malraux regards the main ideas examined so far – those relating to the fundamental nature of art as “rival” world, and those concerning artistic creation – as *general* principles applicable to art in all its forms, and we have seen that the examples he chooses to illustrate his arguments are not limited to visual art alone. Where the histories of the different art forms are concerned, however, his position is a little more complex, and while he appears to see broad similarities between the course of events across all art forms, he also sees significant differences, and one cannot assume that the account he gives of developments in visual art – which the present chapter will outline – can be applied without modification to the history of literature and music.<sup>9</sup> The present discussion focuses on visual art because this is the area in which Malraux has the most to say and where his thinking emerges in its

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. for example the comment in *Les Voix du silence* that Romanticism in painting took a much less oppositional stance towards the past than Romanticism in literature. *Ibid.*, 297. The general issue in question here was foreshadowed in the Introduction. See page 25.

most fully developed and explicit form. The parameters of his account should, however, be borne in mind. Malraux is not suggesting that the history of literature and music can, in every respect, simply be regarded as mirror images of developments in visual art.

Finally, the sequence of events to be examined here has, as one might expect, been discussed from time to time by Malraux's commentators, in certain cases in some detail. A crucial element missing from those accounts, however, has been a clear recognition of the link Malraux establishes between the events in question and the fundamental propositions on which his theory of art rests, especially the idea that art involves the creation of another, rival world. The account given here will stress the importance of this link and show how Malraux's understanding of the history of art reflects the basic ideas we have examined. Following the analysis, we will consider possible objections that might be made and certain responses from critics.

Byzantine art, Malraux argues, like that of numerous other cultures, was not regarded by its contemporaries as "art" in any sense of that word that resembles its meaning today. Byzantine images, like so many other religious images of the past, were not created for groups of admiring art lovers but for assemblies of devout worshippers. The art museum, so much a part of our contemporary experience, was then quite unknown and presumably unimaginable, and Byzantine religious images were not made to consort with others of different styles in the galleries of art museums, but for one context only – the candle-lit interiors of Christian basilicas where, for the assembled faithful, they evoked the mysterious presence of a transcendent, loving God. This, Malraux contends, was the "*fundamental purpose*"<sup>10</sup> of these objects, their very *raison d'être*. In keeping with the basic proposition discussed in previous chapters, they certainly sought to evoke *another world* – a coherent world different in kind from the world of mere appearance – but it was not created, understood, or responded to, as a

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<sup>10</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 133, 140. Malraux's italics. The overall argument, presented here in summary form, is taken principally from *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 126–145. As we shall see, Byzantium, in Malraux's view, was by no means the only civilization that did not regard its painting and sculpture as "art".



Fig. 6. Apsidal vault. *Madonna and Child with Twelve Apostles*, Torcello Cathedral.

© 1990. Photo Scala, Florence.

“It was not a question of depicting the world, but the Other World.”  
 Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, 420.

world of “art”. It was “another world” of a revealed Truth – of an absolute in the sense described above – a supramundane world of an eternal, loving God separate and quite different from the transitory, human realm here below.

Two brief caveats should be entered before continuing. First, Malraux is not suggesting that Byzantine works – the *Madonna and Child* at Torcello (Fig. 6), or the well-known Justinian and Theodora mosaics at Ravenna, for example – do not rightly form part of *today’s* world of art. Quite the contrary. But the question of how such works are regarded *now*, and why we today think of them as “art”, raises other issues – specifically about the relationship between art and time

– which will be considered in the following chapters and which need to be held in abeyance for the moment. The point at issue in the present context is how the works in question were regarded by their contemporaries, and the reasons why they were originally created.

Second, Malraux is not suggesting, as certain critics, most notably E. H. Gombrich, have claimed he is,<sup>11</sup> that such images (or the music or literature of the time) are explicable simply as “expressions” of the absolute in question. For Malraux, art is always an activity *sui generis*, not something the values of a period produce “as apple trees produce their apples,” as he characterises the expressionist view.<sup>12</sup> Both art and an absolute are, as we have seen, responses to the same fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life, and both reject the world of fleeting appearances for another, better world. But they are, nonetheless, *different kinds* of response. In a culture such as Byzantium under the sway of an absolute – a strong religious faith – the artist’s sense of “another world” will quite naturally be the one suggested to him by that absolute (anything else being vain or even sacrilegious – as, indeed, the remnants of Greek and Roman art had become by this time). Nevertheless, Malraux insists, art is not the mere “expression” or “reflection” of anything; it is *creation* – the bringing into being in visual (or other) form of a world which does not yet exist. Thus, he writes,

*As a creator*, the artist does not belong to a community already moulded by a culture, but to one he is building up, even if he thinks little about it. His creative faculty is not merely a subservient illustration of something already understood, but a link with man’s age-old creative power – with new cities built on the ruins of old, with the discovery of fire.<sup>13</sup>

In daily behaviour such as forms of worship, the painter or sculptor may be “expressing” his culture – because his actions simply follow existing practices; but as creator, he is working “in parallel” with it, so to speak, animating it by his discoveries, not merely reflecting something already established and familiar.

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<sup>11</sup> Gombrich, “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 642.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 648. Malraux’s italics. As mentioned earlier, Malraux sometimes stresses the creativity of art by comparing it, as he does here, with other major human discoveries such as the use of fire. See page 118.

To resume Malraux’s historical account: Towards the end of the thirteenth century, something unprecedented occurred in the field of painting, triggering the emergence of what later came to be called “art”. A key aspect of the change was a gradual *rapprochement* between man and God. The Christian faith of Byzantium had been a “dualism”: its God was beyond the reach of human comprehension. God was love, Malraux writes, but not human love:

God’s love was sacred love, and partook of the central mystery of the Eternal. The Revelation did not bring elucidation of the mystery, but communion with it. The main purpose of intellectual inquiry was no longer to explain the cosmos. Although God was love, and although man had access to Him through love, the ultimate mystery of his being remained nonetheless inviolate.<sup>14</sup>

Hence the “transcendent”, “other worldly” nature of Byzantine art. These works, Malraux writes,

never sought to depict Jesus and Mary as individuals or even to standardise Christ’s physical appearance ... Yet in one respect – their otherworldliness – all these figures have a striking similarity, and this is equally true of the biblical scenes over which they preside. For these scenes do not depict events that once took place on earth, but episodes of the sacred.<sup>15</sup>

The decisive change came with Giotto who, for Malraux, represents the first clear break with Byzantine dualism – the first step, in the field of painting, in a reconciliation between man and God.<sup>16</sup> The crucial development was not, as histories of art have so often suggested, simply a sudden interest in “realism” or “naturalism”, although this played an important, ancillary role. Giotto’s discovery – his creative act in the sense described in the previous chapter – involved the revelation of a new “power of painting”. No longer exclusively a vision of otherworldliness, Giotto’s frescos depict sacred scenes that are “now becoming scenes in the life of Jesus”<sup>17</sup> – events that once *did* take place on earth. Thus, Malraux writes,

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<sup>14</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 133. Also, *Les Voix du silence*, 707.

<sup>15</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 133.

<sup>16</sup> Malraux notes that the change was accompanied in Renaissance Italy by more private forms of worship. Hence the “picture box” of the Scrovegni Chapel, as he terms it. *Les Voix du silence*, 316, 318, 319.

<sup>17</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 316.

[Giotto] discovered a *power of painting* previously unknown in Christian art: the power of locating without sacrilege a sacred scene in a world resembling that of everyday life ... For the first time, sacred scenes related no less to the world of God's creatures than to the world of God.<sup>18</sup>

Giotto thus opened the door to a new world of what Malraux terms “pictorial fiction”, “the imaginary”, or the *irréel*.<sup>19</sup> Although his painting was still very much in the service of a strong Christian faith, Giotto nonetheless “[brought] the divine onto a plane nearer to man” by replacing the hieratic forms of Byzantine art with a “solemn expression of the Christian drama”.<sup>20</sup> (Fig. 7) A degree of naturalism or illusionism played a necessary part because the drama took place in “a world resembling that of everyday life”. The essential objective, however, Malraux argues (*contra* the traditional view) was not “nature imitation” – an attempt to better mimic the world of appearances. The aim once again (and this remains his constant, underlying theme) was to create “another world”, but this time one that “related no less to the world of man than to the world of God”.

Developments from this point onwards reveal an enthusiastic exploration of the possibilities Giotto had opened up. “It was not that religious feelings had disappeared”, Malraux writes,

but that these were complemented by the discovery of an imaginary realm conveyed to the spectator by a power of the artist, distinct from his power of representing scenes from Scripture in that it no longer calls forth veneration, but ... admiration.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>19</sup> The word is difficult to translate well, the closest equivalent in English probably being “the imaginary”. The English term “unreal” will not suffice because it carries strong suggestions of something purely fanciful or even false, which Malraux does not intend. In the absence of an exact equivalent, the present study sometimes uses the word untranslated. As the following analysis explains, Malraux intends it to suggest an imagined, harmonious world – a transfigured world of nobility and beauty. Its meaning will become clearer as we proceed.

<sup>20</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 320.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 328. Malraux is not of course suggesting that the works of Giotto and those who followed were somehow *superior* to those of Byzantium (a claim made by later Renaissance writers such as Vasari). Here as elsewhere, there is no question of artistic “progress”.



Fig. 7. Giotto, *Marriage of the Virgin*, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

© 1990. Photo Scala, Florence.

“The world to which [Giotto’s] characters belong ... the world in which the Renaissance will discover its reality, is the world of fiction.”  
 Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel*, 319.

A century later, by the time of Botticelli, a further important step had taken place. In exploring the newly discovered realm of the imaginary, Malraux argues, painting called more and more frequently on the mythology of Antiquity whose heroes, gods and goddesses seemed to represent a privileged, timeless world of the imaginary, and to offer a “repertoire of exalted acts” befitting such a world.<sup>22</sup> For Botticelli, especially in his non-religious works, it was no longer just a question, as it had been for Giotto, of “locating without sacrilege a sacred scene

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<sup>22</sup> *L’Intemporel*, 657.



in a world resembling that of everyday life” but now of creating an earthly realm that rivalled that of the sacred. Thus, Malraux writes, the admiration inspired by a painting such as the *Primavera* (Fig. 8),

like that inspired by Antiquity, and which Antiquity now legitimised, is addressed to a demiurge which, for the first time, rivals the Christian demiurge, because for the first time it gives exalted expression to a fiction drawn from the realms of the profane.<sup>23</sup>

These developments, Malraux contends, conferred on art – and progressively on the *word* art – both a new function and an unprecedented prestige. The claim is crucial to his argument. The paintings and mosaics of Byzantium, like the works of other religious cultures, were forms that emerged in response to a sense of transcendence that *preceded* them and that could, in principle at least, be experienced without them.<sup>24</sup> They drew their strength, their authority, and their very *raison d'être* from a faith in another world – an absolute – that pre-existed them. By the time of Botticelli, Malraux argues, there had emerged the first unambiguous depiction of a transcendent world – a new absolute – that came into being *solely through the artist's achievement*. Christian faith is not as yet under open attack (this, as we shall see, did not occur until the eighteenth century). But through its newly discovered powers, painting has now begun to construct an “other world” (which, while heavily reliant on classical mythology, was happy to include events of the Christian story as well<sup>25</sup>) *independent of any pre-existing absolute* – an exalted, imaginary world, Malraux writes, outside of which “man did not fully merit the name man”<sup>26</sup> which came into being, elicited admiration, and commanded authority, solely through the power of the work itself.

In short, Malraux contends, a revolutionary change had taken place that altered the function of painting and sculpture in an unprecedented

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<sup>23</sup> André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: L'Irréel, Ecrits sur l'art (II)*, 481.

<sup>24</sup> In principle and in fact. Malraux notes, for example, that Christianity and Buddhism took some five centuries to discover styles befitting their teachings. Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, 643.

<sup>25</sup> “In the thirteenth century,” Malraux writes, “the least hint of fiction was anathema to religious art; by the seventeenth century all religious art had become fiction”. *La Psychologie de l'art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 87.

<sup>26</sup> *L'Intemporel*, 657.



Fig. 8. Botticelli, *Primavera*, The Three Graces (detail)  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. The Bridgeman Art Library.

“When he finishes the *Primavera* [Botticelli] knows that ... his painting owes its importance not to Olympus, nor to its representation of this or that individual, but to the admiration it evokes”.

Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: L'Irréel*, 481.

way. Source of a “nobler” world – an imaginary, transfigured world of “beauty”,<sup>27</sup> peopled by men and women seemingly touched by a spark of the divine – the painted image or the sculpted figure was no longer an object of veneration, as it had been in Byzantium,<sup>28</sup> but of admiration – an admiration evoked through the achievement of the artist and by no other means. Works such as those of Botticelli, Malraux writes, were in effect the “Declaration of the Rights of the Imaginary” (“la Déclaration des droits de l’Irréel”) which became the unspoken charter of the painting to follow.<sup>29</sup> The creative task of the painter is henceforth “accomplished in a domain previously unknown to Christianity, because its prime objective will be the admiration it will need to evoke”.<sup>30</sup>

Thus began, in Europe, the reign of “art” (more often called “fine art”) in the sense described here, a reign that was to last some four centuries – until Manet, as we shall see. The domain opened up by Botticelli’s “Declaration of the Rights of the Imaginary” was thenceforth explored and vastly enlarged, Malraux argues, by figures such as Michelangelo, Raphael, Tintoretto, Poussin, Watteau (Fig. 9), and Delacroix. In the process, further advances were made in the techniques of illusionism – and Malraux credits Leonardo with certain decisive discoveries in this regard – but in no case, he argues, was this the central aim. The goal was not a more exact imitation of appearances but, as always, the creation of another, “rival” world – in this case a world of God and man reconciled, a world outside of which “man did not fully merit the name man”, a world of nobility, harmony

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<sup>27</sup> Speaking of the Renaissance and post-Renaissance period, Malraux writes: “the plastic arts [were] for several centuries a special means of acceding to a realm of beauty where they were joined by the other arts”. *La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 74. In this context, Malraux sometimes uses the term “poetry” as an equivalent for “beauty” – the term again evoking the idea of a transfigured, harmonious world. *Les Voix du silence*, 248–293. In time, Malraux points out, the aesthetic of beauty crystallised in the concept of the *beau idéal*, a kind of intellectualised *summum bonum* of art. *Ibid.*, 290–93.

<sup>28</sup> And also, of course, in Romanesque and Medieval Europe. The abbreviated version of Malraux’s account given here has omitted his extremely interesting comments on these periods.

<sup>29</sup> *L’Irréel*, 481, 483.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.



Fig. 9. Watteau, *Embarkation for Cythera* (1717)

Louvre, Paris, Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

and beauty that art alone could conjure up.<sup>31</sup> Since a degree of naturalism was a necessary component of this world, Malraux writes, “Europe began to take it for granted that one of painting’s supreme prerogatives was the creation of the semblance of reality”. But this was not in fact the key aim, because

although it set out to master a certain range of visual experience, art was always seen as something different in kind from the world of appearances ... [and] what was now asked of art was less an imitation of reality than the illusion of an idealised world. While attaching so much importance to imitative technique, and

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, 54: “In idealising Mona Lisa, Leonardo introduces her into a world as foreign to the street as it is to the church, a world of which the arts are the privileged agents.”

to making figures seem real, this art was in no sense realistic; rather it aspired to be the most persuasive expression of a fiction – of a harmonious imaginary world.<sup>32</sup>

This account is open to a number of questions and objections but before considering those matters it is important to complete Malraux's narrative. The events examined so far, which are described in *La Psychologie de l'art*, *Les Voix du silence* and the first two volumes of *La Métamorphose des dieux*, bring Malraux's account up to the end of the period of the *irréel*, a period whose last major representative he sees in Delacroix.<sup>33</sup> His narrative does not, however, end there. The third volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux*, entitled *L'Intemporel*, and the final section of *Les Voix du silence* entitled "The Aftermath of the Absolute", focus on a major new development which commenced in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. This episode plays a crucial role in Malraux's thinking about the nature of art today, and one could not hope to do justice to his theory of art without including it. Before turning to possible queries and the responses of critics, we will therefore consider these further events.

The concept of art that emerged from the developments described above has, Malraux argues, left a deep impression on Western culture, and continues to influence much of what is written today about art and the theory of art. (He suggests, for example, that the strong emphasis the discipline of aesthetics has placed on the idea of beauty since the eighteenth century is a direct result of these developments – in effect, a somewhat belated philosophical rationalisation of the art of the *irréel*.<sup>34</sup>) Influential though this concept of art has been, however, are we confident that it captures what the idea signifies *today*? Is art still explicable as the pursuit of a "harmonious imaginary world" – a world

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<sup>32</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 268. This summary, as indicated, has been greatly abbreviated and one omission is Goya whose late works can, of course, scarcely be described as depicting "a harmonious imaginary world". Malraux, as mentioned earlier, wrote a separate volume on Goya whom he clearly sees as an exception, and as one of the forerunners of the disintegration of values to be described in the following section.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, *Ibid.*, 252, 299.

<sup>34</sup> See *Ibid.*, 282.



Fig. 10. Picasso, Woman with pram (detail)

Paris, Musée Picasso. (C) RMN/© Béatrice Hatala.

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Fig. 11. Oceanian art, Mask, Ambrym Is., Vanuatu archipelago  
Paris, Musée du quai Branly. (C) RMN / Hervé Lewandowski.

of “beauty” in that sense – and is that concept directly transferable to the modern world of art which, while still including figures such as Botticelli, Leonardo, Watteau, and Delacroix, now encompasses artists such as Manet, Van Gogh, and Picasso (Fig. 10), and works from the tribal societies of Africa, the islands of the Pacific, (Fig. 11), ancient Mesopotamia, India, Pre-Columbian Mexico, and much else? Malraux’s answer to this question is an unequivocal no. We still retain

the *word art*, and it has lost nothing of its importance or prestige; but the *meaning* of the word has altered in a fundamental way. There has been a profound cultural change, no less far reaching in its consequences than that brought about by Giotto and subsequent Renaissance painters, which has transformed both the significance of the word "art" and the nature of the experience associated with it. This event, which Malraux does not hesitate to call an "aesthetic revolution", has ushered in the world of art as we know it today.<sup>35</sup>

The seeds of this revolution, Malraux argues, were sown in the closing years of the seventeenth century. This was a decisive moment for Europe when "something unprecedented was happening; something that was to transform both art and culture".<sup>36</sup> For at least three centuries, Christianity had been gradually losing its hold on Western civilization and the new century of the *philosophes*, with their all-out war on religion, saw its final collapse. Now, for the first time, Malraux writes,

a religion was being threatened otherwise than *by the birth of another*. In its various manifestations, ranging from veneration, to sacred dread, to love, religious feeling had changed many times. Science and Reason were not another metamorphosis of this feeling; they were its negation.<sup>37</sup>

"What was disappearing from the Western world," Malraux argues, "was the absolute",<sup>38</sup> and the final disintegration, when it came, was swift and decisive. An Encyclopaedist "was farther removed from Racine in his Port-Royal retreat than Racine was from St Bernard; for that notion of retreat had ceased to mean anything to the Encyclopaedists".<sup>39</sup> And despite the persistence of conventional forms of pious observance, "Eternity withdrew from the world," and "our civilization

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<sup>35</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 1, 25. This revolution, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, involved more than the emergence of a new notion of art. It also led to the resuscitation of a wide range of works from other cultures. The explanation of this point requires an examination of Malraux's understanding of the relationship between art and time, which is considered in the next chapter.

<sup>36</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 720.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 720,722. Malraux's italics.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 722.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 707.



became as unresponsive to the voice of Christianity as to the stellar myths and Druid trees”.<sup>40</sup>

For a time, Malraux argues – echoing views which, we have seen, he had developed as early as *La Tentation de l'Occident*<sup>41</sup> – the void left by the disappearance of religious faith was filled by a new faith in humanity itself, a faith which, allied to the idea of history, took the form of an ideal “new humanity” with its powerful myths of progress, scientific advance and democracy. Yet while some of these hopes still linger on, they have been gravely compromised. “The hope that Victor Hugo, Whitman, Renan and Berthelot placed in progress, science, reason and democracy – their faith in man as master of the world,” Malraux writes, “soon lost its self-assurance”. For “when those hopes first arose in Europe there was nothing to give them the lie”. But this is no longer the case. Today, he writes,

We know that peace in our time is as vulnerable as it ever was; that democracy can usher in capitalism and totalitarian policies; that progress and science also mean the atom bomb; and that reason alone does not provide a full account of man.<sup>42</sup>

The result today is an agnostic culture – a culture, which for the first time in human history, lacks any fundamental value – any “absolute” in the sense defined earlier. The claim is not, one should stress, that

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 723.

<sup>41</sup> See page 32.

<sup>42</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 784, 785. Cf. Malraux’s comment in an interview in 1975: “In the nineteenth century, when the most eminent minds were asked to confront science with essential metaphysical problems, they knew full well that science wasn’t solving them. But they didn’t say: science is incapable of solving them. They said science *will* solve them, and a mind like Victor Hugo could write: ‘The key point about science is what it *will* bring us, and it will be the twentieth century that finds the true meaning of science.’ It’s obvious everyone thought the world was heading towards the United States of Europe and universal peace. Well, it’s clear we didn’t arrive at the United States of Europe at all but at crematory ovens and concentration camps. If someone had said to Victor Hugo that there would be gas chambers one day in the future, he would have said ‘You’re completely mad!’ Well, we’ve discovered – we, our century – that science has both a positive and a negative – that, certainly, it can achieve medical wonders, but also that it produces the atomic bomb. So the meaning of science has changed completely: it hasn’t ceased being a value for us, but it has ceased being exclusively a promise ...” André Malraux, *Dialogue imaginaire avec Picasso: ‘La tête d’obsidienne’* (Television series: *Journal de voyage avec André Malraux.*) (Paris: Interviewer: Jean-Marie Drot, 1975).

belief in God, or some other form of transcendence, has necessarily become an impossibility,<sup>43</sup> or that no one in any previous culture ever doubted the prevailing beliefs of their times. "Agnosticism is no new thing," Malraux writes, "What is new is an agnostic culture. Whether Cesare Borgia believed in God or not, he carried the sacred relics, and while he was blaspheming among his close confidants, St Peter's was being built".<sup>44</sup> The unprecedented development, which is our contemporary reality, is a Western culture as a whole that lacks any fundamental value, any absolute – unlike Ancient Egypt, unlike Greece, unlike Byzantine civilization or the Middle Ages, unlike post-Renaissance Europe (for which art itself had constructed an absolute), unlike even the nineteenth century despite the fragility of its faith in Man – in short, unlike so many other cultures that have preceded ours or have existed in other parts of the world. We can look back across the millennia of human history, Malraux is arguing, and see culture after culture in which a sense of the numinous, or of the sacred, or even, in the nineteenth century, of a secular ideal, gave man a sense of his place in the scheme of things, an assurance that there is something beyond the ephemeral realm of appearance – a sense that there is an underlying purpose or "explanation". We today have only a series of unanswered questions. Having taken to heart Nietzsche's pronouncement (issued somewhat late in the day on Malraux's chronology) that God is dead, and having recognised, willingly or not, that, in words Malraux had used as early as *La Tentation de l'Occident*, "man is dead, after God",<sup>45</sup> modern Western culture is the first agnostic culture – the first civilization in human history in which "all this" (in Berger's phrase) lacks any explanation, the first civilization which, Malraux writes, "is aware that it does not understand man's significance",<sup>46</sup> the

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<sup>43</sup> As mentioned earlier, Malraux's focus is not philosophical arguments designed to prove the non-existence of God. (See page 32.) Similarly here, he is making an observation about the nature of modern Western culture, not engaging in debate about religious belief. Nor of course is he denying that some proportion of the population of modern Western societies continues to profess a religious faith of some kind.

<sup>44</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 738.

<sup>45</sup> See page 35.

<sup>46</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 37. Cf. *Antimémoires*, 7: "Here is the first civilization capable of conquering the world, but not of inventing its own temples or its own tombs."

first in which men and women are born, live out their various allotted terms, then die, without any sense of the fundamental purpose of it all.

The consequences for Western art, Malraux argues, have been dramatic. For millennia, in cultures as various as Egypt, India, and Pre-Columbian Mexico, the function of painting and sculpture had been inseparable from a fundamental value – an absolute. This had clearly been the case in Byzantium where, as we have seen, the very *raison d'être* of the “episodes of the sacred” depicted in mosaics and frescos was to evoke the mysterious presence of a transcendent God. And it remained the case even when, from the Renaissance onwards, the new absolute – the exalted world outside of which “man did not fully merit the name man” – depended on art itself for its existence.<sup>47</sup> What might the function of art be, however, in an agnostic culture? What kind of “rival world” could painting and sculpture aspire to in a context in which the very possibility of another world beyond the world of mere appearance seems to have been irretrievably lost?

For Malraux, the first visual artist to offer an unambiguous answer to this question was Manet, particularly in his painting *Olympia*. This work, which caused a scandal when first exhibited (and not simply for its subject matter), announces a transformation in the function of art no less dramatic than that brought about by Giotto, and in doing so brings a long chapter in the history of Western art, lasting several centuries, to a close. Gone was any attempt to conjure up an exalted, fictional world – “another world” of nobility and ideal beauty such as that embodied in Titian’s *Venus d’Urbino*, whose subject Manet was audacious enough to borrow (and which, to highlight the contrast, Malraux reproduces in *L’Intemporel* side by side with *Olympia* – Fig. 12 and Fig. 13). For Manet, as for many other artists who were soon to explore the new regions he had opened up, such as Renoir,<sup>48</sup> Van Gogh, Cézanne, Picasso and Chagall, the “other world” of art would now be a world in which, Malraux argues, art is simply *its own value*. Like Giotto, Manet had not simply discovered a new style, but in so

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<sup>47</sup> In passing, it is interesting to compare the lengths of time in question here. Malraux writes: “How easy it is to imagine a history of art in which the Renaissance would be only an ephemeral humanist accident!” *Les Voix du silence*, 389.

<sup>48</sup> Malraux quotes Renoir as saying of *Olympia*: “With this work, a new era in painting began.” *L’Intemporel*, 692.



Fig. 12. Titian, *The Venus of Urbino*

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. ©1996. Photo Scala, Florence. Courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali.



Fig. 13. Manet, *Olympia*

Musée d'Orsay, Paris/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

doing had revealed a new power of painting. No longer linked to *any* value outside itself, not even one that depended on art for its existence, painting would now rely exclusively on *its own power* to create a rival world. For the first time, Malraux writes, painting “discovers the autonomy of painting” and is no longer in the service of anything beyond itself.<sup>49</sup>

This idea is easily misunderstood and Malraux goes to considerable lengths to make it as clear as possible. He contrasts his analysis, for example, with that of the twentieth century artist and theoretician, Maurice Denis, who made the well known statement that “a picture, before being a war-horse, a nude, or an anecdote of some kind, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order”.<sup>50</sup> For Malraux, Denis’s comment is only a half-truth. It is correct in suggesting that art has ceased to be subordinate to religious or fictional aims and has become simply painting – an “assemblage” of colours. But, Malraux asks, “To what end?”<sup>51</sup> Denis omits the *purpose* of this assemblage. It is not, as his formula might easily lead one to assume, simply to cater for the pleasure of the eye. For Malraux, the purpose remains, as it had always been, to create a coherent “world apart”, a rival world proof against the chaos of appearances. The crucial distinction between the modern artist and his predecessor, however, is that for the former – those artists who explore the new possibilities opened up by Manet – that purpose has, for the first time, become the artist’s *exclusive* aim. Cut off from any other value, art has discovered a fundamental value within itself which, Malraux writes, “is much deeper than a desire to please the eye”. It is “the age-old urge to create an autonomous world, which, *for the first time, has become the artist’s sole aim*”.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 669, 670. See also *Les Voix du silence*, 737.

<sup>50</sup> *L’Intemporel*, 787.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. Cf. also *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 33, where Malraux writes: “If it was just for the sake of ‘colours assembled in a certain order’, why would Cézanne sacrifice everything for it?” The same response to Denis – “to what end?” – is asked as early as *La Psychologie de l’art*. See *La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 17.

<sup>52</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 870. The French reads: “c’est la très vieille volonté de création d’un monde autonome, pour la première fois réduite à elle seule.” Malraux’s emphasis.

Thus, while Western culture continues to use the *word* "art" – hallowed, after all, by centuries of use over the post-Renaissance period – its meaning has altered radically. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, Malraux argues that this change was signalled not only by the nature of the art *created* but also by the unprecedented range of works *resuscitated*. He will argue that just as the Renaissance revived the works of Antiquity – ignored for a millennium – there has now been "another Renaissance" (to borrow his own phrase<sup>53</sup>) much broader in scope, which has extended the reach of what is now regarded as art to objects from the depths of prehistory and from the four corners of the earth. That, however, is to anticipate. For the present, the crucial point is that Malraux regards Manet as a decisive turning-point in Western art. He marks the abandonment of the rival world of the *irréel* – assiduously pursued by artists as various as Botticelli, Leonardo, Titian, Poussin, Watteau, and even as late as Delacroix – and signals the discovery of a rival world reliant solely on art's fundamental capacity to build an autonomous world. Divorced from any absolute, art now falls back on what Malraux terms "sa part invincible" – the irreducible element without which it would not even be a possibility: the pursuit of a unified world that "stands for unity as against the chaos of mere, given reality", to quote the formulation mentioned earlier.<sup>54</sup> Left to its own devices in an agnostic culture, art post-Manet relies on its own powers and nothing more.<sup>55</sup>

More will be said later about the implications of this account but a brief comment should be made here to correct two common misunderstandings. A number of critics have claimed that Malraux's argument amounts to an extreme "formalism" that denies the value of representational art. Others contend that he is resorting to a "subjectivism" where nothing counts except, in one writer's words, "glorifying the individual". We will briefly consider both claims.

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<sup>53</sup> *La Psychologie de l'art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 132.

<sup>54</sup> See page 82.

<sup>55</sup> Malraux argues that poetry underwent a similar transformation at about the same time. In the description of the developments outlined here given in *La Psychologie de l'art*, he writes: "Poetry shared in the great adventure and was similarly transformed; with Baudelaire, it discarded the 'story', although official poetry continued wallowing for years in narratives and dramas". Malraux, *La Psychologie de l'art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 73.

A representative example of the first is a comment in 2004 on Malraux's collected *Ecrits sur l'art*. A reviewer, Stéphane Guégan, writes:

Malraux pushes the primacy of form even further than Maurice Denis, whom of course he quotes. He goes as far as denying not only traditional *mimesis*, but the value of all representation.<sup>56</sup>

The comment is an example of the tendency of some critics to skim Malraux rather than read him.<sup>57</sup> Malraux certainly quotes Denis, as we have seen, but Guégan omits to say that he quotes him to *disagree* with him – to suggest that his well known formula (often, certainly, invoked in discussions of “formalism”) is *deficient*. Malraux is arguing that modern painting *cannot* be understood simply as “a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order” because the formula forgets to ask: to what purpose? The purpose of art for Malraux remains, as always, the creation of “another world”, the important qualification in the case of modern art being that this purpose is no longer subordinated to an absolute such as an exalted fictional world or a religious faith. This in no sense implies a ban on representational art, understood as painting that might choose people or objects as part of its subject matter (“subject matter” in the simple sense that the *Mona Lisa* is a painting of a woman and not of a man holding a glove while the reverse is true of Titian's *Man with a Glove*). Indeed if it did, Malraux's obvious enthusiasm for painters such as Van Gogh, Renoir, Cézanne, and Degas, not to mention Manet himself, would be incomprehensible. Malraux, as we saw earlier, denies that art – *any* art – is *essentially* representation (because it is transformation, the creation of *another* world), but this claim does not imply that art should never be *representational* in the sense that its

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<sup>56</sup> Stéphane Guégan, “La pensée sur l'art d'André Malraux: est-elle toujours utile?,” *Beaux Arts Magazine*, no. 245 (2004): 89. Guégan cites a range of painters of whom, he claims, Malraux disapproves in the name of this formalism, especially painters “prior to *Olympia*”. The claim is mistaken. Malraux is certainly less than enthusiastic about *some* of the painters Guégan mentions but even then his reasons have nothing to do with a preference for “formalism”. Any suggestion that Malraux is in principle antipathetic towards *all* painting prior to *Olympia* is of course quite incompatible with his obvious admiration for painters such as Giotto, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Titian, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Watteau, Goya, Delacroix and many others. Guégan's views are discussed again below. See page 283.

<sup>57</sup> As noted in the Introduction. See page 21.

subject matter might include depictions of recognisable objects. The first point relates to the *nature* of art – the kind of thing it is – the second to the *kind of art* a particular artist might wish to create: two quite distinct questions. Malraux no more denies the “value of all representation” as Guégan suggests, than he advocates a doctrinaire attachment to “the primacy of form”. The suggestion that he is a “formalist” in the sense implied – a suggestion Guégan is not alone in making<sup>58</sup> – is a serious misreading of his position.

No less questionable are claims that Malraux regards art post-Manet as pure “individualism” or “subjectivism”. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a prominent advocate of this view, has written that Malraux sees modern painting as a “movement towards the subjective and a ceremony glorifying the individual”. He continues:

There is only one subject in today’s painting [Malraux] says – the painter himself. Painters no longer look for the velvet of the peaches, as Chardin did, but, like Braque, the velvet of the painting. The classical painters were unconsciously themselves; the modern painter wants first of all to be original and for him his power of expression is identical to his individual difference. *Because* painting is no longer for faith or beauty, it is for the individual; it is the annexation of the world by the individual.<sup>59</sup>

Parts of this comment are based on quotations from Malraux – chiefly from the first volume of *La Psychologie de l’art* – but Merleau-Ponty places them in a context that distorts their meaning and seriously misrepresents Malraux’s thinking. First, one should note that in the same section of *La Psychologie de l’art* from which Merleau-Ponty is quoting, Malraux writes in relation to modern art that “there is no question of straining after originality, since all art is original”,<sup>60</sup> the comment no doubt referring to his argument, discussed earlier (and also contained in *La Psychologie de l’art*), that *all* art, as distinct from the pastiche, is creation in the full sense of the term, whether the painter be a Manet, a Picasso, a Giotto, or the unknown authors of the works at Lascaux or Altamira. Quite clearly, Merleau-Ponty’s claim

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<sup>58</sup> See for example Richter, 85, 86. Interestingly, one critic suggests, to the contrary, that Malraux lacks enthusiasm for *abstract* art. See Marissel, 174. There is, however, no more evidence for this than for Guégan’s view that he “[denies] the value of all representation”.

<sup>59</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 63,64. Italics in original.

<sup>60</sup> *La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 79.



that, in Malraux's eyes, "the modern painter wants first of all to be original" is difficult to reconcile with that statement. More importantly, Merleau-Ponty ignores the carefully phrased context in which Malraux discusses the modern painter's individuality. There is room here for a brief summary only, but essentially Malraux's explanation hinges on the ideas discussed above concerning the post-Renaissance idea of art and the transformation that took place after Manet. He asks us to imagine "what would have happened if Tintoretto had been compelled to paint three pieces of fruit on a plate, just that, without any sort of setting", and goes on: "We feel at once that his presence *as painter* would have stamped itself more forcibly on this still-life than on any Baroque fantasy or *Battle of Zara*".<sup>61</sup> The basic thought here is the same as that already discussed – that modern art is a manifestation of "the age-old urge to create an autonomous world, which, *for the first time, has become the artist's sole aim*". The imaginary Tintoretto, deprived of the fictional world to which his art is so strongly linked – by being forced, Cézanne-like, to paint "three pieces of fruit on a plate, just that" – would, Malraux is suggesting, be compelled to rely much more strongly on what was specifically "Tintoretto" in his work. For in these circumstances, he continues,

He would have had to transform the apples by painting alone. Thus, being cut off from his transfigured world would not have resulted in his simply being dominated by his subject-matter; on the contrary, while not transfiguring it, he would still have annexed it. The fruit would have had to enter his own universe, ["son univers particulier"] just as, in earlier times, it would have entered a transfigured universe.<sup>62</sup>

Malraux elaborates the point further but this is perhaps sufficient to see where his thought is tending. It is clearly not a question, as Merleau-Ponty implies, of a mere attempt to "be different" and still less of "a ceremony glorifying the individual". Merleau-Ponty is not entirely mistaken in claiming that for Malraux "because painting is no longer for faith or beauty, it is for the individual"; but stated as bluntly as that, and linked to ideas about being "original" and "individual difference", and above all deprived of the context Malraux provides, the

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 83. Malraux's emphasis.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* Malraux is using the phrase "transfigured world" to signify the world of the *irréel* – as exemplified in this case by Tintoretto's paintings.

statement lends itself to conclusions that Malraux clearly does not intend. Essentially, as Malraux adds (in a comment that Merleau-Ponty also overlooks), it is a question of *styles*,<sup>63</sup> bearing in mind Malraux’s definition of styles as “significations ... [that replace] the unknown scheme of things by the coherence they impose on all they ‘represent’”<sup>64</sup>, the key point being that in art post-Manet individual styles are no longer in the service of anything beyond themselves. Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation – which in this instance, as in some others, seems to have exerted an unfortunate influence on other commentators<sup>65</sup> – is, in short, seriously awry. Like any writer, Malraux can, of course, be made to say any number of things once the context of his statements is removed (and in this case, as we see, the gamut runs from “formalism” to “subjectivism”). Given the obvious efforts he makes to provide contexts that will give his ideas as much clarity as possible, such methods, however, seem particularly inapt.

This summary of Malraux’s account of the emergence of “art” and its subsequent transformation has necessarily been quite brief, concen-

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> See page 82. As we see here, Malraux’s definition of style is effectively the same as his definition of art in the modern sense. The (true) artist creates an autonomous coherent world and in doing so creates a style – distinct from the pastiches from which his or her work has broken free. (Cf. the discussion of creation in art in Chapter Four.)

<sup>65</sup> In a discussion of Merleau-Ponty and Malraux, Alex Potts, for example, repeats the claim that Malraux argues that the modern artist pursues an art that is “entirely individual and subjective in character”. See Alex Potts, “Art Works, Utterances, and Things,” in *Art and Thought*, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 91–110, 95. The editors of a collection of Merleau-Ponty’s writings on aesthetics claim that: “Malraux’s fundamental thesis throughout [*Les Voix du silence*] was that modern painting is a ‘subjectivism’ that breaks with the attempts of ‘objectivism’ among the Renaissance classical artists”. Johnson and Smith, eds., 19. (The significance of the quotation marks is not clear since Malraux himself rarely uses the terms “subjectivism” and “objectivism”, and certainly not in the sense implied in this statement.) Some comments about subjectivism border on the comical. One critic writes: “What happens in modern painting according to Malraux, is that artists have returned to the subjective; instead of picturing some element of the objective world, each painter spreads out an intimate part of himself on the canvas for everyone to see.” E.F. Kaelin, *An Existentialist Aesthetic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962), 271, 272.

trating on major points and leaving out much valuable detail. Even this abbreviated explanation, however, reveals how closely his theory of art is tied to history (of art, and in the more general sense), and how inappropriate it would be to marginalise the historical element and treat it as merely incidental or illustrative. Certainly, the history of art, for Malraux, is not merely an account of artistic influences, and the account provided here shows how limited a part that approach has to play in his thinking. The history that matters for Malraux, as we can now see more clearly, is a series of discoveries – of inventions – some of which, as in the case of Giotto and Manet, can be revolutionary enough to reorient the function of art at a fundamental level. Indeed, the emergence of the *very idea of art* in the centuries post-Giotto, together with the response associated with that idea (admiration rather than reverence), is an historical event in Malraux's eyes. And similarly, the transformation of that idea, and of the associated response (art ceasing to be the domain of the *irréel*) in the decades post-Manet, was not simply one event among others in a general history of something *always* known and *always* experienced as “art”, but an event in historical time which altered the function of something that had, as a result of specific previous events, become known as art. The series of events described above thus form an essential part of Malraux's theory of art, and it is no accident that a major part of his writing on the subject – the three volumes of *La Métamorphose des dieux* and large portions of *Les Voix du silence*, for instance – are presented in terms of historical sequences. Art, for Malraux, as we have said, is a series of inventions or it is nothing. As an affirmation of the human adventure, it is defined solely by the regions it traverses, the rest remaining undiscovered and unknown.

That said, however, the summary presented here would have been deficient if it had not also stressed that Malraux views both the fundamental changes described above – the emergence of “art” and its subsequent transformation – in terms of his basic proposition that the fundamental ambition of art, whether it be *called* art or not, is to create “another world” proof against the chaos of appearances. This point is often overlooked. The critic, Geoffrey Harris, for example, provides a quite detailed summary of the developments considered here but while recognising that the sequence of events involved major

changes after Giotto and Manet, fails to highlight the underlying metaphysical framework within which Malraux views these events.<sup>66</sup> In Malraux's eyes, the transition from Byzantine forms to those of the Renaissance was not *only* an event in history. It was a movement, in the world of painting and sculpture, from one kind of "rival world" to another – from one linked to a Christian absolute which pre-existed the works it inspired, to another involving a new absolute dependent on painting and sculpture for its very existence, thus giving birth to the notion of art in its new, prestigious sense. Similarly, the movement from art in this incarnation to art as it emerged after Manet was not *only*, as Harris writes, "the end of a period of art born at the Renaissance".<sup>67</sup> It was, again, a movement from one kind of rival world to another – from one whose absolute was brought into being by painting and sculpture themselves (limiting ourselves to visual art), to a world of art devoid of any absolute, in which painting and sculpture rely exclusively on their own power to create a rival world. Thus, despite the importance of history, which the account given here has emphasised, Malraux's argument does not reduce *simply* to a recounting of historical events. His argument is *inseparable* from history, but art always remains a form of endeavour *sui generis* which is not amenable to explanations at the historical level alone. Art, for Malraux, is always the creation of a rival world – an *anti-destin* in the sense described earlier – and any explanation that neglected this would overlook a fundamental element. This "dual" nature of art – the fact that it belongs to history but not to history alone – is an aspect of Malraux's thinking to which we shall return following the analysis in the next chapter of his explanation of the relationship between art and time.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Harris, 169–195. Similarly, Henri Godard, in his otherwise informative Introduction to the second volume of Malraux's *Ecrits sur l'art*, provides a quite detailed account of the developments in question but fails to link them clearly to their metaphysical framework. See Henri Godard, "Introduction" in *Malraux: Ecrits sur l'art (II)*, IX–LXII, esp. XXVII–LXII.

<sup>67</sup> Harris, 185.

<sup>68</sup> See page 209. This key metaphysical component of Malraux's account distinguishes it clearly from Marxist or post-Marxist accounts such as that of Walter Benjamin to whom some critics have sought to liken him. See, for example, Edson Rosa da Silva, "La Rupture de l'aura et la métamorphose de l'art: Malraux, lecteur de Benjamin?," in *André Malraux 10: Réflexions sur l'art plastique*, ed. Christiane Moatti (Paris: Minard, 1999), 55–78. Benjamin's claim that art originated in the

One might perhaps object in response to all this that Malraux seems to be using the term “art” in more than one sense. First, he uses it with the meaning introduced in Chapter Three where it signifies the creation of rival, coherent world acting as a defence against the chaos of appearances. Second, there is, according to his argument, the meaning the term acquired from the Renaissance onwards when it came to signify (briefly put) the expression of “a harmonious imaginary world” – a world of beauty. And third, there is the meaning the word has acquired in the modern world, post-Manet, in which it signifies the “the age-old urge to create an autonomous world, which, for the first time, has become the artist’s sole aim”. Surely, one might object, Malraux is guilty of inconsistency here, and a theory of art that employs the term art with three seemingly different meanings must be inherently confused.

The problem is much more apparent than real. As the preceding analysis has sought to show, the first and third meanings are, with one important reservation, the same. When Malraux writes that art since Manet has fallen back on “sa part invincible” – the irreducible element without which it would not even be a possibility – revealing the “age-old urge to create an autonomous world”, he means, as we indicated, that it has resorted to its fundamental power to create a rival, coherent world. The sole difference in meaning is that the description of the fundamental nature of art as outlined in Chapter Three is, as explained there, the description of a mere *possibility* – something that stands in

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service of ritual and only later became “art” is, whether one agrees with it or not, fundamentally an *historical* theory – an account conceptualised essentially as an historical process. For Malraux, as we are stressing here, art is not explicable at the historical level alone. For the same reason, Malraux’s account can also be distinguished from narratives such as that offered by Larry Shiner who attributes the emergence of the idea of art to a series of social and economic factors. (Shiner’s argument, which there is no space to consider here, involves the claim that the “modern system of art” emerged in the eighteenth century. Malraux would agree that the concept of art which began to emerge with the Renaissance – the *irréel* – was given a somewhat belated *philosophical rationalisation* in the eighteenth century – giving birth to the discipline of aesthetics. (See page 148.) But on Malraux’s account, as we have seen, the eighteenth century was at the latter end of the period of the *irréel*, while the *modern* concept of art – in the sense of the art of Manet and his successors – was not yet born.) See Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), *passim*.

need of realisation (art always being creation in the full sense and there being no such thing as "art in itself"). Art as it has developed post-Manet is, precisely, a realisation of that possibility, but in this instance *in those terms alone* – as distinct, for example, in terms of a pre-existing absolute as in Christian Byzantium, or as the manifestation of a harmonious imaginary world.<sup>69</sup> The first and third meanings, in short, differ only in that the former is mere possibility, the latter is that possibility realised. The second meaning of the term art is, as we have seen, the meaning it acquired at a particular stage in Western history when it first gained the prestige associated with its newly discovered power to create an absolute – a world "outside of which man did not fully merit the name man". This is in fact the only "special" use of the term in Malraux's account – special in the sense that it differs from the fundamental meaning of the term described above – and in practice this rarely leads to confusion because Malraux always uses this meaning in the context of the particular historical period with which he associates it. One should perhaps add that, given the nature of his account, Malraux clearly has no choice but to use the term art in the ways he does. The developments post-Manet did not result in the emergence of a *new term* to replace "art" (although it is interesting to note that the phrase "fine arts" – "beaux-arts" – which was in common use up to a century ago has gradually been supplanted by "art" *tout court*). Malraux thus has no other option but to use the same term. The different meanings in question do not in fact seem to have been a cause for disquiet among Malraux's critics since, even among those who are less than sympathetic to his views, this, at least, does not seem to have been a cause for complaint.

An objection of a different kind, aimed more directly at the substance of Malraux's argument, might be that he relies too heavily on the claim that the notion of art was absent in earlier stages of Western culture. The suggestion that "art" first emerged after Giotto and the

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<sup>69</sup> As we shall see after discussing Malraux's understanding of the relationship between art and time, and his concept of metamorphosis, he argues that works such as those of Byzantium which were not regarded as "art" in their original cultural context have come to be regarded as art for the modern viewer. This, however, does not involve a further meaning of the word art. In this context, Malraux is using the term in essentially the same way he uses it to apply to art post-Manet. These matters are explained in Chapters Six and Seven.

Renaissance (to state Malraux's proposition very baldly) ignores the simple fact, one might argue, that most, if not all, cultures have engaged in painting, sculpture, music, story-telling, or dance, in some form. The term and the concept "art" may not have always been used, one might concede, but the thing itself has always been present and it would be absurd to be distracted by questions of mere terminology.

Before examining this objection, it is useful to look at the context of the issue in a little more detail. Malraux's own position, firstly, leaves little room for doubt, and there is much more than Byzantium at stake. He writes in *Les Voix du silence*, for instance, that "the Middle Ages had no more idea of what we now mean by the word art than Greece or Egypt, who had no word for it",<sup>70</sup> and later that "a major part of our art heritage has been bequeathed to us by men for whom the idea of art was not the same as our own, or by those for whom the idea did not even exist".<sup>71</sup> The suggestion is not, of course, that these cultures, like many others, were not rich in painting, sculpture, literature and music, or that their works are not important. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Malraux's writings on art, and a feature that marks them out from those of many other modern theorists, is the attention he pays to the works of other cultures and his refusal to limit his purview to post-Renaissance Western art only. (The reasons for this will be examined in subsequent chapters.) His point is, rather, as discussed earlier, that the *idea* of art, and the particular kinds of responses associated with it, emerged at a certain point in Western history and that we cannot simply assume that those elements were present as a common denominator in all cultures at all times.

Malraux is by no means alone in claims of this kind. The well known anthropologist, Raymond Firth, has written, for example, that "the concept 'art' as such is alien to the practice and presumably the thought of many of the peoples studied by anthropologists".<sup>72</sup> The archaeologist, Gay Robins, comments that

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<sup>70</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 248.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 331. The first part of the sentence – "those for whom the idea of art was not the same as our own" – doubtless refers to the period pre-Manet.

<sup>72</sup> Raymond Firth, "Art and Anthropology," in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics* ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 15–39, 26. Cf. the following comments in a study of the native arts of North America: "None of the native languages of North America seem to contain a word that can be regarded as

... as far as we know, the ancient Egyptians had no word that corresponds exactly to our abstract use of the word "art". They had words for individual types of monuments that we today regard as examples of Egyptian art – "statues", "stela", "tomb" – but there is no reason to believe that these words necessarily included an aesthetic dimension in their meaning.<sup>73</sup>

In a not dissimilar vein, Paul Kristeller argues in his careful study of the development of the "modern system of the arts" in Western culture that there are major differences between the meaning the term art had acquired in the West by the eighteenth century and the closest Greek and Roman equivalents.<sup>74</sup> And of the Middle Ages, he writes that

... the concept of beauty that is occasionally discussed by Aquinas and somewhat more emphatically by a few other medieval philosophers is not linked with the arts, fine or otherwise, but treated as a metaphysical attribute of God and his creation ...

and later that

... there is no medieval concept or system of the Fine Arts, and if we want to keep speaking of medieval aesthetics, we must admit that its concept and subject matter are, for better or worse, quite different from the modern philosophical discipline.<sup>75</sup>

synonymous with the Western concept of art, which is usually seen as separable from the rest of daily life ... Tribal art was not made for its own sake but to satisfy the material or spiritual needs of the tribesmen." Christian Feest, *Native Arts of North America* 2nd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 9, 14.

<sup>73</sup> Gay Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>74</sup> Kristeller writes *inter alia*: "We have to admit the conclusion, distasteful to many historians of aesthetics but grudgingly admitted by most of them, that ancient writers and thinkers, though confronted with excellent works of art and quite susceptible to their charm, were neither able nor eager to detach the aesthetic quality of these works of art from their intellectual, moral, religious and practical function or content, or to use such an aesthetic quality as a standard for grouping the fine arts together or for making them the subject of a comprehensive philosophical interpretation." (Kristeller's analysis includes a discussion of both Plato and Aristotle.) Paul Kristeller, "The modern system of the arts: a study in the history of aesthetics (I)," in *Essays on the History of Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 1992), 3–34, 11, 13. A similar account of Greek and Roman attitudes is given in Shiner, 19–27.

<sup>75</sup> Kristeller, 16, 17. As part of a concluding comment, Kristeller writes: "The various arts are certainly as old as human civilization, but the manner in which we are accustomed to group them and assign them a place in our scheme of life and of culture is comparatively recent." Paul Kristeller, "The modern system of the arts: a study in the history of aesthetics (II)," in *Essays on the History of Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 1992), 35–64, 63.



There is a considerable literature on this topic and these few references do not, of course, amount to a conclusive case. Still less do they establish the validity of Malraux's specific arguments outlined in this chapter. They do, however, suggest that a claim of the kind that "the Middle Ages had no more idea of what we now mean by the word art than Greece or Egypt, who had no word for it" cannot simply be dismissed as outrageous or even as improbable. As the quotations above suggest, there is no lack of evidence to support such a view, or to lead one to suspect that the same may well be true of many other cultures. In the context of the theory of art specifically, Malraux seems to have been one of the first, if not the first, to highlight this point and integrate it into his thinking, but it is by no means a novelty in fields such as history, archaeology and anthropology.

What then of the objection we have mentioned – that most, if not all, cultures have engaged in painting, sculpture, music, story-telling, or dance, in some form and that although they may not have used the term or concept "art", one should not be distracted by questions of mere terminology because the thing itself has always been present?

Even setting aside the kind of evidence mentioned above, this argument collapses very quickly. The key question is whether one can seriously claim to define the notion "art" (and thereby establish the necessary equivalence) simply by listing a series of physical objects and activities such as "painting, sculpture, music, story-telling, or dance"? One can, of course, disagree about what, precisely, the term art *does* signify, and that is one of the central preoccupations of the philosophy of art. But something most philosophers of art are most unlikely to accept is that the concept named by the term is sufficiently defined by reducing it to *nothing more than* a bare list of this kind – which, for example, says nothing at all about the purposes or significance of the objects and activities so named. Despite a certain surface appeal, this argument ends up, in short, being so severely reductionist that it quickly leads to an absurdity.<sup>76</sup>

The aesthetician Dennis Dutton raises an objection of a somewhat more substantial kind. Dutton advances the claim that the objects and

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<sup>76</sup> Versions of the argument are nonetheless advanced from time to time. See for example: Noël Carroll, "Art and Human Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62, no. 2 (2004): 95–107.

activities we term "art" all display certain universal characteristics. In all human societies, large or small-scale, he writes, "the arts" are always associated with certain "features" or "practices" that distinguish them from other activities and which "[make] possible cross-cultural discourse about art in general". Dutton proposes eight such features or practices and it is not possible to discuss them all here. (He suggests, moreover, that his list is not exhaustive and that there are "other potential candidates".) By way of example, however, three of the eight are: the "exercise of a specialized skill", the desire to "represent or imitate real and imaginary experience of the world", and an intention to "afford pleasure" to an audience. These features, Dutton writes, are not simply those that characterise "art in our sense" but ones that "characterise it throughout the whole of human history".<sup>77</sup>

The argument has serious defects. To begin with, the alleged "features" or "practices" are question-begging. "Specialised skill", for example, would presumably be required to produce many objects that would not necessarily be regarded as works of art (clothing, boats, houses etc). A particular *kind* of specialised skill must therefore be intended and it is not clear how one would specify *which* kind without arguing in a circle that it is the kind required to produce art. The suggestion that art is distinguished by a desire to "represent or imitate real and imaginary experience of the world" is no less problematical because it appears to imply that representation, or mimesis, is an essential feature of art, a view that is not universally accepted among art theorists (and which, as we have seen, would certainly be rejected by Malraux<sup>78</sup>). In the third case, while one might perhaps argue that "affording pleasure to an audience" may be the ambition of certain visual artists such as Cabanel (Fig. 14) or Boucher, composers of "light" or "pop" music, or writers of "true romance" novels, one might

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<sup>77</sup> Denis Dutton, "But they don't have our concept of art," in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 217–238., 233–238.

<sup>78</sup> See above page 114. Dutton has since produced a revised version of his list of cross-cultural features or practices, which he renames "recognition criteria" for works of art. The list is, however, very similar to the one discussed here and is open to the same kinds of objections. See Denis Dutton, "A Naturalist Definition of Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 3 (2006): 367–377.



Fig. 14. Alexandre Cabanel, *The Birth of Venus* (1863)  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

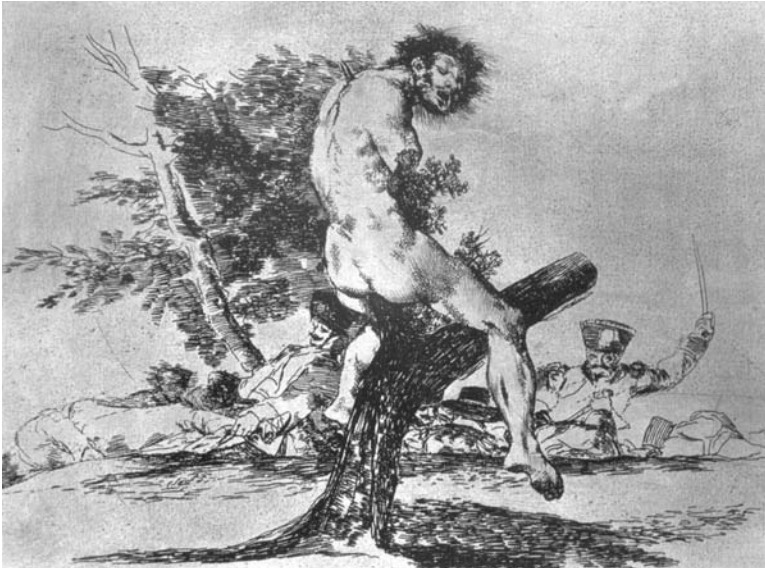


Fig. 15. Goya, "This is worse", *The Disasters of War* (1810-14)  
Private Collection. The Bridgeman Art Library.

well question whether this accurately describes the intention of (for example) the carvers of many African or Oceanic ritual masks, of Goya in works such as his *Disasters of War* (Fig. 15), of Grünewald in the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (Fig. 5), of Dostoyevsky in *The Possessed*, and of many other artists whose works seem designed to evoke responses of a far more profound – and often more disturbing – kind than mere pleasure.

More importantly perhaps, when one looks again at Dutton’s proposed list of universal features or practices, one sees that, despite its apparently broad scope – since it includes a range of ideas that writers in aesthetics often associate with art – the list is in reality highly *selective*. On closer inspection, one sees that it is limited exclusively to features or practices that modern Western thinking *already tends*, rightly or wrongly, to associate with art – such as specialised skill, representation, affording pleasure, etc. But that is where it stops. Features or practices often associated with non-European artefacts in their original contexts – with African masks or Egyptian sculpture, for example – include the many different roles such objects played in religious ceremony and ritual, and these features and practices are quite absent from Dutton’s list. The evidence, in other words, has been filtered in advance. It is, in effect, as if one were both judge *and* advocate: one not only gives a verdict on the basis of the evidence, one also excludes any evidence considered unfavourable.

Moreover, to reverse the analysis, one can readily think of features and practices commonly associated with Western art today that were non-existent in the cultures in which many objects now regarded as art originated. An obvious example is the public exhibition in art museums of objects deemed to be art, a practice once quite unknown in non-Western cultures, and indeed in Western culture itself prior to the eighteenth century.<sup>79</sup> Another is the careful preservation of objects regarded as works of art, a practice taken as a given in modern Western culture (and one of the prime functions of the art museum) but by no means universal in the cultures in which many of the same objects

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<sup>79</sup> There were of course the private art collections of the nobility before this, but even these do not pre-date the Renaissance.

originated.<sup>80</sup> In sum, Dutton's argument falls a long way short of a convincing case that he has identified features of art that "characterise it throughout the whole of human history". This does not, of course, establish that Malraux's alternative view is necessarily correct. It does, however, suggest that his approach cannot be lightly dismissed, especially when seen in conjunction with the kinds of corroborating historical and anthropological evidence mentioned earlier.

Malraux himself, as we have seen, is prepared to take seriously the proposition that cultures other than the post-Renaissance West viewed their painting and sculpture (and the other "arts") in ways quite unlike those that the West has associated with the term "art" (or "fine art"). Indeed a key feature of his theory of art, too infrequently remarked on by critics, is not only that he accepts that this is so but that, as we have seen, he integrates that fact (for he clearly accepts it as fact) into the very fabric of his theory. Art understood as the fundamental urge to create a unified, rival world replacing the chaos of appearances (in the sense in which those ideas have been defined) is, in Malraux's eyes, a form of human endeavour that stretches back to prehistoric times and is common to most, if not all, cultures. But this ambition has not always been directed to the creation of "art" in the senses in which that idea emerged in the West (specifically, in the senses discussed in the course of this chapter). As we have noted, Malraux argues that such ideas, and the responses associated with them, would not have been understood even as late as the Romanesque period and the Middle Ages. "The man who made a great Romanesque statue," he commented in an interview towards the end of his life,

made it so that it could be prayed to. If someone had said, "It's not there to be prayed to," Saint Bernard, for example, would have replied: "Well, my friend,

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<sup>80</sup> Cf. the comment by the anthropologist, Jacques Macquet: "When taking office, a Bamileke chief ... had his statue carved. After his death, the statue was respected but it was slowly eroded by the weather as his memory was eroded in the minds of his people." Jacques Macquet, *Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1979), 38. Lack of interest in preserving such artefacts was by no means uncommon in tribal cultures.

what's the good of your sculpture then?" It was sculpture in the service of the *soul*.<sup>81</sup>

For us today, the sculpture in question, along with many others from earlier times and other cultures, may well be among those that have *become* what we regard as art – and Malraux's explanation of this transformation has yet to be examined; but we are mistaken, he is saying, if we assume that Saint Bernard and his contemporaries, or Rameses II and his contemporaries, or Asoka and his Buddhist contemporaries, and many others, looked on the painting and sculpture of their times, or any of their "arts", as we do today. Such works were certainly intended to create "another world", Malraux argues, but not another world of "art". "If we were able to experience the feelings experienced by those for whom an Egyptian statue or a Romanesque crucifix was originally made," he writes in *Les Voix du silence*, "we could no longer leave such objects in the Louvre".<sup>82</sup>

As we have indicated, one of the aims of the present chapter has been to show why, for Malraux, an answer to the question "What is art?" is inseparable from history, especially as it relates to art, and the analysis of Malraux's thinking thus far has included quite frequent references to events in the history of art. This will continue to be a feature of the remaining chapters and it is perhaps timely at this stage to give some consideration to the allegations mentioned in the Introduction that Malraux's treatment of art history is often faulty and unreliable. In one sense, this matter might perhaps be considered peripheral because Malraux is not, for the reasons we have noted, and as he himself stresses, setting out to write a history of art, and it would be a mistake to view works such as *Les Voix du silence* or *La Métamorphose des dieux* in that light. On the other hand, unlike many contemporary philosophers of art, who are content to discuss art prin-

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<sup>81</sup> André Malraux, *Cinquante ans d'une passion: le musée imaginaire*. (Television series: *Journal de voyage avec André Malraux*.) (Paris: Interviewer: Jean-Marie Drot 1975). Emphasis in transcript.

<sup>82</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 260. Cf. Malraux's similar comment in an interview in 1965: "If, in front of an Oceanic ancestor figure, a funerary stela of the Early Dynastic Period, or a Romanesque crucifix, our feelings were the same as those for whom they were sculpted, we could not leave them in our museums." André Malraux, "Malraux: un nouveau musée imaginaire," *Arts* 29 September (1965): 7.

cipally as an abstract concept, with little or no reference to specific works or historical events, Malraux not only makes extensive use of historical material but, as we have seen, integrates it into the very fabric of his theory. If it should prove to be true, then, that he is an unreliable witness where history is concerned, given to playing fast and loose with the facts, that might well be a matter of serious concern, casting doubt on the very substance of his theory. In Malraux's case, therefore, charges of historical irresponsibility – and some of the allegations have been framed in language no less severe than that – cannot be lightly dismissed; and although space will not permit an extended discussion of this matter, it clearly cannot be ignored.

The accusation that Malraux is little more than an amateur dabbler in the history of art, and a careless – if not dishonest – one at that, surfaced quite soon after the publication of his first books on art and it was not long before many commentators, whether art historians or not, were treating the claims as more or less established fact. In effect, this view has now become part of the critical “folklore” surrounding Malraux's books on art and is seldom, if ever, questioned. An early and influential accuser was E. H. Gombrich who, as already noted, wrote in 1954 concerning the English translation of *Les Voix du silence* that Malraux's text was “nowhere imbued with that sense of responsibility that makes the scholar or the artist,” and that “there is no evidence that [he] has done a day's consecutive reading in a library or that he has even tried to hunt up a new fact”.<sup>83</sup> In like vein, though with hostility less disguised, the French art historian, Georges Duthuit, published a lengthy attack on *Les Voix du silence* in 1956 claiming among other things that Malraux was guilty of negligence, ignorance and fraud.<sup>84</sup> In the United States, the art historian Thomas Munro, reviewing the

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<sup>83</sup> Gombrich, “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” 78. Gombrich's essay was first published in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1954. It has clearly been influential. While disagreeing with Gombrich on certain points, William Righter was impressed enough to write in 1964 of his “recent devastations” of Malraux. Righter, 55. As indicated earlier, Geoffrey Harris, in the recent *Routledge Key Writers on Art: The Twentieth Century* describes Gombrich's essay as “virtually canonical”. See Introduction, note 7.

<sup>84</sup> Duthuit, ‘Avertissement’ (Foreword). Although not recent, Duthuit's book has not faded from view. See, for example, the reference in Gérard Genette, *The Work of Art: Immanence and Transcendence* trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 226.

English translation of *Les Voix du silence* in 1957 for the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, claimed to have found "serious historical errors" and "reckless inaccuracies abounding", only conceding rather grudgingly that "for the pictures it contains, [the book] is probably worth the price".<sup>85</sup> By 1968, the critic and academic Denis Boak could speak of Malraux's "rejection of ordinary scholarship" as if stating a generally accepted fact, and assert, without apparently seeing the need for any supporting evidence, that for Malraux the evidence of history is "largely shrugged off".<sup>86</sup> And in 1977, the French writer and diplomat Roger Peyrefitte reported (with some satisfaction, since he was no admirer of Malraux) that, "when I spent some time in the U.S.A. in 1967, a professor at Princeton told me that students were immediately given a mark of zero if they referred to the unreadable *Les Voix du silence*".<sup>87</sup> While comments of this kind seem to have become less frequent in more recent times,<sup>88</sup> this is probably less due to any change of heart than because art historians have simply ceased to pay any attention to Malraux, and because critics in other fields have largely accepted his alleged failings in art history as established fact.<sup>89</sup> Nowhere in the critical literature has there been any serious attempt to re-examine or challenge this verdict, leaving Malraux as much *persona non grata* in university courses in art history as he usually is in courses in aesthetics.

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<sup>85</sup> Munro: 481, 483.

<sup>86</sup> Boak, 180, 185. Boak's views seem to have been substantially influenced by Gombrich and Duthuit. See Boak, 178, 189, 190, 195.

<sup>87</sup> Roger Peyrefitte, *Propos secrets* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1977), 202. In a similar vein, Hans Belting (who is lukewarm about Malraux at best) writes that "I still remember [the art historian] Wolfgang Fritz Volbach warning students against reading Malraux because he would rob them of their belief in art history". Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 153.

<sup>88</sup> Two comments by recent French reviewers of Malraux's collected *Ecrits sur l'art* suggest there has been no major change of opinion. One writes: "While he doesn't have as much contempt for art history as is often said, Malraux rejects its methods in the analysis of works and in the conditions of their emergence." Guégan: 89. Another comments: "Art historians in France, apart from André Chastel, have not given Malraux a good reception." Albera: 51.

<sup>89</sup> As Robert Thornberry aptly observes, comments such as Gombrich's "were quickly elevated to the level of orthodoxy". Robert Thornberry, ed., *A Confrontation of Metamorphoses: Essays on Malraux and the Creative Process* (Edmonton: RAMR Monographs (2), 1989/90), 12.



There is no space here for a comprehensive examination of this matter, but it is worthwhile looking briefly at some of the evidence adduced to support the charges in question. Despite his uncompromising condemnation, Gombrich, disappointingly enough, produces no evidence at all of historical errors, confining himself to disagreements with Malraux's *theoretical* arguments (where, as we have suggested previously and shall argue again, his interpretation is seriously awry<sup>90</sup>) and to a defence of the role of the art historian (where, as we shall argue shortly, he also misconstrues Malraux's position). Indeed, as an interesting sidelight it is perhaps worth adding that at one point Gombrich himself seems to lack something of "the sense of responsibility that makes the scholar". Towards the end of his comments, in the course of a criticism of the "rhetoric" of *Les Voix du silence*, he upbraids Malraux for his use of the phrase "Antigone's immortal cry" ("I was not born to share in hatred but to share in love"). "Who," Gombrich asks, with more than a hint of condescension, "would not prefer the driest philological gloss on the exact meaning of Antigone's 'immortal cry' (which is not a cry but a reasoned statement in a momentous argument) ...?" Unfortunately, Gombrich was apparently content to rely on Stuart Gilbert's English translation of *Les Voix du silence* and omitted to check the original French text. Malraux does not in fact mention a cry, his phrase being "l'immortelle évidence d'Antigone".<sup>91</sup>

In contrast with Gombrich's comments, the art historian Thomas Munro's criticisms of Malraux have at least the virtue that he offers some – albeit limited – evidence to support his claims. Citing Malraux's discussion of Leonardo da Vinci as an instance of Malraux's "serious historical errors", Munro writes that "no one who had really seen the Hellenistic *Odyssey* paintings in the Vatican (Fig. 16) could assert [as Munro suggests Malraux does] that Leonardo, by blurring outlines, invented a way of rendering space such as Europe had never known before".<sup>92</sup> Fortunately, Munro provides relevant page references, so there is no difficulty in locating the passage in which

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<sup>90</sup> See page 140 and Chapter Nine, note 26.

<sup>91</sup> Gombrich, "André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism," 83. *Les Voix du silence*, 893.

<sup>92</sup> Munro: 483.

this alleged inaccuracy is to be found. Malraux writes there, in a comment that needs to be quoted at some length:

In all previous painting – Greek vases, Roman frescos, the art of Byzantium and the East, the art of Christian Primitives of various lands, of the Flemings, Florentines, Rhinelanders and Venetians ... whether they were painting in fresco, in miniature, or in oils, painters had always composed “by outlines” [“par le contour”]. It was by blurring outlines, and then by prolonging the boundaries of objects into distances that were no longer the abstract locations of previous perspective – those of Uccello and Piero della Francesca seem to accentuate the independence of objects rather than attenuate them – distances made indistinct by tones of blue, that Leonardo, a few years before Hieronymus Bosch, invented, or systematised, a way of rendering space that Europe had never known before, and which was no longer simply a neutral environment for bodies but which, like time, enveloped figures and observers alike and flowed towards a vast immensity.<sup>93</sup>

One sees immediately that Munro has given a severely truncated version of what Malraux has to say. It is not simply a question of “blurring outlines”. Malraux speaks of “prolonging the boundaries of objects into distances that were no longer the abstract locations of previous perspective”, of “distances made indistinct by tones of blue” and of space which “enveloped figures and observers alike and flowed towards a vast immensity”. The explanation is given further substance by reproductions Malraux provides on the same pages to illustrate the contrast he has in mind – a detail of background rocks in a painting by Filippo Lippi and of the background landscape in the *Mona Lisa* (Fig. 17 and Fig. 18) – images of which Munro makes no mention. In short, Malraux has much more to say – both verbally and visually – than Munro indicates.<sup>94</sup> Either Munro has not read the passage in question carefully enough, or he considers his brief reference to “blurring outlines” to be an adequate account of what Malraux says. For a critic

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<sup>93</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 267.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Jean-Yves Tadié’s apt comment in his Introduction to Volume I of the Pléiade edition of Malraux’s *Ecrits sur l’art* (which includes *Les Voix du silence*): “... the photographs matter almost as much as the text; these are not decorative illustrations.” Jean-Yves Tadié, “Introduction,” in *Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, LII.



Fig. 16. Section of the *Odyssey* frieze (Rome, c. 50 B.C.)

Courtesy of the Vatican Museums.

(Munro does not specify which section of the *Odyssey* frieze he has in mind. This scene with rocks has been chosen to afford a basis of comparison with the Filippo Lippi and the Leonardo da Vinci shown opposite.)

accusing Malraux of “reckless inaccuracies”, neither alternative seems acceptable.

But there is a larger issue at stake here as well. Doubtless there are certain kinds of statements one can make about a work of art that might be safely described as statements of fact – such as who painted it, wrote it, or composed it, or who the sitter was if it is a portrait (assuming, in any given case, that such matters are beyond reasonable doubt). If one makes a mistake about such a point, one might certainly be deemed guilty of an “historical error” – which, of course, may or may not be serious, depending on the context. But is this the case here? Setting aside whether Munro’s perfunctory paraphrase of Malraux’s passage is fair or not, and whether his view of Leonardo’s innovation, or Malraux’s, is to be preferred, it is surely arguable that



Fig. 17. Filippo Lippi, *Madonna and Child with Angels* (c.1455) (detail)

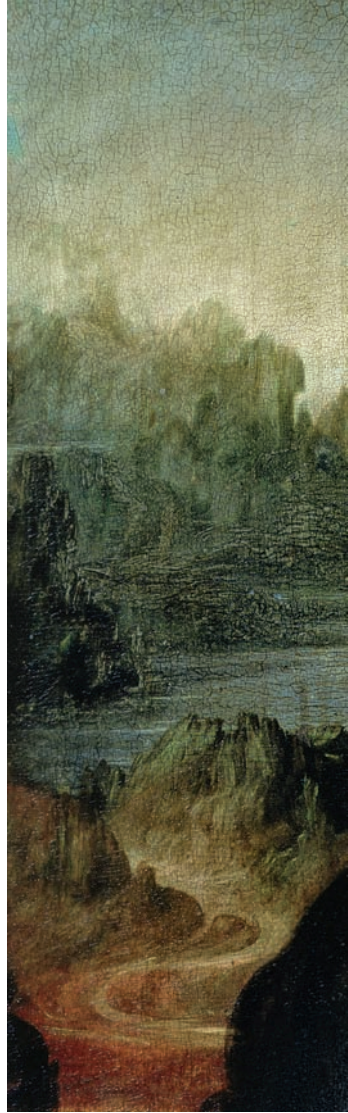
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Alinari/The Bridgeman Art Library.

The two images accompanying Malraux's account of Leonardo's invention of "a way of rendering space that Europe had never known before".

*Les Voix du silence*, 267

Fig. 18. Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa* (c.1503-6) (detail)

Louvre. Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.



the point at issue here is essentially one of *interpretation or opinion* not of fact. In such cases, arguments advanced in favour of a particular view may, of course, be more or less persuasive, and one may even wish to dismiss certain claims as implausible; but to speak of “inaccuracies” and “errors” (and to make assertions of the kind that “no one who had really seen the Hellenistic *Odyssey* paintings in the Vatican could assert ...”) implies that one is dealing with straightforward matters of fact, not opinion – of claims that are simply right or wrong, true or untrue – and it is far from clear (especially when one compares the *Odyssey* frieze with the Leonardo) that Munro is entitled to consider his claim as belonging in that category.<sup>95</sup>

This is by no means an isolated case. There are similar shortcomings in Georges Duthuit’s attack on *Les Voix du silence* and *La Psychologie de l’art*, mockingly entitled *Le Musée inimaginable*. Duthuit’s rather rambling work occupies three volumes and there is no space here to consider more than a sample of what he has to say.<sup>96</sup> A good, representative example, however, is his commentary on Malraux’s account of Gandharan Buddhist art, which forms a major part

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<sup>95</sup> Munro’s other examples are open to the same kinds of criticisms. That is, he distorts Malraux’s comments by abbreviating them and taking them out of context. In addition, they are all matters of interpretation and debate, not self-evidently matters of historical fact. See Munro: 483, 484. It is worth adding that the quality of the *Odyssey* frieze has altered very significantly over the centuries through fading, repainting, and various treatments. One commentator states that the result has “changed the character of the frieze completely, giving it a homogeneous, atmospheric effect and hiding the more restricted palette and abrupt colour transitions of the original.” Bettina Bergmann, “‘Die Odysseeg fresken von Esquilin’ by Ralf Biering,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 101, no. 4 (1997): 803. Munro makes no mention of these factors.

<sup>96</sup> The third volume, however, is largely taken up with reproductions. Duthuit also attacks the theoretical aspects of Malraux’s works but there is no space to examine that element of his criticism here. For the most part, he proceeds by caricaturing Malraux’s position and then ridiculing the caricature. There is no mistaking the hostility. As one reviewer of *Le Musée inimaginable* remarked: “Duthuit becomes at times so vehement that he lapses into sarcastic invective. Every page contains insinuations of bad faith, ignorance or *naïveté*.” The reviewer adds nonetheless that Duthuit’s book “is worth close study as the comment of a specialist”. See George Boas, “Le Musée inimaginable,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16, no. 2 (1957): 281, 282. Duthuit is not alone in resorting to sarcasm where Malraux is concerned. Gombrich, for instance, refers to Malraux as “the Pythia” and his comments as “the dark words of the oracle”. Gombrich, “Malraux on Art and Myth,” 218.

of the second section of *Les Voix du silence* and of the second volume of *La Psychologie de l'art*, both entitled "The Metamorphoses of Apollo".

According to Duthuit, Malraux's thesis is that the art of Gandhara emerged from a life-or-death struggle between a "Greco-Roman, humanist hegemony" and "the anti-humanism of India and China", a confrontation that eventually saw the "death of Greek realism". The event, Duthuit, writes "is presented [by Malraux] as if it were a confrontation between black and white," and as a moment in the history of art where one can clearly say, "Here is a combat between night and day". Malraux's error, Duthuit argues, is that he exaggerates the artistic importance of the post-Alexandrian Hellenistic presence in Asia and underrates the Hindu influence (an interpretation of Malraux that led one subsequent writer, apparently influenced by Duthuit, to write that Malraux makes "all oriental art dependent on Western".<sup>97</sup>) In support of his contention, Duthuit appeals to the authority of "a specialist, William Cohn, in a book published many years before *Les Voix du silence*", in which Cohn writes:

One might perhaps imagine that these foreign invasions and overlordships, always more or less Hellenistic, must have left a deep imprint on Hindu art. But this was not the case. Even if the coming of the Kushan favoured so-called Gandharan art, the most Hellenistic of all Hindu styles, and even though much of the sculpture found at Mathura recalls that of Antiquity, and although traces of Hellenism reach as far as Amaravati, these accidents in no way affected the fundamentally original and enduring character of Hindu sculpture.<sup>98</sup>

And a little later, as if to clinch the argument, Duthuit adds Cohn's view that

Some people have been tempted to elevate the art of the Gandharan school at the expense of other Hindu art. This reveals a certain European fatuousness and much ignorance where the genius of Hindu art is concerned.

These comments, Duthuit announces, are "straightforward good sense falling on Malraux's argument like rain on a picnic". "We must bid adieu to [Malraux's] beautiful antitheses!" he writes in mock sorrow. "Adieu, Apollo and Alexander!" Malraux's misleading exaggeration

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<sup>97</sup> Boak, 195.

<sup>98</sup> Duthuit, 93. Duthuit's footnote refers to W. Cohn, *Indische Plastik*, Berlin: Bruno Cassirer Verlag, 1922.

of the Hellenistic influence has been exposed, and his account of the emergence of Gandharan Buddhist art stands revealed as fallacious.<sup>99</sup>

There are serious errors in this criticism. First, it involves oversimplification. Malraux's characterisation of Greek culture is considerably more complex than the term "humanist" suggests (for example, he insists on the importance of the Greek *religious* sense<sup>100</sup>) and it is quite clear also that he does not view Greek art simply in terms of "realism"<sup>101</sup> – a term which, in any case, Malraux uses very sparingly and always with reservations. In addition, while he sees important differences between Greek civilization and the civilizations of India and China, Malraux nowhere suggests that this should be seen in terms of a dichotomy between humanism and anti-humanism, or a contrast between "night and day".<sup>102</sup> (And where art specifically is concerned, he leaves us in no doubt about his admiration for large numbers of the works of India and China.)

More importantly, however, Duthuit's suggestion that Malraux sees the emergence of Gandharan Buddhist art as the consequence of a struggle for supremacy between Hellenistic and Hindu influences, which the former won, is a clear misreading of Malraux's argument. In a passage drawn from the very section of *Les Voix du silence* that Duthuit claims to be interpreting, Malraux writes:

The history of this great adventure [the emergence of Buddhist art] is not that of the survival of Hellenistic forms, but rather of their death. When, in the oases,

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 93,94. The argument continues for several more pages, but Duthuit introduces other art historians into the fray (one of whom he disagrees with) and the discussion tends to become, even more obviously than in the sections quoted here, a contest between Duthuit's own views and alternative opinions – that is, a debate conducted in terms of conflicting art historical *interpretations*.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. for example, page 134 above.

<sup>101</sup> See, for example, *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 85–96. Cf. also Malraux's comment quoted earlier, Chapter Four, note 44: "There is no realistic style as such; only realistic orientations of existing styles."

<sup>102</sup> In this same section, Malraux speaks, for example, of the "humanism" of Chinese civilization. *Les Voix du silence*, 370. In the version of the same section in *La Psychologie de l'art*, he writes of Buddhism (in a statement which, oddly, Duthuit himself quotes): "Thus a great art [Hellenistic art] forgotten in the vastness of the deserts, comes into contact ... with one of the noblest teachings ["l'une des plus hautes paroles"] the world has ever known." *La Psychologie de l'art: La Création artistique*, 38.

these forms encountered weak values, they merely fell to pieces; but when in India and China they came upon the powerful conceptions of the world sponsored by Indian and Chinese Buddhism, they underwent a metamorphosis. Rarely has history shown us more clearly that the “problem of influences”, which bulks so large in modern thinking about art, is always posed the wrong way around. The Hellenistic forms in Gandhara were forms from which art deliberately broke free, and the same is true of the Greco-Buddhist forms in India and China ... Though there is a continuity of a kind from the *Koré of Euthydikos* to Lung-Mên, it is in no sense a continuity of influences, but of metamorphosis in the exact sense of the term: the life of Hellenistic art in Asia is not that of a model but of a chrysalis.<sup>103</sup>

Duthuit, in short, is fencing with shadows. Apparently oblivious to Malraux’s lengthy analysis of the creative process in the books he is discussing, and also of passages such as this in the very section he is examining, Duthuit casts the question in terms that Malraux expressly rejects. Far from suggesting that Hellenistic forms fought a life or death struggle against Hindu forms, Malraux agrees that *from the outset* the former underwent a metamorphosis leading to the emergence of entirely new forms that were neither Hellenistic nor Hindu. True to his account of the creative process, Malraux rejects Duthuit’s assumption that the process can be understood in terms of conflicting influences (an assumption which, nonetheless, Duthuit is happy to ascribe to him). Art, for Malraux, as we saw earlier, begins precisely where “influences” cease,<sup>104</sup> and consistent with this claim, he views the emergence of Buddhist art as a “breaking free”, a genuine process of creation, not a struggle between different traditions. Duthuit, in short, has misunderstood Malraux at a fundamental level and his scornful reference to the latter’s “beautiful antitheses” comprehensively misses the point because Malraux’s argument is simply not framed in those terms. Certainly, Malraux regards Hellenistic art as the crucible – or the chrysalis, to use his own more accurate metaphor – in which Gandharan Buddhist art had its beginnings (a view in

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<sup>103</sup> Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, 376.

<sup>104</sup> See page 126. Art historians in general seem to have missed this point in Malraux. One wonders, nevertheless, if his rejection of explanations framed simply in terms of artistic influences has not been the cause of some of the hostility he has encountered from art historians, whose own explanations often rely heavily on this approach. Duthuit’s own account, it should be added, advances no theory of artistic creation at all, leaving one to conclude that Gandharan Buddhist art is, in some unexplained way, an “amalgam” of Hindu and Greek art.



which he is far from alone<sup>105</sup>); but Malraux would be happy to agree that it was very quickly a case of “Adieu, Apollo and Alexander!” – though his reasons for saying so would be ones that Duthuit has clearly not grasped.

It is perhaps superfluous to add that even within the terms of Duthuit’s own argument – that is, if one accepted that the question at stake involved nothing more than a struggle between Hellenistic and Hindu influences – one would scarcely be dealing here with straightforward matters of fact as Duthuit seems to assume. William Cohn’s views, persuasively argued or not, must still, presumably, be regarded as matters of opinion, not of established fact, especially since one is dealing here with events that took place over two thousand years ago of which only relatively scattered evidence remains. To give some idea of the differences of opinion surrounding the topic in question, it is worth quoting the view of a more recent art historian who writes, in a lengthy and detailed study of Gandharan art, that

The history of this extraordinary adventure of Graeco-Hellenistic art, enlisted in the service of the Buddhist Revelation, is a history of adaptation, of modification and of transformation – let us even say: of metamorphosis. Essentially, as André Malraux suggests in *Les Voix du silence*, it is the history of a liberating factor, which brings to those who receive it the means of emancipating themselves from it ... The art of Gandhara is thus not just Graeco-Buddhist or Graeco-Romano-Buddhist, but above all itself.<sup>106</sup>

This is not the place to enter into the details of art historical debates surrounding Gandharan art, but a comment such as this – which suggests a process very different from a life or death struggle between Greek and Hindu forms – highlights the dangers of Duthuit’s tendency to quote Cohn as if quoting the law and the prophets, and, in turn, the dangers courted by subsequent critics of Malraux’s alleged historical

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<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Mario Bussagli’s comments in the next paragraph.

<sup>106</sup> Mario Bussagli, *L’Art du Gandhara*, trans. Béatrice Arnal (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1996), 445. Bussagli was Professor of the History of Indian and Central Asian Art at the University La Sapienza in Rome. *L’Art du Gandhara* was first published in Italian in 1984. The precise origins and significance of the Gandharan style have long been matters of debate (rather than of settled fact). See for example: Sir John Marshall, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhara* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1960). Lolita Nehru, *The Origins of the Gandharan Style* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989). Bussagli’s bibliography gives a long list of references – although, interestingly, it includes neither Duthuit nor Cohn.

inaccuracies who have tended to treat Duthuit's own comments in the same way. Duthuit in fact shows the same propensity to confuse fact and opinion noted above in the case of Thomas Munro. He would certainly seem to require something more substantial than the evidence examined here to sustain accusations of "negligence, ignorance and fraud".<sup>107</sup>

It is not difficult to find other examples of misreadings of Malraux by art historians. One of the oddest, perhaps, is Bertrand Davezac's comment, in an article in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, which claims that in *Les Voix du silence*

we learn to our surprise that, save for a few exceptions, Italy was on the whole incapable of producing an art of high quality, while great figures like Hals, Rembrandt, Vermeer and lesser Dutch interior painters, expressed values through which they reached the highest artistic achievements.<sup>108</sup>

Now admittedly, this comment was made in 1963, well before the publication of the second volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux (L'Irréel)* where Malraux's enthusiasm for artists such as Uccello, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, Donatello, Botticelli, Leonardo, Titian, and Tintoretto is quite unmistakable. On the other hand, the comment was made well after the publication of the first volume of the same work where, as we have already seen, the crucial role Malraux assigns to Giotto is plainly evident. More to the point, it is extremely difficult to see how Davezac could reach his conclusion on the basis of *Les Voix du silence*, as he claims to do. This work certainly includes discussions of Hals, Vermeer and Rembrandt (Malraux, significantly, praises Rembrandt as a "Michelangelo"<sup>109</sup>) because for Malraux they, like Goya, relate to an early phase in the disintegration of the Christian absolute (a phase which, for reasons of space, was omitted in the discussion of this matter earlier in the present chapter). There is no suggestion here, or anywhere else in *Les*

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<sup>107</sup> Duthuit's account of Malraux's discussion of Gandharan Buddhist art is one of the major pieces of evidence he adduces to justify his accusations, occurring early in his first volume. As indicated, there is no space to analyse the other elements of Duthuit's argument, but it would not be difficult to sustain a case that all of them contain misreadings of Malraux and confusions between matters of fact and matters of opinion similar to those revealed here.

<sup>108</sup> Davezac: 179, 180.

<sup>109</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 713.

*Voix du silence*, however, that these artists were in some way superior to Italian painters or that “Italy was on the whole incapable of producing an art of high quality”. On the contrary, it is in *Les Voix du silence*, as we have seen, that Malraux credits Leonardo with the decisive discovery mentioned above – “a way of rendering space that Europe had never known before”; and in addition, the work is studded with references to Italian artists for whom Malraux obviously has a high regard – such as Giotto, whose crucifixion he describes as one of man’s “noblest creations”,<sup>110</sup> Michelangelo, whose *Last Judgment* he discusses at length and with obvious admiration,<sup>111</sup> Tintoretto, Titian, Botticelli and many others. Finally, while Davezac does not specify which “lesser Dutch interior painters” Malraux is alleged to esteem so highly, Malraux’s comment on what he terms the “minor masters” who were Rembrandt’s successors is apposite:

Were they realists? Landscape apart, all they did was to raise to a slightly higher level the tavern picture, the conversation piece, the anecdote, or the dinner-party. One is surprised at the limited number of subjects and their repetitiveness, inevitable no doubt since every style tends to bring its own subjects with it as well as its manner. What they depicted was the *emptiness* of the world, softened by sentimental fiction ...<sup>112</sup>

If this is the school of artists Davezac is referring to – and it is not clear which other group he could have in mind<sup>113</sup> – it is mystifying, to say the least, how he could reach the conclusion that Malraux regards them as having “expressed values through which they reached the highest artistic achievements”. Malraux clearly regards Rembrandt, the later Hals, and Vermeer as great painters, but his limited enthusiasm for what Davezac terms “lesser Dutch interior painters” is quite plain; and one will search in vain in *Les Voix du silence* or anywhere else in Malraux’s writings for the slightest suggestion that he ranked

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 547.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 715. Cf. also: “All the little Dutch painters look anecdotal beside Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.” *La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 146.

<sup>113</sup> Malraux himself mentions Pieter de Hooch, Terborch, Hobbema and Fabritius but seems also to be thinking of other less well-known painters of the same period. See *Les Voix du silence*, 715–717. It is quite clear that he does not regard any of them as artists of the first rank.

these painters higher than Italian artists such as those mentioned above.

While it is impossible to provide a comprehensive coverage here, one would have little difficulty mounting a case that most, if not all, the "errors" and "inaccuracies" art historians have claimed to find in Malraux are as questionable as the examples discussed here. Again and again they involve misreadings or misrepresentations of what he has written; and rarely, if ever, are they matters of fact as distinct from questions of opinion and interpretation.<sup>114</sup> Art history, like history more generally, is of course always in a state of gradual change due to continuing research and debate, and it is by no means impossible that Malraux, like any other writer relying on the state of research as he or she knows it, may at some point be shown to be in error about some matter of fact (the date of a work's creation, who painted it, etc). It would, however, be extremely difficult to substantiate a claim that Malraux is "reckless" in his approach to historical material, or that the evidence of history is, in Denis Boak's words, "largely shrugged off". Indeed, on the basis of the evidence considered here, one might well be forgiven for concluding that, in the case of some of Malraux's critics from the field of art history, there is more than a hint of recklessness in the criticisms themselves, and that it has often been the critic's basic responsibility to read an author with care, and to quote him fairly and accurately, that has been largely shrugged off.

It seems possible that some of the animosity towards Malraux among art historians has resulted from a misunderstanding about his attitude towards the discipline of art history, a misunderstanding perhaps fostered by E.H. Gombrich's comments on the subject. Gom-

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<sup>114</sup> It is worth noting that even amongst Malraux's more sympathetic critics, there seems at times to be an unnecessary defensiveness about his historical accuracy. Jean-Yves Tadié, for instance, in his editor's Introduction to Volume I of the *Ecrits sur l'art*, compares Malraux to the "writer" or "poet", rather than the historian, and goes on to say: "Let us not ask of one what we derive from the other: historical accuracy from the poet, style from the historian." (Tadié, X.) Such apologias (questionable in any case, since why, after all, should a writer or poet not be accurate about historical details – or an historian not write well?) seem to take it for granted that art historians' criticisms of Malraux are well founded – a conclusion certainly at variance with the samples examined here. As indicated, Malraux's alleged unreliability in historical matters has become part of the folklore surrounding his works. A critical examination of this folklore is long overdue.

brich suggests not only that Malraux has a cavalier approach to historical facts (a view for which, as mentioned, he produces no evidence) but also that he has a basic inclination to ignore the work of “the historian or the scholar”, thus evincing a kind of systematic indifference, if not antipathy, towards historical research *per se*. In support of this view, Gombrich quotes, in abbreviated form, a passage from Stuart Gilbert’s English translation of *Les Voix du silence* which reads:

For a very small number of men, keenly interested in history, the past is a complex of riddles asking to be solved, whose progressive elucidation is a series of victories over chaos. For the vast majority of us it comes back to life only when it is presented as a romantic saga, invested with a legendary glamour ... it is art whose forms suggest those of a history, which, though not the true one, yet is the one men take to their hearts ...<sup>115</sup>

This comment, Gombrich contends, reveals that Malraux is not interested in the patient work of the historian or the scholar because he prefers the “romantic saga”. (One should interpose that Stuart Gilbert’s translation is a little misleading at this point since Malraux does not in fact write “romantic saga” but “a vast, legendary fiction,” and the phrase “invested with a legendary glamour” is Gilbert’s gloss not Malraux’s text.<sup>116</sup>) Malraux, Gombrich argues, prefers “the myth” to historical truth. “In his style and presentation”, he writes, “[Malraux] never renounces the ‘legendary glamour’ which this saga can lend to rhapsodies about art”.<sup>117</sup>

This claim – which Gombrich repeats in a subsequent article<sup>118</sup> – is a serious misreading of what Malraux says. The passage Gombrich is quoting occurs in the closing sections of *Les Voix du silence* where Malraux is revisiting some of the central themes of his work and, in

<sup>115</sup> *The Voices of Silence*, 619, 620.

<sup>116</sup> Nor does Malraux describe the historian as “solving riddles” but as someone for whom the past is “the object of an interrogation”. Gilbert’s translation here is an example of his occasional tendency, mentioned in the Introduction, to embroider Malraux’s text more than necessary. (See page 29.) Once again, presumably, Gombrich did not check the translation against the original French (which is at *Les Voix du silence*, 874, 875.)

<sup>117</sup> Gombrich, “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” 78, 79.

<sup>118</sup> E.H. Gombrich, “Malraux’s Philosophy of Art in Historical Perspective,” in *Malraux: Life and Work*, ed. Martine de Courcel (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 169–183, 181, 182.

this case, the idea, discussed earlier, that art is a "humanisation" of the world – an *anti-destin* that replaces the unknown scheme of things in which man counts for nothing with a world "scaled to man's measure" – a world he can recognise as his own. This being so, Malraux argues, it is not surprising that art often makes a deeper impression on us than historical writing. Unless we are specialist historians, whose professional studies give us an intense interest in aspects of the past, it is primarily through art that the past "comes alive" for us and remains in our memories. Art may not, as he acknowledges, provide the "true history" – and we may be well aware of that – but this "history" is, nonetheless, the one that, for most of us, strikes the deepest chord. (English speakers have only to think of the image of Richard III or Henry V conveyed by Shakespeare compared with what they may happen to have gleaned through reading history.) In the course of a passage that Gombrich omits in the extract quoted above, Malraux asks:

What, in the first instance, do Greece, Rome and the Middle Ages conjure up in our minds if not architecture, statues, and poetry (meaning more than "verses")? ... So long as the artist pays no heed to them, conquerors are mere victorious soldiers; Caesar's relatively small conquests mean more to us than all Genghis Khan's far-flung triumphs. It is not the historian who confers immortality; it is the artist with his power over men's dreams ... Had they come back to life, the Roman worthies would never have swayed the Convention as Plutarch did.<sup>119</sup>

Malraux's aim here is in no sense to denigrate historical scholarship or suggest that one should *prefer* the "myth" to the historian's account. He is simply making a point about the power of art. The specialist historian, he agrees, may be in a different case by virtue of his or her professional interest. For the rest of us, however, the past we encounter through art tends to move us more profoundly, and etch itself more deeply on our memories, than any recitation of historical fact, however comprehensively or skilfully done. If Malraux had then gone on to say: "This being so, one can safely ignore the work of historians, including art historians," he would certainly have been guilty of the charge Gombrich lays at his door. There is, however, no such proposition, express or implied, or anything resembling it, in the passage Gombrich quotes, in other sections of *Les Voix du silence*, or any-

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<sup>119</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 875.

where else in Malraux's writings, and no warrant for thinking that he ever held such a view. Gombrich writes that "[Malraux's] outlook and purpose differ fundamentally from those of the historian or the scholar" and in one sense that statement is correct because Malraux is expounding a theory of art in which art figures as much more than a series of historical facts.<sup>120</sup> To suggest, however, that he is interested only in "rhapsodies about art" and is happy to play fast and loose with history in the interests of such "rhapsodies" is quite another matter, and one that the evidence simply does not support.

One cannot refrain from adding that it is a strange irony indeed that Malraux, of all art theorists, should be the one accused of a lack of interest in history. Levelled against a number of aestheticians in the contemporary analytic tradition, for example, the charge might be understandable, given the staunchly ahistorical approach adopted by most writers of this persuasion and the scarcity of their references to historical developments earlier than the twentieth century. As one recent writer – an art historian – aptly notes in this connection, the disciplines of aesthetics and art history "which would appear to have so much to do with one another" in fact tend to live in different worlds and "pass each other like ships in the night".<sup>121</sup> Yet, one needs only a brief acquaintance with *Les Voix du silence* or *La Métamorphose des dieux* to see immediately that here one is dealing with a writer of a quite different stamp – one for whom both the history of art, and history more generally, play a major role. Moreover, in view of Gombrich's remark that Malraux seems not to have "done a day's consecutive reading in a library", it is perhaps worth suspending the non-biographical focus of the present study long enough to add that there is abundant evidence to the contrary. The overwhelming view of

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<sup>120</sup> In passing, it is interesting to note Hegel's view. Despite the importance history assumes in his aesthetics, Hegel nonetheless cautions against too heavy a reliance on "art scholarship". He writes: "For art scholarship (and this is its defective side) is capable of resting on an acquaintance with purely external aspects, such as technical or historical details, etc., and of guessing but little, or even knowing absolutely nothing, of the true and real nature of a work of art. It may even form a disparaging estimate of the value of more profound considerations in comparison with purely positive, technical and historical information". G.W.F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin, 1993), 39, 40.

<sup>121</sup> Keith Moxey, "Aesthetics is Dead: Long Live Aesthetics," in *Art History versus Aesthetics*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2006), 166–172, 167.

those who have written about Malraux’s life is that he had read very widely indeed, and there is ample evidence (if his works on art alone were not enough) that the history of art was high on his lists of interests<sup>122</sup> – an unsurprising fact since his books on art would scarcely seem possible if that were not so. Given that Gombrich’s focus seems limited to libraries, one should perhaps add that Malraux was by no means content with what he could glean from the printed page or from reproductions. A tireless traveller throughout his life, he saw *first-hand* large numbers of the works he discusses, his itinerary including such distant and varied locations as Elephanta in India, Borobudur in Indonesia, the Lung-Mên caves in China, Palenque in Mexico and many more. None of this, of course, is intended to imply that Malraux’s interpretations of the history of art are, any more than anyone else’s, always necessarily correct (due allowance made for the slipperiness of that term in the context of history), or that they are not open to challenge. To suggest, however, that a writer whose familiarity with history and the history of art, both of the West and of other cultures, seems at times to verge on the encyclopaedic, is someone who has not “done a day’s consecutive reading in a library”, or is somehow uninterested in the history of art, is a bizarre judgment indeed. To repeat: one is certainly entitled to challenge Malraux’s interpretations of history; indeed, given the importance history assumes in his theory of art, serious weaknesses in this area could, as suggested, be much more significant than they might be in other theories of art where the history of art plays little or no role. Challenges, however, need to be based on a careful reading of his text, and one certainly seems entitled to expect something more pertinent, substantial and reliable than the examples considered here.

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<sup>122</sup> The editors’ notes to the recent re-editions of Malraux’s books on art by Gallimard mention that Malraux’s personal library included over two thousand books on visual art, now in the care of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The notes also describe Malraux’s painstaking efforts to ensure that his art historical documentation was as accurate as possible – efforts that went well beyond library sources and included correspondence with relevant sources worldwide. Not surprisingly, the editors disagree with Gombrich’s remark. See Adrien Goetz, François Saint-Cheron, and Christophe Parant, “Notice, notes, variantes,” in *Écrits sur l’art (II)*, 1268–1278. Cf. also Henri Godard’s comment in his Introduction to the same volume: “Whatever Gombrich may have thought, Malraux had read widely, consulted widely and asked a wide range of questions.” Godard, “Introduction” XXIV.



The present chapter has again sought to draw attention to the unified and systematic nature of Malraux's thinking about art. Previous discussion showed that Malraux's account of the creative process flowed naturally from his basic proposition that art is a response, via the creation of a rival, unified world, to what he terms the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life. Similarly, the ideas explored in the present chapter derive, as we have seen, from the same basic proposition, the focus in this case shifting to the different *kinds* of rival worlds art has created – which have not always taken the form of what the post-Renaissance West came to describe as “art.” In the course of this analysis, we have mentioned that the changes ushered in by Giotto and his successors, and later by Manet, were signalled not only by the nature of the works *created* but also by the range of works *resuscitated*.<sup>123</sup> For the Renaissance, “art” was not only the works of Leonardo and Michelangelo and those who followed them, but also the works of Rome and Greece, which Byzantium had ignored (or re-used as building material) for a millennium. Similarly, modern times since Manet have seen the progressive resuscitation, as “art”, of works from a wide range of cultures, such as Egypt, Pre-Columbian Mexico and the tribal societies of Africa, whose works the West had never previously regarded in that light, and which also seem never to have been regarded as “art” by the cultures in question. Thus far, we have made no attempt to explain Malraux's account of this process of resuscitation, the methodology of this study being, as explained earlier, to “dismantle” Malraux's theory of art and discuss his principal ideas one by one. To proceed further, however, we need to turn our attention to this issue. In doing so, we will encounter one of the most revolutionary, yet least well understood, aspects of Malraux's thinking – his view of the relationship between art and time, or, more concisely, the temporal nature of art. This is the central concern of the next chapter.

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<sup>123</sup> See page 157.

## Chapter Six

### Art and Time

“La métamorphose est ... la vie même de l’œuvre d’art dans le temps,  
l’un de ses caractères spécifiques”.<sup>1</sup>

Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Intemporel*

Very little has been written in recent times about the general relationship between art and time. Indeed, it is scarcely too much to say that the issue has all but disappeared from the agenda of modern aesthetics, especially in the English-speaking world. By way of example, neither of the two compendiums, *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* or *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*<sup>2</sup> contains an entry on the topic, or even an index reference. And if one looks more broadly across the literature on the theory of art, one needs to search very diligently to find more than a handful of books or articles over recent decades that refer to the question of time, even obliquely. Before examining Malraux’s position on this matter, it may therefore be appropriate to offer some preliminary remarks to clarify the nature of the issue at stake.

The focus of interest is not the conception of time in this or that particular work – for example in Proust’s *A La Recherche du temps perdu* as compared with, say, the picaresque novel. These are, of course, perfectly legitimate topics, and Malraux himself, when discussing individual artists, occasionally alludes to the sense of time evoked by particular works. (He speaks for example of the “timeless light” in the paintings of Rembrandt and Georges de La Tour, and the

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<sup>1</sup> “Metamorphosis is ... the very life of the work of art in time, one of its specific characteristics.”

<sup>2</sup> Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Kieran, ed. Similarly, there is no mention of the topic in Peter Kivy, ed., *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). There is one entry in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, eds., *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); however, as argued below, the entry overlooks the key issue at stake.

sense of an “eternal moment” evoked by some Dutch still-lives.<sup>3</sup>) The issue at stake in the present analysis, however, is much broader and concerns the *general* relationship between art and time – the temporal nature of art understood generally. Malraux’s thinking on this topic, the present chapter argues, is a central element of his theory of art, and one through which he makes a vital contribution to our understanding of the world of art both in the past and today. It is also an issue, however, which his critics, including figures as prominent as **Maurice Blanchot**, have so far failed to analyse with sufficient care.

It is useful to begin by dealing briefly with two red herrings that might perhaps lead us astray.

**In one of the rare discussions of time in relation to art in recent decades, the aesthetician Anthony Savile, in a book entitled *The Test of Time*, raises the familiar question of whether or not one should consider the longevity of a work of art to be a reliable indicator of its degree of excellence. “As long as the arts have attracted interpretation and criticism,” this author writes, “it has been common, though not universal, practice to appeal to the judgment of time in distinguishing accurate from inaccurate estimates ... and in setting the individual artist in his rightful place in the pantheon of the great”. Savile then asks if this practice is justifiable – that is, if one should expect a work of art worthy of the name to pass “the test of time” – and eventually returns a cautiously worded, affirmative response. It is legitimate, he writes, to ask of a work that it “hold our attention” or “survive” for “a sufficient period”, a period which, he says, he intentionally leaves vague.**<sup>4</sup>

**Now whatever one might think of this claim (a matter about which we shall have more to say), it rests on an important presupposition that Savile neglects to mention. If one considers it reasonable to expect a work of art to pass a “test of time”, one must presumably think there is something in the *nature* of art – something not possessed by other objects and endeavours of which one does not have that expectation –**

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<sup>3</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 618. Malraux, “Articles de ‘Verve’: De la représentation en Occident et en Extrême Orient,” 935.

<sup>4</sup> Savile, 1,10. In their 2004 compendium of essays on aesthetics, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen describe Savile’s book as “important” and reprint the first chapter. See: Lamarque and Haugom Olsen, eds., 236, 253–261.

that *enables* it to endure in this way. Setting aside for the moment the issue of what, precisely, “endure” might mean in this context, and *how* precisely art might “endure” (both crucial issues as we shall see shortly), the very fact that one can pose the question as Savile does, and that it is such a familiar idea, suggests a widespread acknowledgement that there is something exceptional about the nature of art that gives it a peculiar capacity to pass a “test of time”. Underlying Savile’s inquiry, in other words, is a puzzle of a more intriguing and fundamental kind: What might *give* art its apparent ability to “hold our attention” or “survive” for “a sufficient period”? And what, precisely, is the nature of this special capacity? These are the questions the present chapter will address and, also, as we shall see, the questions that preoccupy Malraux in his reflections on the temporal nature of art.

The second red herring concerns the *kind* of survival in question. In speaking of works of art “enduring” or “lasting”, one does not mean that they possess some special quality that might enable them to resist *physical* destruction. This point may seem too elementary to mention but in a recent book entitled *What Good are the Arts?*, which attracted considerable attention at the time of its publication, John Carey writes that “No art is immortal and no sensible person could believe it was. Neither the human race, nor the planet we inhabit, nor the solar system to which it belongs will last forever. From the viewpoint of geological time, the afterlife of an artwork is an eyeblink”.<sup>5</sup> As a contribution to a discussion about the temporal nature of art, this remark is quite beside the point. The belief that a (true) work of art “lasts” or “endures” – whether or not one employs the term “immortal” – has nothing at all to do with a claim that it might somehow be able to resist physical destruction. (How many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of great works of the past, one wonders, have been destroyed by wars, natural disasters, iconoclasm, re-use for other purposes, or simple neglect? Indeed, the very fragility of many works of art quite possibly made them *more* vulnerable to the ravages of time than other, more robust, objects.) The issue at stake in an analysis of the temporal nature of art is of a quite different order and has to do with the apparent capacity of certain works — a *Hamlet*, a *Mona Lisa*, a *Magic Flute*, for example — not only to impress their contemporaries but also to exert a fascin-

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<sup>5</sup> John Carey, *What Good are the Arts?* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2005), 148.

ation on subsequent ages, while so many lesser works have faded into oblivion. It has to do with the power of certain works to “transcend time” in the sense that, unlike so much else — from the latest fad to beliefs about the nature of the gods and the universe — they continue to be “alive” and important to us, and escape consignment to what André Malraux aptly terms “the charnel house of dead values”.<sup>6</sup>

Having dealt with these two potential distractions, how, then, can we approach the real issues at stake in our inquiry? The first point to note is that, although, as we have said, modern aesthetics has fallen almost completely silent on the question of the temporal nature of art, the Western cultural tradition has, by contrast, been far from silent. Broadly speaking, that tradition has espoused two principal — albeit quite different — accounts of the matter and it will be useful to begin by looking briefly at both.

On the one hand, there is the familiar idea, which has been a recurring theme in Western thought at least since the Renaissance, that art — or at least great art — is “timeless”, “eternal” or “immortal” — not, of course, in the pedestrian sense implied by John Carey, but in terms of a capacity to transcend time. In his speech on the function of art in 1974 mentioned earlier, Malraux illustrated this idea by a stanza from Théophile Gautier’s poem, *L’Art*:

All things pass. Sturdy art  
Alone is eternal;  
The sculpted bust  
Outlives the State.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, 890.

<sup>7</sup> Théophile Gautier: *Émaux et Camées*, “L’Art”. In French:  
Tout passe. L’art robuste  
Seul a l’éternité;  
Le buste  
Survit à la cité.

The idea is prominent in Shakespeare’s sonnets, in lines such as:  
“Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st —  
So long as men can breathe, and eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.” (Sonnet 43)

According to this view – which, as we shall see later, Malraux rejects – the work of art is essentially *immune* from the vicissitudes of time. Other aspects of life, such as political credos, social customs, or religious beliefs, eventually succumb to change and sink into oblivion – into the “charnel house of dead values” to borrow Malraux’s expressive phrase again. Art, however, (so it is said) has a power of resistance. It rises above the merely transitory and inhabits a realm in which it enjoys a changeless or “eternal” existence, so that *Hamlet* or Michelangelo’s *David* – to choose two familiar examples – reach us alive and unaffected across the centuries while so much else that men and women in Elizabethan England, or sixteenth century Florence, thought important or admirable has (unless one is a specialist historian) slipped into the realm of forgotten things.

In contrast to this explanation there is the influential stream of thought originating with thinkers such as Hegel and Taine, and developed in various ways in Marxist and post-Marxist theories, which insists that art, like all other aspects of human activity, is part of man’s *historical* experience.<sup>8</sup> Seen in this light, art is certainly not insulated from time. It participates in the world of historical change, either as a reflection of it, or as an agent of change itself, or as both. Understood in this way, both *Hamlet* and Michelangelo’s *David* are closely linked to a specific moment in time; they bear its marks, and perhaps played a part in strengthening or subverting certain social forces or ideologies that characterised that phase of human history. To locate their essential qualities in a changeless, eternal realm *isolated* from history would, from this viewpoint, be to misrepresent them and deny their true nature.

These are only summary descriptions of the two approaches in question and there has been no attempt to canvass the subtle variations

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<sup>8</sup> Hegel argues that there are three “forms” of art (Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic) which emerge in the historical unfolding of the Idea. Hegel, 82–88. Taine writes: “To understand a work of art, an artist, or a group of artists, one must determine precisely the general state of mind and the beliefs of the times to which they belong ... Therein lies the first cause which determines the rest.” Hippolyte Taine, *Philosophie de l’art*, vol. 1 (Paris: Hachette, 1948), 7. Elsewhere, for example in his *Lectures on Art*, Taine adds race as a factor, giving his familiar formulation: *race, milieu, moment*.

proposed from time to time.<sup>9</sup> Even this brief analysis, however, suggests there are major problems in store. To begin with, the explanations are obviously incompatible. Finesse the matter how we will, we clearly cannot argue that something is, at one and the same time, essentially immune from the vicissitudes of time and yet immersed in the world of historical change. But the difficulties do not end there. Each explanation presents its own particular problems and, once we examine them more closely, we quickly see that neither is in fact capable of furnishing a plausible account of the temporal nature of art.

The Achilles' heel of the historical approach – to consider that alternative first – is familiar enough. Stating the matter summarily, the more strongly one insists on the importance of connections between a work of art and a particular historical context, the greater the difficulty one has in explaining any qualitative difference between it and other human activities – and why it, but not they, should be able to transcend that context and evoke the admiration of subsequent ages, perhaps centuries, or even millennia, afterwards.<sup>10</sup> *Richard III* and the countless politico-religious tracts circulating in Elizabethan England were both, one might say, “products” of the same historical context,

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<sup>9</sup> The persistence of the two basic ideas, and their irreconcilability, continue, however, to be evident. See, for example, Janet Wolff's criticisms of Marcuse whose last work, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, asserts the “transhistorical, universal truths” of art. For Wolff, this is to underestimate the importance of “the ideological nature of art, as well as the relevance of the relations of production in which it is produced”. Janet Wolff, *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 44. For a more recent case, see Jonathan Harris's discussion of Peter Fuller's attempt to find “constants” of human experience in works such as the *Venus de Milo*. Fuller, Harris writes, “met sharp opposition from both feminists and Marxists ... – some of whom placed him firmly in the camp of conservative traditional art history and idealist art criticism.” Jonathan Harris, *The New Art History, A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2001), 141.

<sup>10</sup> A problem that seems to have occurred to Marx himself, who writes in the *Grundrisse* that “... the difficulty is not so much in grasping the idea that Greek art and epos are bound up with certain forms of social development. It lies rather in understanding why they should still constitute for us a source of aesthetic enjoyment and in certain respects prevail as the standard and model beyond attainment.” Due allowance made for a degree of deference to Antiquity that we today might regard as excessive, the underlying point remains. David McLellan, ed., *Marx's Grundrisse* (London: Macmillan Ltd, 1980), 45.

but the latter have been long forgotten, except by historians, while *Richard III* lives on and continues to impress us. History alone, in short, seems to leave something crucial out of account where the temporal nature of art is concerned. The more heavily and exclusively one relies on it – irrespective of the theory of history one chooses – the more one seems to remove any possible grounds of distinction between art and objects or activities of any other kind.

The notion of timelessness is no less questionable, and its weaknesses quickly becomes apparent if one takes the full extent of the history of art into account. There are, plainly, certain works such as the plays of Shakespeare and the works of Michelangelo that seem to have been admired more or less continuously since they were created despite the major changes in knowledge and patterns of belief that have taken place since that time. But the category “art” today covers a much broader field than those examples suggest, a fact that is particularly evident in the case of visual art. Today’s art museums include objects as various as ceremonial masks from Africa, Pre-Columbian figurines, and statues from Egyptian tombs. How persuasive is the idea of “timelessness” in cases such as these? Selected objects from Africa, Pre-Columbian Mexico, and Ancient Egypt made their entry into art museums in the early years of the twentieth century. Yet as we know – even if we often tend to forget – the West encountered these cultures well before that, and for centuries regarded their artefacts merely as the botched products of unskilled workmanship, or as heathen idols or fetishes.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, even in their original cultural settings, as mentioned in the previous chapter, such objects do not seem to have been regarded as “art” in any sense of the word that resembles its meaning in Western culture today. Their function – their *raison d’être* – was usually religious or ritualistic: they were “ancestor figures” housing the spirits of the dead, or sacred images of the gods, or, in the case of Ancient Egypt, the Pharaoh’s “double” to whom offerings were made to aid him in the Afterlife. The transformation that has taken place over the centuries in cases such as these, from sacred object initially, then to despised heathen idol, and now to treasured work of art, seems very difficult to square with the notion of “timelessness” – that is, immunity from change. Time and change

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<sup>11</sup> These claims are discussed in more detail in the next chapter. See page 232 et seq.



seem, on the contrary, to have played a very powerful role, not only in terms of whether or not the objects were considered important but also in terms of the *kind* of importance placed on them. There are, of course, many other examples of such transformations and one does not always need to go as far afield as Africa, Pre-Columbian Mexico, or Ancient Egypt to find them.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, we find ourselves today in a baffling situation. If we are seeking a convincing account of the temporal nature of art, we have, as we have seen, two principal ideas at our disposal. The ideas are plainly incompatible, so one cannot embrace both. But each, as we now see, has serious problems of its own. So unless, like many writers in modern aesthetics, we simply turn our backs on the whole issue, we are confronted with a major dilemma. We appear to require a quite different account of the relationship between art and time that will, among other things, make sense of the kinds of transformations and discontinuities noted above where, for example, an artefact functioned originally as a sacred object, then passed through a lengthy period in which it was regarded with indifference or contempt, and then subsequently became an admired “work of art”. As we shall see, it is just such an account that Malraux provides in *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux*, and the next step in this analysis will be to examine his arguments, showing how they explain these “metamorphoses” – to employ his own terminology – and also how his thinking follows as a natural consequence of the basic ideas about the nature of art we have already explored.

It is useful to begin by reflecting again on Malraux’s description of “the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life”, and the related notion of an absolute introduced in the previous chapter. An essential element of the emotion in question, as we saw, is a profound sense of the ephemeral. It is an awareness of “all this” – including man and all his activities – as mere appearance, as contingency grounded in nothing, and thus as easy prey to the depredations of time. It is an emotion, Malraux writes, “inseparable from the passing of time; a simultaneous awareness of the strange, the contingent, and the

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, below page 247 et seq.

ephemeral”.<sup>13</sup> Man inhabits a universe in which his presence seems a matter of indifference and where the significance of all his endeavours, no matter how ambitious, is relentlessly swept into oblivion.

An absolute, it will be recalled, responds to this fundamental emotion by providing an explanation. It *sees through* the chaos of appearances and grasps the underlying nature of things. It responds to the questions “Why is there something rather than nothing?” and “Why has the world taken this form?” by pronouncing that the world is the only way it *could* be – the way it was “intended” to be. An absolute thus vanquishes the all-encompassing sense of transience inherent in the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life. The believing Christian (for example) knows that the Gospel contains an “imperishable” message – precisely because it speaks of the unchanging nature of things – and he or she therefore knows that actions carried out in obedience to that message, whether simple daily tasks or the most ambitious undertakings, partake of that imperishability. The experience of the present moment merges with “what once was” to create a sense of timelessness – as the Angelus recalls the Annunciation, or Christmas the birth of Christ. Similarly, the committed revolutionary, for whom a particular theory of history might reveal “permanent truths” about man and his ultimate destiny, knows that actions performed in accordance with those truths, no matter how minor, partake of the revolution’s “enduring historical significance”.<sup>14</sup>

This explanation sheds light on the temporal nature of art by way of a contrast. Unlike an absolute, art makes no claim about the underlying nature of things – the way things “really are”. Art, as we have seen, creates *another* world. Unlike an absolute, which pronounces that *all things* are the way they are for a reason (such as the will of God), art speaks only of its own rival world, leaving the nature of things – ultimate Truth – unknown and unknowable. Thus, while

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<sup>13</sup> Malraux, “Discours prononcé à la Fondation Maeght,” 885.

<sup>14</sup> In *La Métamorphose des dieux*, Malraux illustrates the idea by a brief retelling of the Hindu story of the ascetic Narada. Vishnu is thirsty and asks Narada for a drink of water before revealing the secret of his Truth. Narada goes off in search of water but is distracted, meets a beautiful young girl, marries her, and they have three children. Twelve years later, a flood sweeps away his wife and children, and in the aftermath Narada encounters Vishnu again who says, “My child, where is the water? I have been waiting more than half an hour ...” *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 19, 20.

art “stands for unity as against the chaos of mere, given reality”, as Malraux writes,<sup>15</sup> it does not, like a religion or a secular absolute, affirm the unity of all things. *It makes the world one, but does not affirm that there is only one world* – a world created “once and for all”, eternally. Thus, while the worlds created by art are coherent – and therefore, in their own way, a conquest of the arbitrary and contingent world of appearance – they are, by their very nature, *never fixed – never final*. Unlike the eternal world of an absolute, they are born to metamorphosis: they are worlds to which metamorphosis is intrinsic. Or as Malraux phrases the point in *L’Intemporel*, metamorphosis “is the very life of the work of art in time, one of its specific characteristics”.<sup>16</sup> Far from being immune to change, art lives and has its being *in* a world of change, with all the unpredictability and vulnerability to circumstance that implies.

This somewhat abstract explanation can be made more accessible by comparing Malraux’s position with a familiar claim concerning the interpretation of works of art. It is often said that any great work of art – a play by Shakespeare, for example – can be interpreted in a variety of ways and that successive periods of history may see it in different lights and discover different meanings in it. Is this ultimately all Malraux is saying when he writes that metamorphosis “is the very life of the work of art”? Is he simply restating this familiar truism? The answer is no. The similarity between this and Malraux’s position is purely superficial. Malraux certainly agrees that different historical periods may discover different meanings in a work of art and regard it with varying degrees of importance (including none at all). By itself, however, this familiar idea says nothing specific about the temporal nature of art. It is perfectly compatible, for example, with the claim, which is quite at variance with Malraux’s position, that the work of art is something whose nature is fixed “once and for all”; for one need only assume that the range of different interpretations to which the work gives rise is the specific, *fixed* range of meanings which the

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<sup>15</sup> See page 82.

<sup>16</sup> *L’Intemporel*, 971. The complete sentence is “Metamorphosis is, I repeat, the very life of the work of art in time, one of its specific characteristics.” The “I repeat” is probably a reference to the fact that Malraux had already made the point emphatically in *Les Voix du silence* and in *La Psychologie de l’art*. Cf. note 17.

artist, consciously or unconsciously, gave it at its birth. Malraux does not leave the matter unresolved in this way. He is arguing, as a direct consequence of his fundamental claims about art (as explained above) that the work of art is something which, *by its nature* – and not merely as a result of chance events – is not fixed. While always “standing for unity as against the chaos of mere, given reality”, it is a domain of significance which is inherently in a state of continual change. “Metamorphosis”, Malraux writes, “is not an accident, it is the very law of life of the work of art”.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the work’s significance at its moment of birth is *only* that – its *original* significance – and one that will, whether the artist is aware of it or not, inevitably disappear to be replaced by another. The work’s moment of creation, whatever effect it may then produce, and whatever function it may then perform (which may not even be *as* “work of art”, as we have seen) is only a point of departure from which it sets out on a journey of metamorphosis. Its nature is precisely that of an adventure launched onto the unknown seas of the human future: like an adventure, it is not proof against time and changing circumstance (as the concept of timelessness would require) and there may well be times when it fades into insignificance and obscurity, possibly for centuries or even millennia; like an adventure, however, it is pregnant with *possibility*: unlike mere historical phenomena (systems of beliefs, for example) which inevitably disappear into oblivion, it may well live again, albeit with a significance quite different from that which it originally possessed.

This principle immediately allows us to make sense of the puzzling discontinuities and transformations discussed earlier, and shows the way out of the impasse highlighted there – the problems raised by the notion of timelessness, given the apparent vulnerability of works of art to the effects of time and circumstance, and the limitations of the historical approach given the capacity of certain objects, but not others, to transcend the context in which they were created. If, as Malraux argues, “metamorphosis is the very life of the work of art” – implying that *by its very nature* its significance is never final – these

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<sup>17</sup> “La métamorphose n’est pas un accident, elle est la loi même de la vie de l’œuvre d’art”. *Les Voix du silence*, 264. Malraux makes the same statement in *La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 16.

characteristics immediately cease to be problems because they are precisely those one would *expect* works of art to display. A work might, for example, begin its life as a sacred object within a particular religious context – a Pharaoh’s “double”, for instance, placed in his mortuary temple to receive the offerings of his subjects. Subsequently, when the beliefs with which that significance was associated have disappeared, it might recede into obscurity as did the works of Ancient Egypt for nearly two millennia, or as Byzantine art did after Giotto, or as Giotto himself did for three centuries after Leonardo and Raphael.<sup>18</sup> In such cases, it is as if the work inhabits, for a time, a kind of limbo in which it evokes at best indifference, at worst contempt. It returns to life and regains human importance only if and when, with the passing of time and its own capacity for metamorphosis, it is able to re-emerge – once again as a coherent world acting as a defence against the chaos of appearances, but with a significance quite different from that which it originally possessed. Thus the works of Ancient Egypt, Byzantium, and Giotto ceased to be sacred images created for tomb, basilica or chapel, and became, after lengthy periods of obscurity, “works of art” in the sense that phrase has for us today.<sup>19</sup> This does not of course tell us why *those particular* changes took place when they did (a matter for subsequent chapters); it does, however, explain the nature of the *process* in question – the capacity of the work of art, in the fundamental sense of a coherent but not fixed world, to acquire different significances (including none at all) at different periods of time, and to do so not simply as a consequence of external forces (for “metamorphosis is not an accident”) but in virtue of its own intrinsic nature – its power of metamorphosis. Thus, the destiny of any great work, Malraux argues, is inseparable from a *dialogue* – if at times a dialogue

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<sup>18</sup> In an interesting passage in his account of his visit to Italy, Goethe writes that at Assisi “I turned away in distaste from the enormous substructure of the two churches on my left, which ... are the resting place of St. Francis” [one of which houses Giotto’s frescos on the life of St Francis]. Goethe’s interest at Assisi was the Roman Temple of Minerva (still extant) of which he writes “one could never tire of looking at the façade and admiring the logical procedure of the architect ... the sensations which this work aroused in me are going to bear fruit forever”. Giotto is not mentioned. J.W. Goethe, *Italian Journey 1786-1788*, trans. W. H Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 106–108.

<sup>19</sup> The sense discussed above at page 156. This matter is discussed in more detail in the next chapter. See especially page 246 et seq.

of the deaf – between the changing human present and the work’s own, continually changing, significance. We recognise, he writes, that

if Time cannot permanently silence a work of genius it is not because the work prevails against Time by perpetuating its original language but because it constrains us to listen to a language constantly modified, sometimes forgotten – as it were an echo answering each century’s changing voice – and what the great work of art sustains is not a monologue, however authoritative, but an invincible dialogue.<sup>20</sup>

This is perhaps the kind of statement that critics such as Bourdieu and Righter, who accuse Malraux of needless rhetoric, might select as evidence for their claim. Yet it is clear from what has now been said that, as usual, Malraux has chosen his words with care. The work’s “language” – the particular significance of the coherent world it presents – is “constantly modified” because it is in a state of continual change over time. It is a language “sometimes forgotten” because there may be periods when, like ancient Egyptian sculpture during the centuries of Christian belief, or Byzantine art after the Renaissance, its significance is no longer understood.<sup>21</sup> The work “answers each century’s changing voice” because, as Malraux writes, this is a *dialogue* between the work’s constantly changing significance and the shifting values of each passing century (including the changing nature of its art, as we shall see more clearly later<sup>22</sup>), not a “monologue” – not simply the authoritative voice of works whose meaning and importance has been established once and for all. Crucially, also, it is an “invincible” dialogue, not because the work accedes to a timeless realm isolated from the vicissitudes of circumstance (not because it “perpetuates its original language” as Malraux writes) but because it is capable of resurrection, and thus of conquering time, even though

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<sup>20</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 264.

<sup>21</sup> This is not of course to suggest that many Byzantine works – religious mosaics and frescos for example – did not continue to command a level of respect as *religious* images. But they were not regarded as art in the sense that concept was assuming. For Vasari, they were the “old style”, which he also describes as coarse, rough, clumsy, barbaric and grotesque. See Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, vol. 1 (London: Everyman, 1963), 12–19.

<sup>22</sup> See page 243.

speaking a language different from that which it had originally spoken.<sup>23</sup>

Art, in other words, (and this applies to literature and music as much as to visual art<sup>24</sup>) lives not as an *eternal* presence – through what it renders impervious to time and transmits across the centuries unchanged – but through a process in which time and change play an inescapable part, sometimes by plunging a work, or a whole constellation of works, into centuries of obscurity. But while metamorphosis implies vulnerability to change, it also holds out a promise of rebirth. Unlike social customs or patterns of belief, works of art (whether *termed* art or not) do not slide irretrievably into oblivion. The moment and the form of their resurrections are always unpredictable because the future into which they are launched is unknown, but the work remains, nevertheless, a participant in “an invincible dialogue”. While not eternal, it nonetheless represents a victory over time through a capacity to live again.

The challenge this explanation presents to traditional thinking can be illustrated by the light it casts on the Renaissance. According to the familiar, conventional account, the new, “naturalistic” forms of Renaissance art were inspired by the discovery of long-buried works of Antiquity during excavations in Roman ruins. But what exactly does “discovery” mean here? Malraux asks.<sup>25</sup> The traditional account is framed in terms of what, in the statement quoted above, he terms a “monologue”, that is, the idea that certain works – in this case Graeco-Roman sculpture – possess such a high degree of artistic excellence that, once revealed, they exert an “authoritative” influence on their beholders, the result in this instance being the adoption of a new “naturalism” or “realism” in place of what came to be seen as old-

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<sup>23</sup> Malraux’s capital letter for “Time” in the statement quoted is also not simply a rhetorical device. He is evoking the idea of destructive transience rather than mere chronology.

<sup>24</sup> As indicated in the Introduction, aspects of Malraux’s theory of art are more easily illustrated by visual art because there is much more “history” available, over longer periods of time. (See page 25.) One such aspect is the relationship between art and time. Malraux’s explanation of this is not, however, limited to visual art. It applies to art in general.

<sup>25</sup> André Malraux, “Appendice aux ‘Voix du silence’: Premières ébauches inédits,” in *Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 903–909, 904.

fashioned Byzantine “stiffness”. This explanation, it is worth noting, has always involved a rather inconvenient historical snag since many works of Antiquity had remained in plain view throughout the thousand years of Byzantium – the bas-reliefs on Trajan’s Column in Rome and the Acropolis in Athens being just two obvious examples.<sup>26</sup> But in any case, Malraux argues, the decisive factor was never discovery in the physical sense. The works of Greece and Rome spoke of a *profane* world which Byzantium (like Romanesque Europe) had resolutely rejected. They became important again once they became part of a *dialogue* – that is, once their capacity for metamorphosis, and the response elicited from them by the emerging forms of the Renaissance, themselves progressively losing touch with a world of faith, gave them a voice again, although now speaking a language quite different from that which they had originally spoken. (For, although central to the Renaissance’s new “repertoire of exalted acts”,<sup>27</sup> the deities of Greece and Rome were now, Malraux points out, shorn of their original religious significance: they were now gods “to whom no-one prayed”.<sup>28</sup>) Thus, here, as elsewhere, he argues, the notion of a monologue – a one-way influence – misleads us. The discovery that mattered for the event we term the Renaissance was not simply the unearthing of Classical figures but the discovery in those objects of a quality previously unsuspected (increasingly to be termed “art” in the Renaissance sense of the word), which the Renaissance itself was discovering in the new world of the “imaginary” adumbrated by Giotto and later brought to full flower by artists such as Michelangelo

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<sup>26</sup> Malraux himself comments on the “odd idea” that all the works of Antiquity had disappeared, citing Trajan’s Column as one obvious exception. Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, 210. Leonard Barkan writes: “No piles of debris, however high, could obscure Trajan’s Column or any number of triumphal arches; richly carved burial containers of various kinds were so numerous that they never ceased to form part of the [Roman] cityscape (often to be reused); and a small number of freestanding statues were so massive as to have avoided removal, plundering, or decay.” In a similar vein he writes: “A few bronzes and scores of friezes, sarcophagi, and sculpted triumphal arches were never discovered at all because they were never underground.” Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1, 42.

<sup>27</sup> See page 143.

<sup>28</sup> *L’Intemporel*, 490.



and Raphael.<sup>29</sup> Thus “what the Renaissance gave Europe,” Malraux writes, “was not only a new art of the living but a new art of the dead”<sup>30</sup> (a *new* art of the dead because it was a quality that Antiquity itself had never known). Effectively, therefore, Malraux’s notion of metamorphosis and dialogue stands conventional thinking about the Renaissance on its head. “It is at the call of living forms”, he writes, “that dead forms are recalled to life”.<sup>31</sup> Or more specifically: “In art, the Renaissance produced Antiquity as much as Antiquity produced the Renaissance”.<sup>32</sup>

The most dramatic example of such a metamorphosis, Malraux points out, has taken place over the past century which has seen the resuscitation, as works of art, of objects from the four corners of the earth and from the depths of human history, large numbers from cultures in which the very idea of art was unknown. Once again, he argues, the key point was not simply the physical discovery of the objects in question, many of which, like Pre-Columbian figurines, African carvings, and Egyptian statues, had been known to the West for long periods of time. The decisive factor was the new direction taken by Western art itself after Manet which has recalled these objects to life through a process of dialogue and metamorphosis, resulting again in “not only a new art of the living but a new art of the dead”. This event, which has played a fundamental role in shaping our modern world of art, and which, as mentioned earlier, Malraux does not hesitate to call “another Renaissance”<sup>33</sup> (although, of course, a Renaissance of much larger proportions) merits a more extended analysis than is possible here, and will be examined in the next chapter. The key element, however, is the conception of the temporal nature of art underlying Malraux’s thinking. There is no question of “timelessness” since so many of the objects concerned, far from being immune from the vicissitudes of time, were ignored or despised for centuries or millennia, and their resuscitation has seen a radical trans-

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<sup>29</sup> “Who made the Antique statues reappear?” Malraux asks, “The excavators or the Renaissance masters who opened their eyes?” *Les Voix du silence*, 263.

<sup>30</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 24.

<sup>31</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 261.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 484.

<sup>33</sup> See page 157.

formation in their significance (since, for us, they are not objects of worship but works of art in the sense that term has today). Nor, obviously, is one speaking merely of historical phenomena, since unlike the values and beliefs (for example) that prevailed at the time of their creation, they now “live again” albeit with a changed significance. Just as the works of Greece and Rome were resurrected by the Renaissance, Malraux argues, so modern art has resurrected the vast range of works from other cultures that form a major part of our world of art today; but it has done so only through a metamorphosis – a process that reveals in those objects a significance different from that which they originally possessed.

If we link these ideas to those in the previous chapter, we can now see more clearly that, for Malraux, the relationship between art and history has a *dual* quality. The earlier discussion stressed that art is inseparable from its history because it exists only in and through its particular inventions and, as Malraux writes, “there is no invention outside time”.<sup>34</sup> This is why, as we saw, his books on art often bear a superficial resemblance to histories of art, “the very nature of artistic creation,” as he explains, “often [obliging] me to follow [the history of art] step by step”.<sup>35</sup> (It is incidentally also why, Malraux argues, we experience a sense of malaise when confronted with an expert modern forgery of a work from an earlier period once we know it is a forgery: sensing that creation is inseparable from history, the work “out of time”, especially if expertly done, is a perplexing anomaly.<sup>36</sup>) Yet while inseparable from history,<sup>37</sup> art, for Malraux, as the previous chapter revealed, is *not fully accounted for* by history. Or as he writes in *Les Voix du silence*, “the great work of art belongs to history, but it does not belong to history alone”.<sup>38</sup> A work like Titian’s *Nymph and Shepherd*, he continues

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<sup>34</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 604.

<sup>35</sup> See page 132. See also the earlier discussion of the dual quality of art’s relationship with history, page 162.

<sup>36</sup> Malraux provides a valuable analysis of this malaise using the Van Meegeren forgeries of Vermeer as his prime example. See *Les Voix du silence*, 592–604.

<sup>37</sup> Or geography, he adds, where, as in the case of, say, Oceanic art, we know little or nothing of the history involved. *Ibid.*, 596.

<sup>38</sup> *L’Intemporel*, 778.

has not survived as a valuable piece of furniture might; it has survived like a voice; it has survived like [Rembrandt's] *Bathsheba*, not like a picture by a Venetian painter of no talent. It is *of* its time, and our relationship with it is not the same as our relationship with a work of Rouault or of Picasso; but it is also *in* our time, in our lives today, and not just in our memory. Its survival is not simply a function of its conservation; it is the presence in life of what should belong to death.<sup>39</sup>

Our relationship with Titian is not the same as that with Rouault and Picasso (or, in the reverse direction, with *The Victory of Samothrace* or the bison at Lascaux) because, as creation, it inevitably takes its place in time – in history. But, unlike a piece of furniture – or a hand axe from a prehistoric cave – or the work of a “painter of no talent”, it is not *only* historical evidence of times gone by; it has also escaped the time in which it was created to become a living presence today: it is a presence in life, albeit through a process of metamorphosis, of “what should belong to death”. We shall have more to say about history in a later chapter. The important point for the present is that, for Malraux, while art is inseparable from the historical moment in which it was created, it differs from the mere historical object in being able to transcend that moment. “The flint-knife does not reach us on the same temporal wave lengths as Lascaux,” he writes. “Tool, weapon, and mother-goddess, all beginning from the same stone, separated along the way ...”<sup>40</sup>

The concept of metamorphosis recurs again and again in *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* and it comes as no surprise that critics have commented on it quite frequently. The discussion has, however, left much to be desired. In his essay “The Museum, Art and Time” mentioned earlier, Maurice Blanchot, for instance, claims that Malraux sees the artist as “sole master of the eternal”, and that, for Malraux,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Malraux's emphasis. The description of art as “the presence in life of what should belong to death” occurs elsewhere in Malraux. See, for example, *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 33.

<sup>40</sup> “Le temps du silex ne nous atteint pas par les mêmes ondes que le temps de Lascaux: outil, arme, déesse-mère, partis des mêmes pierres, se sont séparés en chemin ...” *L'Intemporel*, 772.

[art] bestows a meaning on history, and guarantees beyond the perishable and across the death of time, the life and eternity of this meaning. Art is no longer the anxiety over time, the destructive force of pure change. It is bound to the eternal, it is the eternal present which, through the vicissitudes and by means of metamorphoses, maintains and ceaselessly recreates the form in which “the quality of the world through a man” was once expressed.<sup>41</sup>

Like much of his essay, Blanchot’s comment is somewhat unclear. He appears, however, to be claiming that, in Malraux’s eyes, art perpetuates “a meaning bestowed on history”, a meaning in some way associated with (or equated with?) “the quality of the world through a man”. The connection Blanchot sees between these concepts is by no means self-evident, and there is, in any case, no suggestion anywhere in Malraux that “art bestows a meaning on history”.<sup>42</sup> In the present context, however, the principal deficiency of the comment is that, despite suggesting at one point that art transmits the meaning in question through a process of metamorphosis, Blanchot also appears to be arguing that Malraux regards art as “bound to the eternal” – or at least the “eternal present” – and that the “quality” or “meaning” in question is “ceaselessly recreated”. As we have seen, this is not at all what Malraux is proposing. The original meaning of a work, for Malraux, is precisely what is *lost* through the process of metamorphosis and there is no suggestion anywhere in his writings on art that this meaning is “ceaselessly recreated”. The work of art, in Malraux’s eyes, always survives – if it does survive – at the cost of a *transformation* of its significance. There is no question of it acceding to an “eternal”, and while it does resist “destruction” through change (one is not of course speaking of physical destruction), it is certainly not immune from the effects of change. Metamorphosis for Malraux *necessarily* involves change. That, surely, is why he chooses the term, and insists, again and again, on the difference between the idea of metamorphosis and the idea of eternity (or timelessness) where art is

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<sup>41</sup> Blanchot, 39.

<sup>42</sup> Unless perhaps Blanchot is alluding to Malraux’s claim discussed earlier (see page 189) that unless we are specialist historians, it is primarily through art that the past “comes alive” for us. It would be dangerous, however, to interpret this as claiming that “art bestows a meaning on history” because one risks suggesting that Malraux is thinking in terms of *theories* of history, which is certainly not the case. This issue is discussed further in Chapter Nine.

concerned.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, it is precisely here that the striking originality – and explanatory value – of his thesis lies. Unfortunately, Blanchot’s account tends to obscure this key point rather than illuminate it.<sup>44</sup>

Misleading interpretations have been a recurring feature of critical commentary on this aspect of Malraux’s theory of art and on occasion have even led to accusations that he simply borrowed the concept of metamorphosis from other writers, one commonly cited source being the art historian Henri Focillon who also uses the term from time to time.<sup>45</sup> This claim does not stand up to even mild scrutiny. Focillon employs the idea of metamorphosis as part of an argument, regrettably rather vaguely formulated, that “plastic forms” (it is not always clear whether he limits this idea to art alone) constitute “an order of existence” and that “this order has the motion and the breath of life”. Forms, he contends, are “subjected to the principle of metamorphosis, by which they are perpetually renewed”, which implies that a work of art is “motionless only in appearance” since in reality forms are able to “engender [a] great diversity of shapes” and are “primarily a mobile life in a changing world”.<sup>46</sup> These propositions clearly bear very little

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. his comment on Egyptian sculpture: “I am not talking here about eternity; I am talking about metamorphosis. Egypt has re-emerged for us; it had disappeared for fifteen hundred years.” André Malraux, “Postface aux “Conquérants”,” in *Œuvres complètes (I)*, ed. Pierre Brunel (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 271–286, 278. On occasion, Malraux uses the word “immortality” as a synonym for eternity. Thus he writes: “Let us stop confusing metamorphosis with immortality.” *L’Homme précaire et la littérature* 19.

<sup>44</sup> Jean-François Lyotard introduces a different kind of confusion and suggests that Malraux does not see art as transcending history *at all*. Quoting Malraux’s comment (*Les Voix du silence*, 879) that “the whole history of art, when it is the history of genius, should be seen as a history of deliverance” (which implies precisely that art is *not* imprisoned in historical time), Lyotard writes: “Does this mean a history emancipated from the world of history? A music and song freed from sensible and sentimental expressivity? Of course not: the work of art never gets clear of anything, never exceeds its subjection to the world. It is a first step beyond, the beginning of an entry into the desert: the exodus out of the sensual Egypt is not and must not be accomplished.” Lyotard, *Soundproof Room*, 98. Somewhat enigmatic though the comment is, it hardly seems consistent with Malraux’s argument that art “does not belong to history alone”.

<sup>45</sup> See for example: Righter, 23–25. Boak, 193.

<sup>46</sup> Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Elizabeth Ladenson (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 41, 44.

resemblance to Malraux's position (who never suggests, for instance, that forms are "an order of existence" – whatever that may mean precisely – or that they are "perpetually renewed"); but the differences become even starker when Focillon begins to speak specifically about time. Here his argument revolves largely around a dispute with theorists such as Taine whom he sees as imposing too strict a link between art and historical forces. Appealing once more to his proposition that forms have a life of their own, Focillon seeks to loosen the grip of such deterministic explanations by replacing them with the idea of "endless action and reaction" in which there is "an immense multiplicity of factors" at work, and where, in certain cases, the "time that gives support to the work of art ... is quite capable of slipping back into the past or forward into the future".<sup>47</sup> However plausible or implausible this theory might seem, it is clearly a world away from Malraux. In particular, there is nothing to suggest that Focillon's occasional use of the term "metamorphosis" signifies anything resembling the process of dialogue and resurrection we have discussed, or, indeed, that Focillon is even interested in *addressing* the problem of resurrection to which Malraux is responding. At most, Focillon's understanding of the temporal nature of art involves an attempt to loosen the connection between art and historical time (sometimes going as far as suggesting, somewhat confusingly, that "the forms" are in some way timeless<sup>48</sup>). Superficial interpretations that would align his thinking with Malraux's serve, once again, only to obscure the latter's argument.<sup>49</sup>

A key implication of Malraux's position, as we can now see, is that the question of the temporal nature of art would be misconceived if it were posed simply in terms of the work's capacity to "last" or "endure". In his book *The Test of Time*, Anthony Savile argues, as mentioned earlier, that if a given work "holds our attention" for a "sufficient period", it will have passed "time's test" and thus have

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 141, 153, 154, 156.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Ibid., 63.

<sup>49</sup> Some critics attempt to link Malraux to Focillon on other grounds. The art historian, Roland Recht, writes that "it would be interesting ... to show what the incantatory prose of a writer like Malraux owes to Focillon's rhetoric". Recht does not, however, attempt the demonstration. Roland Recht, *A quoi sert l'histoire de l'art?* (Paris: Les éditions textuel, 2006), 52.

earned a place in “the pantheon of the great”. Malraux has no interest in constructing “tests” to separate great art from art that is not great (or from “non-art”); but more importantly for present purposes, the terms in which this proposition is cast would be apt, from Malraux’s standpoint, to mislead us. Without further stipulation, terms such as “test of time”, “last”, and “endure” suggest *continuing* recognition over a given period and thus immunity from the vicissitudes of time. This, however, would be to ignore the fact that many objects regarded as works of art today were viewed with indifference or disdain for long periods, and also that the *way* they are now viewed – as “works of art” – is often quite different from the ways they were originally regarded. Even as late as the mid-nineteenth century, Egyptian art, for example, had not “lasted” or “endured” (although it was by then a subject of increasing archaeological interest); and it had not “lasted” or “endured” for some fifteen hundred years.<sup>50</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, in other words, Egyptian sculpture and painting were not “art” (which one might, for example, have placed beside the then much-admired *Apollon Belvedere* or a Raphael Madonna) and, indeed, had *never been* art in any Western sense of the word. By the early twentieth century, certain Egyptian works had, one might say, rather paradoxically, “begun” to endure: they were now regarded as art for the first time, with claims quite as legitimate as the *Belvedere* or a Raphael. The notions of “lasting” or “enduring” without qualification are, in other words, likely to lead us astray. Indeed, the contemporary attitude toward Egyptian sculpture and painting, which accepts them as art in the same sense as it does, say, a Michelangelo or a Rembrandt (an unthinkable step in 1850) seems, when viewed in terms of the total life span of the works in question, the *exception* rather than a “lasting” state of affairs. It is survival but in the sense of *revival* – a coming back to life of an object that had been effectively dead for some fifteen hundred years and which, before then, had been an object of worship, not a “work of art”. With minor modifications, the same argument applies to Asian art, African art, Pre-Columbian art and many others, including pre-Renaissance Western art such as that of

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. note 43.

Byzantium and of Romanesque and Medieval Europe.<sup>51</sup> Seen in this light, the question of whether or not an object has “passed the test of time” is a potential trap. The question retains a surface plausibility as long as one confines one’s attention to a limited range of artists across the last three or four hundred years of Western history;<sup>52</sup> but the realm of art, as Malraux frequently reminds us, is now much more extensive than that, and stretches back many millennia and across a wide spectrum of non-Western cultures. A basic given for an analysis of the relationship between art and time today, he is arguing, is that the rubric art now includes large numbers of works to which no one, until relatively recently, would have imagined a “test of time” even to be *relevant*, because they were universally regarded as lying outside the realm of art. Art “endures” or “lasts”, Malraux contends, not through immunity from time but through metamorphosis. Art speaks the language of survival, not immortality.<sup>53</sup>

This is perhaps an appropriate point to reconsider the quotation from Malraux’s early novel, *La Voie royale*, discussed briefly in the Introduction,<sup>54</sup> which concerned the transformation of the work of art into “myth”. It will be recalled that Savile, in *The Test of Time*, had accused Malraux of a “lackadaisical conflation of epistemology and ontology” because

When speaking in *La Voie Royale* of the status of succeeding generations’ appraisal of an artist’s work, he says that “what interests me personally is the gradual change that comes over such work ... Every work of art, in fact, tends to develop into myth”.<sup>55</sup>

In itself, Savile’s observation would not perhaps merit more than passing mention because his quotation is, as noted earlier, not drawn

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<sup>51</sup> As we shall see later, Malraux argues that the process of metamorphosis has also affected the way in which we see post-Renaissance Western art. See page 247.

<sup>52</sup> Such as the two mentioned in earlier discussion – Shakespeare and Michelangelo. Yet even here, where much shorter time spans are involved, attitudes have not been static. The liberties taken over the centuries with Shakespeare’s plays, for example, are well known. There are also artists such as Vermeer, Georges de La Tour and El Greco whose standing has changed enormously over the same period.

<sup>53</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 887.

<sup>54</sup> See page 21.

<sup>55</sup> Savile, 268. The quote is only an approximate translation and omits some important phrases, as we shall see.



from *any* of Malraux's books on art but from a statement made during a brief conversation early in *La Voie royale* (a conversation which in fact plays only a minor role in the action of that novel). Savile's use of the passage is, however, far from an isolated case. The conversation in question, and especially the idea it contains that every work of art "tends to develop into myth", has been quoted by a number of Malraux's commentators and, for some at least, seems to have become a key point of reference for his ideas on art.<sup>56</sup> One can only conjecture how this state of affairs has come about, especially since *La Voie royale* is not one of Malraux's most widely read novels, but it is perhaps pertinent to note that E. H. Gombrich quoted the passage in question, at somewhat greater length, in his influential early review of *Les Voix du silence*, stating that "Here [the novel's hero] pronounces the theme on which all Malraux's subsequent writings are but variations".<sup>57</sup> Whether or not this was the origin of the view in question, however, the importance placed on the passage by a number of subsequent commentators makes it difficult to dismiss without comment. Fortunately, the obligation is not without its benefits since it affords another opportunity of seeing how significantly Malraux's thinking

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<sup>56</sup> The French critic Pascal Sabourin, for example, suggests that the passage represents the substance of the thinking to be found in *Les Voix du silence*. Pascal Sabourin, "Réflexion sur l'art," in *L'Herne, André Malraux*, ed. Michel Cazenave (Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1982), 300–309, 304. Cf. also: Richter, 25. Moncef Khemiri, *L'Esthétique de Malraux* (Tunis: Office de la Topographie et de la Cartographie, 1999), 216–218. Harris, *André Malraux: A Reassessment*, 80, 81. (Harris, however, appears to recognise that it represents an early phase in Malraux's thinking.) The idea also gained currency quite rapidly outside the realm of Malraux studies. In a 1977 collection of essays on ancient history, for example, M. I. Finley writes: "For the visual arts André Malraux has [written that] the art of the past survives only as myth". See M.I. Finley, *Aspects of Antiquity*, 2nd ed. (London: Pelican, 1977), 14.

<sup>57</sup> Gombrich, "André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism," 80. It is perhaps worth noting also that Savile's rather approximate translation, given above, is the same as that given by Gombrich. In his widely-read *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich repeats the claim that for Malraux "art survives only as what he calls 'myth'". See E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977), 54. In some cases Gombrich's influence is quite evident. Christopher Perricone, for example, quotes the claim in *Art and Illusion* and appears to assume that it accurately reflects Malraux's view. Christopher Perricone, "Art and the Metamorphosis of Art into History," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31, no. 4 (1991): 314, 315.

about art had changed between *La Voie royale* and post-1934 works such as *Les Voix du silence*.<sup>58</sup>

The passage in question occurs in a conversation between one of the novel's major characters, Claude Vannec, and a French colonial administrator, Ramèges, which takes place prior to the departure of Claude's expedition for the Cambodian jungles in search of lost Khmer temples (the expedition forming the major subject of the novel). The second part of Claude's comment to Ramèges, omitted by Savile, reads:

For me, museums are places where the works of an earlier epoch, which have developed into myths, lie sleeping – where they live the life of history – waiting for the day when artists recall them to real life. And if they affect us directly, that's because the artist possesses this power of resuscitation ... In the last analysis, of course, no civilization is ever fully understood by another. But its artefacts remain, and we are blind to them until our myths come into line with them.<sup>59</sup>

There are some obvious points of similarity between the views Claude expresses here and Malraux's understanding of the temporal nature of art as analysed in the present chapter. For example, there is simply the interest Claude displays in the question of the resuscitation of works of earlier epochs, an issue which, if this passage is any guide, seems to have intrigued Malraux as early as 1930 when *La Voie royale* was published – a not insignificant fact in itself since, as we shall see in the next chapter, this issue is still, in the early twenty-first century, given scant attention in modern aesthetics. Secondly, there is the idea that the artist plays an important role in this process of resuscitation and, as we have seen in connection with the Renaissance, and as the next chapter will show even more clearly, this remained an important element in Malraux's thinking in later works such as *Les Voix du silence*.

That said, there are, nevertheless, major differences between the explanation Claude gives and the understanding of the temporal nature of art Malraux advanced later in his books on art. Crucially, the notion of metamorphosis – the very dynamic of his subsequent thinking – is missing. Nowhere in Claude's comment is it made clear that the

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<sup>58</sup> The significance of the year 1934 is discussed earlier, especially in Chapter Two.

<sup>59</sup> *La Voie royale*, 398.

process of “sleeping” and subsequent re-awakening results from the *very nature* of art, or that resuscitation is inevitably accompanied by a transformation in the significance of the work. If one can assume, as Savile, Gombrich, and others who quote the passage appear to do, that Claude is echoing Malraux’s own ideas, Malraux seems at this early stage to have sought an explanation for the process of re-awakening in the idea of “myth”, the work first “developing into myth” and then being recalled to life when “our myths come into line with them” [“s’accordent à eux”]. This explanation raises some thorny questions. How exactly does the work “develop into myth”? What precisely is meant by “come into line with [or “agree with”] them”, especially since Claude has also said that “in the last analysis ... no civilization is ever fully understood by another”? Moreover, the nature of the process itself seems unclear given that the work first develops into myth and then, for no clear reason, becomes a *work of art*, once the two myths “come into line”. In short, the account seems incomplete, and somewhat incoherent. It is as if, having been struck by the capacity of certain works to be “recalled to life”, Malraux (or at least Claude) is still groping for an adequate explanation, resorting to the notion of “myths coming into line” as the most plausible option. As far as the novel itself is concerned, these problems are of little consequence since Malraux is, after all (*pace* Gombrich and others), presenting a conversation between two characters in a work of fiction, not writing a book on the theory of art. The important point for present purposes is that there is a very substantial gap between the views Claude expresses and the fully developed position Malraux presents in his post-war books on art. It should be added that, despite the prominence Gombrich, Savile, and others give to the notion of “myth” in Malraux’s thinking, *one will look in vain* in *Les Voix du silence*, *La Métamorphose des dieux* and Malraux’s other works on art post-1934 for an account of the temporal nature of art *in which the notion of myth plays any part*. Given all this, Gombrich’s comment that Claude “pronounces on the theme on which all Malraux’s subsequent writings are but variations” – a claim which, as indicated, seems to have played no small part in influencing later commentators – seems particularly unfortunate. Setting aside the consideration that there is much more to Malraux’s theory of art than his account of the relationship between art and time, important though that is, the passage Gombrich quotes is, at best, an early and incomplete representation of Malraux’s mature

thinking and falls well short of the propositions developed in *Les Voix du silence* and the three volumes of *La Métamorphose des dieux*.<sup>60</sup> Here again, one encounters an instance of the regrettable tendency of some critics to skim Malraux's books on art rather than read them,<sup>61</sup> the problem in this case being exacerbated by an attempt to extract the key to his theory of art from a brief conversation in an early novel in preference to the series of major works he devoted specifically to the topic.

Before concluding this discussion, it is interesting to look briefly at certain recent attempts to deal with the question of art and time by writers in modern aesthetics – in particular, in the Anglo-American school of “analytic” aesthetics. As intimated earlier, writers of this persuasion have usually paid very little attention to the problem of the temporal nature of art. Generally speaking, art is treated simply as a cultural “given” common to all societies, and thus as something to be addressed at a suitably abstract level free from too close a connection with questions of time and place, historical change, or, *a fortiori*, any capacity to transcend time. This “universalist” approach continues to prevail, but recent times have seen some tentative attempts to graft a temporal dimension onto it. Two such attempts are worth brief examination here, partly to contrast them with Malraux's approach and partly to highlight the problems this school of thought encounters once it tries to deal with the relationship between art and time.

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<sup>60</sup> In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich compounds his error by claiming that for Malraux “the art of the past is closed to us altogether”. Given, as we have seen, that so much of Malraux's theory of art is devoted to an explanation of precisely why, and how, certain works survive, and *transcend* time, and given also the attention he lavishes on the arts of ancient civilizations, for example – much more, arguably, than Gombrich himself, who often seems ambivalent about works outside the European tradition (cf. Chapter Seven, note 17) – this claim is, to say the least, puzzling; and all the more so given that even in the quote from *La Voie royale* that Gombrich relies on so heavily (mistakenly as we have said), Malraux (or at least Claude) does not claim that “the art of the past is closed to us altogether” but, on the contrary, that it can be “[recalled] to real life.” (See page 217.) Such obvious misreadings again tend to give a hollow ring to Gombrich's admonition about “the sense of responsibility that makes the scholar”. See E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 54.

<sup>61</sup> See page 21.

The first attempt is principally associated with the American philosopher of art, Jerrold Levinson. The background calls for a little explanation. One of the trends in analytic aesthetics in recent times has been a shift away from definitions of art formulated in terms of what are called “intrinsic” factors – such as beauty, form, or structural unity – towards “extrinsic” factors derived in some way from the social and intellectual context of the work of art. The prime example is the so-called “institutional theory” often associated with George Dickie who argues (stating the matter summarily) that the key determinants of what is, and what is not, art are the people and institutions for whom it was created. In Dickie’s words, the claim is that “a work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public”, the notion of an “artworld” defined in terms of audiences and institutions possessed of certain specified cultural attributes.<sup>62</sup> The theory has been criticised on a number of grounds (its apparent circularity among others) but the point of interest for present purposes is that, in line with the general tenor of analytic aesthetics, Dickie’s definition, even though “extrinsic”, remains essentially atemporal and involves no reference to the history of art. Jerrold Levinson has sought to modify this element and, while continuing to adopt an “extrinsic” approach, attempts to add an historical dimension to the definition of “arthood”. He thus formulates the claim that: “something is art if and only if it was intended or projected for overall regard *as some prior art is or was correctly regarded*.”<sup>63</sup> In effect, there is an appeal to a chain of “regards” receding into the past, or as Levinson puts it,

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<sup>62</sup> George Dickie, “The New Institutional Theory of Art,” in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*, ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 47–54, esp. 51–53. The article was first printed in *Proceedings of the Eighth Wittgenstein Symposium*, 10, (1983) 57–64. For a more recent statement of the theory, see George Dickie, “The Institutional Theory of Art,” in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 93–108. Dickie’s thinking seems to have been influenced by Arthur Danto’s early essay “The Artworld”.

<sup>63</sup> Jerrold Levinson, “The Irreducible Historicity of the Concept of Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42, no. 4 (2002): 367. Emphasis added. This is Levinson’s abbreviated statement of his definition. More detailed formulations can be found in a series of earlier essays, the first published in 1979. See: Levinson, “Defining Art Historically.”

What it is for a thing to be art at any time can eventually be exhibited in this manner by starting with the present and working backward. New art is art because of this relation to past art [i.e. it is regarded as some prior art was correctly regarded], art of the recent past is art because of this relation to art of the not-so-recent past, art of the not-so-recent past is art because of this relation to art of the distant past ...<sup>64</sup>

The claim has elicited a number of criticisms which are not directly relevant to present concerns. One writer, Claire Detels has, however, raised an objection which is both relevant and very telling. Detels points out that if we wished to include Gregorian chant, for instance, under the rubric art we would, according to Levinson, need to inquire “if a particular piece of Gregorian chant was intended for regard-as-a-work-of-art in any of the ways works of art existing prior to it had been correctly regarded”. The question, Detels observes, is by no means easy to answer because evidence is quite limited. More importantly for present purposes, she adds,

What evidence there is suggests that Gregorian chant should be excluded, since it was more a part of liturgical practice than something regarded as a work of art (whatever that might be inferred to mean ca. 800 A.D.)<sup>65</sup>

Detels is in effect highlighting the same historical point raised earlier in the present study – that there is strong evidence to suggest that the concept “art” is not a cultural universal. This being so, as she rightly points out, one cannot simply assume that all objects regarded as art today originated in cultures in which a “regard-as-art” would have been a familiar, or even a comprehensible, idea. In such cases, Levinson’s “chain of regards” would cease to operate, thus excluding from the rubric art not only Gregorian chant, of course, but also (for instance) a wide range of painting and sculpture found in today’s art museums – much of which is now regarded as art of prime importance – which originated in cultures as various as ancient Egypt, Africa, the European Middle Ages, and many others in which the idea of art

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<sup>64</sup> Levinson, “Defining Art Historically,” 36.

<sup>65</sup> Claire Detels, “History and the Philosophies of Arts,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, no. 3 (1993): 368, 369. Detels adds interestingly: “According to the myth recorded by Franconian scribes in their manuscript illustrations, for instance, the ‘composer’ of Gregorian chant is God, who dictated the sacred liturgical language through a dove into the ear of Pope Gregory the Great.”

seems to have been quite unknown. Levinson's reply to this objection is not at all satisfactory. He writes:

Although some ancient artworks – say, certain tragedies or temples – were intended, let us assume, for appreciation as instances of god-propitiation, it is certainly not the case that they were intended *solely* for appreciation in that respect. Surely they were also intended for other regards, involving attention to those works' emotional, formal, and symbolic aspects.<sup>66</sup>

The “surely” perhaps suggests that Levinson is a little less certain about the historical evidence than he would like to be. More importantly, there is, in effect, a sleight-of-hand at work here. Levinson, as we saw, is attempting to define art in terms of “extrinsic” factors, specifically factors involving an historical dimension. His claim is that “something is art *if and only if* it was intended or projected for overall regard as some prior art is or was correctly regarded”. The definition having encountered a serious obstacle – the *absence* of “regards-as-art” at many points in history – he abandons the basis of the argument and falls back on “intrinsic” factors such as “emotional, formal, and symbolic aspects”. In addition to the clear inconsistency, this immediately raises the familiar questions (questions that seem to have sparked the move in aesthetics away from “intrinsic” considerations in the first place) about whether art *can* satisfactorily be defined in terms of ideas such as “emotional, formal, and symbolic aspects” (given, for example, that “emotional, formal, and symbolic aspects” are by no means confined to art).

This episode is an interesting example of the apparent inability of analytic aesthetics to provide a coherent account of art once temporal issues are brought into play. In effect, Levinson is attempting to add an historical dimension to the atemporal, universalist assumptions lying at the heart of this school of thought by presenting the abstraction “art” as a series of “regards-as-art” stretching back in time. The problem, as Detels' objection neatly highlights, is that the evidence of history has simply not been taken seriously for one does not need to

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<sup>66</sup> Levinson is not responding to Detels specifically here but to another critic who posits the case of an eccentric individual in the past who may not have thought in terms of regard-as-art. The objection is in principle the same, although less telling than Detels' who is thinking, more pertinently, in terms of historical facts and of whole cultures. Levinson's reply, however, applies to the kind of case Detels raises. Levinson, “The Irreducible Historicality of the Concept of Art,” 370.

go far back in time (relatively speaking) to encounter societies in which “regards-as-art” seem to have been quite unknown – even though it is precisely from such societies that large numbers of works regarded as art today originally came. The analytic aesthetician is then obliged to throw in the towel and resort to other approaches (such as “intrinsic” definitions).<sup>67</sup> A signal advantage of Malraux’s theory of art, by contrast, is that it contains the notion of metamorphosis at its heart and is not obliged to assume that all the objects we today regard as art were always viewed in that light. It is certainly the case, Malraux argues, that what the modern world calls art, whether it be the works of Picasso or the cave paintings at Lascaux, has always involved the creation of “another world” – a coherent world replacing the chaotic world of mere appearance. But this creative act, he contends, was not always designed to produce another world of “art” and was very often (much more often than not if one surveys the whole sweep of human history) intended to body forth an Other World of God, or the gods. Many objects created for this purpose – such as the mosaics at Ravenna or many of the works of ancient Egypt – have *become art* for us today through the process of metamorphosis examined in this chapter (and to be considered again later). But they were not created or understood as “art” originally and there is no question of a chain of “regards-as-art” stretching back throughout all time and across all cultures. There is the creative act that *we today* call art, and many works from earlier cultures are now included within it; but they are there by virtue of a metamorphosis which the very nature of that creative act made possible, not because they are part of a continuous chain of “art regards”.

Another attempt to graft a temporal dimension onto analytic aesthetics has arisen in the context of a debate about interpretation. Again a little background is in order. Participants in this debate divide roughly into “realists” and “constructivists”. The former contend, broadly speaking, that for any “objects-of-interpretation” (a phrase commonly used in this debate), a category in which works of art are

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<sup>67</sup> Or, perhaps, try to minimise the importance of the historical evidence. Detels notes that Levinson minimises the historically relative nature of the concept “art”. Detels: 368. Needless to add, this seems an odd stance for a theorist who is ostensibly seeking to make history a key element of his explanation.



included, there must be one and only one ideally admissible interpretation. The “constructivists” respond that objects-of-interpretation can legitimately answer to more than one interpretation. If the latter are correct and the object is “interpretation-dependent”, the process of interpretation, it is argued, “changes its properties” in some way. The realists reply that, on the contrary, the object is basically complete, and independent of interpreters, before the process of interpretation begins.<sup>68</sup>

One might perhaps wonder what this somewhat esoteric debate has to do with the temporal nature of art (and we shall see in a moment that in fact it has nothing to do with it) but the notion of “change” invoked in the context has sometimes been employed in ways that imply relevance. A representative case again is a comment by Jerrold Levinson. In an essay entitled “Artworks and the Future”, Levinson adopts the stance of the “realist” and, seeking to connect this thinking to the idea of time, argues that

It is not *artworks* that, in the crucial sense, change over time, it is rather *us*. We think more, experience more, create more – and as a result, are able to find more in artworks than we could previously. But these works are what they are, and remain, from the art-content point of view, what they always were. It is not their content that changes over time, but only our access to the full extent of that content in virtue of our and the world’s subsequent evolution ... later history may *bring out* what *was* in earlier art, but it does not progressively *bring about* that there is *now* more in it.<sup>69</sup>

There are a number of comments to make. First, one might well argue that this debate is not, strictly speaking, a debate in the philosophy of

<sup>68</sup> This is a summary of views expressed for example in: Joseph Margolis, “Plain Talk about Interpretation on a Relativistic Model,” *Ibid.* 53, no. 1 (1995). Robert Stecker, “The Constructivist’s Dilemma,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 1 (1997). Philip Percival, “Stecker’s Dilemma: A Constructive Response,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 1 (2000). Robert Stecker, “Is the Constructivist’s Dilemma Flawed? Reply to Percival,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60, no. 1 (2002): 82.

<sup>69</sup> Jerrold Levinson, “Artworks and the Future,” in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 179–214, 180, 181. Emphasis in original. Arthur Danto seems to share this view. He writes: “One can *discover* only what is *already* there but has remained up until then unknown or misrecognized.” Arthur Danto, “Artifact and Art,” in *Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections*, ed. Susan Vogel (New York: The Centre for African Art, 1988), 18–32, 19.

*art* at all – that is, if one considers the philosophy of art to be a discipline concerned specifically with issues related to art, as distinct from a broader class of objects (such as “objects-of-interpretation”). In contrast with Malraux’s position, for instance, nothing in the debate is predicated on claims relating specifically to the nature of art, and participants seem generally to assume that where questions of interpretation are concerned, it makes no significant difference whether one is speaking of a Rembrandt or a road sign: everything is grist for the same philosophical mill.<sup>70</sup> Second, it is surprising, to say the least, to find an argument framed so unapologetically in terms of a work’s “content” given that the problems associated with this idea, and its usually inseparable companion “form”, are so well known in the field of art theory and criticism.<sup>71</sup> (How exactly would one isolate the “content”, independently of the form, of Wordsworth’s ode on *Intimations of Immortality*, or Manet’s *Olympia*, not to mention musical examples?) Third, and closer to present concerns, on what basis could one safely conclude that subsequent audiences will necessarily “find more in artworks” than original audiences? Levinson’s formulation tends to cloud the issue by referring simply to “we” and “our”, thus occluding any question of *specific points* in time. If one poses the question more precisely, however, and asks, for example: “Do we today ‘find more’ in a Romanesque crucifix than the Christian worshippers for whom it was originally created?” or “Do we today ‘find more’ in a statue of Rameses II than the ancient Egyptians?”, one quickly sees that such questions are – or certainly seem – quite unanswerable. How could one possibly know? We can be reasonably sure that we find something *different* in such works (since, as Malraux

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<sup>70</sup> From time to time there are explicit acknowledgements of this. Cf. for example: Joseph Margolis, “Plain Talk about Interpretation on a Relativistic Model,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53, no. 1 (1995): 2: “I focus on the arts, but I take the lesson to apply to the whole of human culture.” Robert Stecker writes in a similar vein: “While I speak here of literature, these problems [of interpretation] can be extended to any interpretive procedures concerned with human action or the products of human agency: the interpretation of all art, of all texts, of individual behavior, of history, etc.” Robert Stecker, “Fish’s Argument for the Relativity of Interpretive Truth,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48, no. 3 (1990): 223.

<sup>71</sup> The issue is further confused by Levinson’s definition of content which seems to include properties often regarded as part of form. See Levinson, “Artworks and the Future,” 182–184.

points out, if what we found were the same, we would quickly remove them from our art museums<sup>72</sup>); but whether this amounts to something “more” is surely quite unknowable (just as it is unknowable whether at any point of time we have access to what Levinson terms “the full extent” of the work’s content – since we have no way of knowing what the future will find in it). It is not inconceivable, though equally unverifiable, that we may in fact know *less* than those for whom the objects were created.

The fundamental point to be made here, however, is that nothing in this debate – either in Levinson’s statement, or in the philosophical context outlined – reveals anything definite about the temporal nature of art *irrespective of which side of the debate* – realist or constructivist – one opts for. As pointed out earlier,<sup>73</sup> whether or not works of art lend themselves to a series of interpretations can never in itself resolve this issue because one might quite legitimately conclude either that the different interpretations are the *fixed* range of meanings that the artist gave the work at its moment of creation (a possibility that Levinson himself raises when he speaks of “access to the full extent of that content”), or, alternatively, that the work *has no* fixed range of meanings. Here again, as in the earlier discussion of creativity in art,<sup>74</sup> one sees the limitations of an aesthetics that holds the question of the *nature of art* at arm’s length, on the assumption, apparently, that this question will somehow resolve itself if one simply treats art as a member of a larger class of objects (in this instance “objects-of-interpretation”) and asks enough questions. At the same time, one also sees the depth and strength of Malraux’s position not only because he answers the question at stake – arguing, as we have seen, that *by its nature* the work of art is born to metamorphosis – but also because the claim is a reasoned one, emerging as a necessary consequence of his fundamental propositions about the nature of art.

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<sup>72</sup> See page 173.

<sup>73</sup> See page 202.

<sup>74</sup> See page 124. Levinson’s article has been discussed more recently by Peter Lamarque in a collection of essays entitled *The Philosophy of Interpretation*. Lamarque seems to accept Levinson’s apparent assumption that the latter’s argument has some substantial bearing on the temporal nature of art. See Peter Lamarque, “Objects of Interpretation” in *The Philosophy of Interpretation* ed. Joseph Margolis and Tom Rockmore (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 96–124, esp. 115–117.

Malraux's explanation of the relationship between art and time stands out as one of most important and revolutionary elements of his theory of art. As noted earlier in this chapter, our Western cultural inheritance has bequeathed us two basic approaches to this issue: either art is timeless, in which case it is essentially impervious to change, or it is part of man's historical experience and thus, like all other aspects of human activity, essentially at the mercy of changing circumstance. As we have seen, neither explanation accounts for the facts as we know them: art clearly does not live "eternally", and nor is it a mere historical phenomenon, such as a set of beliefs, that disappears irretrievably into "the charnel house of dead values". And neither explanation even begins to tell us why, when resurrected, so many of the objects we today regard as art assume a significance quite different from that which they originally held – that a god or an ancestor figure has become "art". Malraux, as we can now see, has given us the explanation we require. He enables us to understand why art "conquers time" – why we find (for example) Egyptian or Sumerian religious figures thousands of years old in our art museums (and not just in history museums), yet at the same time he frees us from having to believe what now seems manifestly untenable – that art is eternal.

As noted earlier, the question of the temporal nature of art has dwelt very much on the margins of aesthetics for many decades. Indeed, the last major contribution to the topic was arguably that of Hegel who placed art firmly within the domain of history. Broadly speaking, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have made do either with variations on Hegel (Arthur Danto is the chief example<sup>75</sup>) or with Marxist and post-Marxist accounts which, again, place art essentially within the domain of history. The other alternative has been the almost complete indifference to the topic shown by Anglo-American analytic aesthetics (unless one perhaps argues that the tendency of this school to regard art as a universal "given" carries with it the unacknowledged

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<sup>75</sup> Part of Danto's theory of art involves a reinterpretation of Hegel's end of art thesis. See, for example, Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), esp. 30–34.



Fig. 19. *Gudea, Prince of Lagash* (c. 2150 B.C.)

Louvre. (C) RMN/Christian Jean.

assumption that art is, in some essential way, timeless). *Meanwhile*, however, in an unprecedented historical development to be examined more closely in the next chapter, art museums – again, *art* museums not just history museums – have been filling up over the course of the last hundred years with objects from distant times and other cultures which seem to have escaped history (because, though long-forgotten, they have “come alive” for us today) but which are self-evidently not timeless (because they have been resurrected after long periods of

oblivion with significances quite different from those which they originally held), and whose very presence in art museums therefore confronts us with the question of the relationship between art and time in an acute and pressing way. To put the matter in a quite concrete form: how can we explain the presence of a figure such as the *Gudea of Lagash* (Fig. 19) in one of today's art museums (something unthinkable before the twentieth century) if the only theories at our disposal are that art is timeless or that it is part of man's historical experience – assuming of course that we do not simply turn our backs on the question?

The outstanding value of Malraux's thought in this regard is not only that he recognises the pressing need to address this question (and recognised it, as we have seen, at least as early as the 1930s) but that he provides an answer that fits the facts as we know them – an answer that explains the now well-established presence in our world of art of objects that were effectively dead for centuries or millennia and have now been resurrected. Malraux has thus given us a fundamentally new way of understanding the relationship between art and time, and one that, unlike the two principal explanations handed down to us by our Western cultural tradition, *makes sense* of the world of art as we now know it. His account of the temporal nature of art thus stands out as a landmark achievement in the theory of art, albeit one whose significance is as yet far from being fully appreciated.

The next chapter builds on these ideas to explain the emergence over the course of the past century of what Malraux terms “the first universal world of art”.



## Chapter Seven

### The First Universal World of Art

“... le domaine où les natures mortes de Chardin sont unies  
aux *Rois* de Chartres et aux dieux d’Elephanta  
dans une présence commune ...<sup>1</sup>

Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel*.

To say that the Renaissance was accompanied by a revival of the works of Graeco-Roman Antiquity is to utter a commonplace. Malraux’s own explanation of this event, as indicated in the previous chapter, differs markedly from traditional accounts; but the simple fact that from about the fourteenth century onwards, Europe showed increasing interest in, and admiration for, the works of Greece and Rome, and that these works progressively became part of the world of “art” as it was gradually coming to be understood, is something that histories of Western art have long regarded as well-established and uncontroversial. It is by no means a commonplace, however, to suggest that an event of a very similar kind, though much more extensive in scope, has taken place in our *own* time, over the past hundred or so years. There has, of course, been an increasing recognition in histories of art, and to a lesser extent in the discipline of aesthetics, that the rubric “art” today signifies much more than Renaissance and post-Renaissance Western art, and that it now encompasses the works of cultures as various as India, Africa, Byzantium, and the early civilizations of Mesopotamia. In general, however, *the event itself* – the fact that the domain of art experienced this vast expansion over the past century – has received very little attention; and seldom, if at all, has aesthetics or the history of art paused to consider the importance of the event and whether it may even have signalled a major transformation in the very significance of art.

Malraux’s own view stands in stark contrast to this. As foreshadowed in the previous chapter, he regards this vast resuscitation of

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<sup>1</sup> “... the domain in which Chardin’s still-lives join the Chartres *Kings* and the gods of Elephanta in a common presence ...”



works from other cultures, and from previously neglected periods of Western culture, as intimately connected with the new direction taken by Western art after Manet, and as the most recent, and certainly the most remarkable, instance of the process of dialogue and metamorphosis examined in that chapter. For Malraux, therefore, this event is of the first importance. It is an event which, as noted earlier, he does not hesitate to call “another Renaissance”, mindful though he is, of course, that this recent Renaissance has revived much more than the works of two Mediterranean cultures. The present chapter begins with Malraux’s analysis of this major development, linking the discussion to the explanation of the relationship between art and time in the previous chapter. It then explores a number of implications of his position, highlighting certain key challenges it presents to traditional thinking in the discipline of aesthetics.

Early in the first volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux*, Malraux asks us to suppose that when Baudelaire put down his pen after composing his poem *Les Phares*, somewhere in the early 1850s,<sup>2</sup> “a demon security guard (in the form of a cat)” appeared, and invited him to visit the Louvre as it is today. Malraux pictures Baudelaire’s amazement. *Les Phares* is Baudelaire’s homage to the artists he considers to be the greatest of all time who, he writes, stand “like beacons on a thousand citadels” and “bear clearest witness ... to our nobility, like an impassioned cry that rolls through the ages”. Baudelaire’s “beacons” are Rubens, Leonardo, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Puget, Watteau, Goya and Delacroix – that is, no one outside the field of European painting and no one earlier than Leonardo and Michelangelo. “Neither Giotto nor Van Eyck is mentioned,” Malraux writes, and although elsewhere Baudelaire refers to Mexican, Egyptian and “Ninevite” works, he regards them, Malraux notes, as examples of a “childish barbarism” and an “urge to see things on a grand scale”.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Malraux adds, Gothic sculpture was treated at the time as “a province of archaeology”, its resuscitation as art, like that of Egyptian

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<sup>2</sup> In English, “The Beacons”. *Les Phares* is one of the poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*, published in 1855.

<sup>3</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 8.

sculpture, coming substantially later. “Never,” he writes, “did Baudelaire make mention of Chartres”.<sup>4</sup>

Malraux admired Baudelaire as art critic<sup>5</sup> as well as poet, and these passages in *La Métamorphose des dieux* are in no sense intended to suggest that Baudelaire was artistically insensitive or that any of his “beacons”, with the probable exception of Puget, is not a great artist. Malraux is simply reminding us that as late as the mid-nineteenth century, even a mind as acute as Baudelaire’s considered the domain of art to be confined to the works of High Renaissance and post-Renaissance Europe (with the addition, of course, of certain works of Antiquity). Objects from non-European or pre-Renaissance sources (even including Giotto and Van Eyck) were outside the boundaries of that domain, and were to remain so for a considerable time to come. The shortcomings of such works were agreed on all hands. They were viewed, Malraux writes, as the products of barbarian tastes, lack of expertise, or clumsy execution.<sup>6</sup> Some had made their way into *cabinets de curiosités*, or into archaeological or ethnological museums, once these came into being, but they were unthinkable in an *art* museum alongside the works of the artists on Baudelaire’s list, or those of a Raphael, a Titian, a Caravaggio, or a Poussin.

If, however, we reflect on what art means for us *today*, Malraux points out, we see immediately how radical the change has been. Today, he writes,

the word “art” conjures up for everyone, even if only vaguely, his or her own ideal art museum. *Les Phares* tells us Baudelaire’s, which included no work prior to the Renaissance. But we today would add the statues of *Djoser* and *Renefer*, the *Koré of Euthydikos*, and the *Lady of Elche*, a number of images of Shiva and certain Buddhist figures (Fig. 20), the *Eagle-Knight* of Mexico, the Dogon mask

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. In a similar vein, Malraux wrote elsewhere (in the 1950s): “Let us not forget too quickly that scarcely a century ago, for all historians as for all artists, art meant Western art – with some documentary exceptions.” André Malraux, “Appendice à ‘La Métamorphose des dieux’: deux ébauches de préface,” in *Ecrits sur l’art (II)*, 1058. Cf. also: “How comprehensively Gothic art was ignored by the nineteenth century! Théophile Gautier, passing by Chartres around 1845, wrote: ‘I have not had the time to make the detour to visit the cathedral.’ The distance from the road to the cathedral was then four hundred metres.” André Malraux, *Du Musée* (Paris: Editions Estienne, 1955), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Tadié, XII.

<sup>6</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 9, 10.

in the Musée de l'Homme, the Chartres *Kings* (Fig. 21), the *Beau Dieu* at Amiens, the Bamberg *Eve*, the *Saviour* of St Cosmas and Damian, or the *Theodora* at Ravenna, *Notre-Dame-de-la-Belle-Verrière* at Chartres, the Avignon *Pieta* ... and how many others! [including] Vermeer's *Lacemaker* (Fig. 22), Chardin's *La Pourvoyeuse* [*The Return from Market*], Courbet's *The Painter's Studio* ...<sup>7</sup>

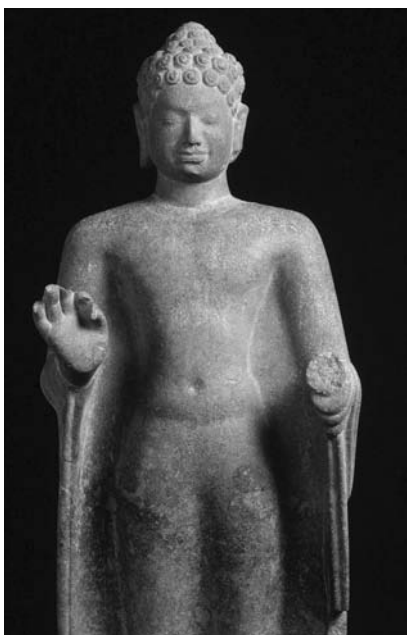


Fig. 20. Buddha, Cambodia (7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century)

Paris, musée Guimet - musée national des Arts asiatiques (C) RMN / Michel Urtado.



Fig. 21. Biblical figure, Chartres

At first sight, one might perhaps be tempted to dismiss this list as what Pierre Bourdieu, in his comment on *Les Voix du silence*, dismissively called a “purely incantatory [litany] of proper names”<sup>8</sup> – that is, a list intended merely to impress. But that view, as one now sees,

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 26, 27. The collection of the Musée de l'Homme is now largely housed in the Musée du quai Branly.

<sup>8</sup> See above, page 18.



Fig. 22. Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*  
Louvre, The Bridgeman Art Library.

would be mistaken. Malraux has chosen a series of specific examples to underline how dramatically the domain of art has expanded over the past century, his list going well beyond Western art (which, of course, is not excluded) to encompass works from Ancient Egypt, Hindu and Buddhist cultures, Pre-Classical (and no longer just Classical) Greece, the unknown fourth or fifth century BC culture that produced the *Lady*

of *Elche*, Pre-Columbian Mexico, Africa, Medieval Europe and Byzantium.

Perhaps, though, one might ask: by what authority does Malraux make this claim? What entitles him to say that “we today” would include these works in an “ideal museum”? And who exactly, as E.H. Gombrich asked, is the “we” in question?<sup>9</sup> This is an issue to which we shall have occasion to return but two brief points can be made here. First, Malraux’s approach in all such cases is not intended to be prescriptive. In *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale*, published in 1952, he provides some seven hundred images of works he would include in his ideal museum of world sculpture, but he is careful to state in his Introduction: “No doubt others might have made a selection different from mine. But whoever, today, knows what a work of art is ... would accept three quarters of them; and the fourth quarter would not be the same for everyone”.<sup>10</sup> The claim, both here and generally, is not, in other words, that the works selected simply “are” works of art according to some pre-established set of rules (an approach foreign to Malraux’s thinking in any case<sup>11</sup>) but that people who are familiar with the painting and sculpture of different ages and cultures, and who have a genuine love of it (as distinct from mere knowledge of it, or no interest at all<sup>12</sup>) are very likely to assent to many, if not most, of Malraux’s choices. Second, it is important to bear in mind that precisely the same question – “On whose authority?” – could just as readily be asked about the selection of European artists

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<sup>9</sup> Gombrich, “Malraux’s Philosophy of Art in Historical Perspective,” 176. Gombrich suggests that only a “tiny circle” of people takes an interest in the new, wider range of art Malraux has in mind. Malraux, who was well aware of the large numbers of visitors to today’s art museums and to art heritage sites around the world, obviously took a different view. Cf. *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 36. The popularity of the new Musée du quai Branly in Paris, where visitor numbers have far exceeded expectations, is one example which suggests that Malraux’s view is to be preferred.

<sup>10</sup> *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale: La statuaire*, 972, 973. Cf. also *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, 258 where Malraux makes the same claim in relation to the “library” of books that would be generally regarded as important works of art.

<sup>11</sup> This issue is discussed again below. See page 273.

<sup>12</sup> As indicated in Chapter Four, Malraux argues that, fundamentally, our response to works of art takes the form of enthusiasms, or the lack of them, and is not essentially an intellectual process – a judgment. See page 109.

whose works have been admired since Renaissance times. Figures such as Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Shakespeare, Balzac, Mozart and Brahms, one might argue, have been considered more important than others because their works also commanded the same kind of consensus of opinion that now surrounds – or, at least, increasingly surrounds – works such as those on Malraux’s list. Thus, the “we” in his statement simply means “we today for whom art is important” – as distinct from those who are indifferent to it – as compared with the same kind of “we” a century or more ago (whom Malraux exemplifies by Baudelaire). This does not mean, one should stress, that Malraux espouses something resembling the “institutionalist” theory of art, mentioned previously, which holds, in essence, that an object is a work of art *if* it is accepted as such by a particular cultural group (an “artworld”).<sup>13</sup> Malraux, as we have seen, defines art in terms of its fundamental *purpose* – briefly stated, as a rival, coherent world acting as a defence against the “chaos of appearances”; moreover, as we have also discussed, art understood in this fundamental sense has not, in his view, always functioned *as* “art” in any Western sense of the term.<sup>14</sup> His references to what “we today” regard as art, and to what was so regarded by earlier writers such as Baudelaire, are not therefore intended as *definitions* of art; they are simply a way of recognising that in previous centuries there was a rough consensus about which works that term encompassed, that there is also a rough consensus today, and that the range of works encompassed in the second case is much broader (in the sense indicated) than in the first.<sup>15</sup> For at least four hundred years, he is pointing out, “art” had signified painting and sculpture (confining our attention here to visual art) from specific periods of European culture – that is, from the Renaissance onwards and from Classical Greece and Rome. Within a short few decades from the late nineteenth century onwards, it had extended its reach to include objects from a wide range of other cultures and deep into prehistory.

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<sup>13</sup> See page 220.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, page 166.

<sup>15</sup> Malraux is not suggesting that the consensus is always unerring in its enthusiasms: he is not denying that artists of great merit may on occasion be underrated or even ignored. As indicated, there is no question here of hard and fast rules.

One might of course ask if this is historically correct. Was there in fact the sudden expansion Malraux describes over the period in question? Very little has been written on this question in modern aesthetics but one exception is H. Gene Blocker, a philosopher of art with a special interest in “primitive” art. Blocker comments that,

Although primitive artifacts were known to Europeans from the time of the great explorations of the New World and the Far East from the 15th century onwards, and although a few pieces were admired by artists such as Dürer and Cellini, there was virtually no aesthetic interest in such artifacts as works of art until the early years of the 20th century. Gold objects from Pre-Colombian Mexico and Central and South America were melted down and the valuable raw material shipped back to Spain; a few pieces were taken back to the home countries as evidence of the culturally savage and barbaric state of the natives; and what aesthetic response there was was largely one of horror at the ugliness and brutality supposedly symptomatic of these savage, heathen works of the devil.<sup>16</sup>

The magnitude of the change that took place in the early twentieth century is reflected in the reactions of an art historian of the time, Hans Tietze, who, in the words of E.H. Gombrich,

wrote, in 1925, of the great revision of art history that had occurred since 1910, of the “daily discoveries of new worlds, the hourly transvaluation of all values”. Even the once familiar took on a new intensity: “Classical Antiquity, Gothic and Baroque suddenly entered our lives with an undreamed-of immediacy, and the works of the Far East and Negro artists breathed a complete humanity that stirred the very depths of our being.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> H. Gene Blocker, *The Aesthetics of Primitive Art* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994), 272.

<sup>17</sup> Gombrich, “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” 79. Gombrich cites as his source an essay by Tietze entitled “Die Krise des Expressionismus”, *Lebendige Kunstwissenschaft*, Vienna, 1925, 40. In this context, Gombrich is quoting Tietze as evidence of an “expressionist” theory of art which was influential at the time, and to which Gombrich claims Malraux adheres. Gombrich’s mistaken view that Malraux’s theory of art is expressionist has been mentioned earlier and is the subject of further brief comment below (see Chapter Nine, note 26). The important point for present purposes is not Gombrich’s claim about Malraux but the “daily discoveries of new worlds, the hourly transvaluation of all values” to which Tietze refers. Gombrich himself seems to have been less than enthusiastic about the new horizons that were opening up. Cf. his remarks at the end of the essay cited here where he comments that “... we may come to see that our fathers and grandfathers were not quite wrong, after all, when they thought that we understand some styles better than others. That a Rembrandt self-portrait or a Watteau drawing ‘means more’ to us than an Aztec idol or a Negro mask”. Gombrich, “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” 85.

A similar change is noted by the art historian Élie Faure who, in his somewhat more prolix style, made the event the subject of the opening paragraph of his *Histoire de l'Art: L'Esprit des formes* published in 1927. "In appearance," Faure writes,

an abyss lies between the Negro or Polynesian idol, for instance, and Greek sculpture at its apogee. Or between that idol and the great European painting of which the Venetian School has revealed to us the mean and the possibilities.

"And yet", he continues

one of the miracles of this time is that an increasing number of minds should become capable not only of tasting the delicate or violent savor of these reputedly contradictory works and find them equally intoxicating; even more than that, they can grasp, in the seemingly opposed characters, the inner accords that lead us back to man and show him to us everywhere animated by analogous passions ...<sup>18</sup>

None of this is intended, of course, to suggest that Malraux shared the theoretical views of either Tietze or Faure, both of whom were art historians. Here, nonetheless, are two well-informed authorities writing in the early twentieth century who attest quite clearly to the sudden change Malraux describes. For Tietze it was the "daily discoveries of new worlds, the hourly transvaluation of all values"; for Faure "one of the miracles of this time".

There is, moreover, another, more obvious source of evidence: the histories of the collections of major Western art museums which were in existence in the early twentieth century or before. Wherever these collections include items from non-Western cultures, one finds that these items only entered the museums, and were only placed within *general* collections – that is, the same collections as post-Renaissance Western painting and sculpture, and the works of Greece and Rome – during the first half of the twentieth century, and even then usually only by gradual degrees. A representative case, chosen almost at random, is the Art Institute of Chicago and its African art collection. The Institute began collecting African artefacts in the mid-1920s, but prior to the 1950s they were displayed only in the Children's Museum, a placement which, as an historian of the museum writes, "implied that [African art] was not considered to be equal in merit or significance to art on view in the main galleries" and was "comparable to

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<sup>18</sup> Élie Faure, *History of Art: The Spirit of the Forms*, trans. Walter Pach (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930), ix.



that of children". In the late 1950s the Institute created a Department of Primitive Art, later renamed the Department of African, Oceanic and Amerindian art, and thenceforth African art, along with that of the other cultures mentioned, took its place in the museum's general collection.<sup>19</sup> A similar case is the Asiatic art collection in the Rijksmuseum. From the seventeenth century onwards, Dutch traders to the Far East had brought large numbers of Asian artefacts back to Europe but it was not until 1918 that a "Society of Friends of Asiatic Art" was founded in Holland with the express purpose of building a collection of items chosen for their artistic value rather than their decorative appeal, ethnographic significance, or curiosity value. By 1932, the work of the Society had led to the establishment of a Museum of Asiatic Art in Amsterdam, and this collection eventually became the nucleus of the Rijksmuseum's collection of Asiatic art, first established in 1952.<sup>20</sup> Similar stories can be told of many other art museums around the world in the early decades of the twentieth century. Certainly, artefacts from non-Western cultures could often be found before then in *cabinets de curiosités*, or in ethnological or archaeological collections, but their inclusion in *art* museums is a development of relatively recent date. Malraux's argument, in other words, is amply supported by historical evidence.

One obvious temptation would be to see this development as a natural consequence of Europe's increasing contacts with other cultures during the nineteenth century, and the growing body of historical and archaeological research. Malraux does not accept this explanation. The inescapable fact, he points out (and as Blocker, for example, makes clear in the comment quoted earlier), is that many of the cultures whose works began to enter art museums in the early twent-

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<sup>19</sup> Kathleen Bickford Berzock, "African Art at the Art Institute of Chicago," *African Arts* 32, no. 4 (1999): 19, 20, 24, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer, ed., *Asiatic Art in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff/Landshoff, 1985), 7–22. Of the pre-twentieth century situation, Scheurleer writes: "The Netherlands had to wait until 1932 for a museum of Asiatic art, even though it might have been thought that, with their foreign trade in the 17th century, their contacts with the Far East and their Eastern colonies, the Dutch could have started much earlier. Not so – objects there were in plenty, but there was no background from which to judge their quality. There existed collections of a historical and/or ethnographical nature and hidden among them were examples of real art, but these were neither acknowledged nor appreciated as such." *Ibid.*, 9.

entieth century had been known to Europeans for long periods of time. The objects in question had, however, been seen simply as fetishes, idols, or curios – never as art. As Malraux writes,

We would have become aware earlier of the world of art that came into being with contemporary civilization if we had not confused it with a previous development – if we had not seen it as the inevitable consequence of our colonial conquests, our explorations and our archaeological expeditions. But did the West discover African art when it discovered bananas? It certainly did not discover Mexican art when it discovered chocolate. What African explorers found was not African art but fetishes; the conquistadors found Aztec idols not Mexican art.<sup>21</sup>

It is true of course that many objects lying outside the previously accepted boundaries of art were not *discovered* until well into the twentieth century. Numerous objects from Mesopotamian civilizations now regarded as treasured works of art were not unearthed until the 1920s; the Palaeolithic cave paintings at Lascaux were not discovered until 1940, and there are many similar examples. But the acceptance of such objects *as* works of art would not have occurred, Malraux argues, without the radical change in the response to such objects that was already under way. “If, in the nineteenth century, which knew nothing of Sumerian civilization,” he writes,

some archaeologist had dug up the *Warka Head* (Fig. 23), he would have classified it among Chaldean idols and seen it in terms of the historical interest that such works had through their vague links with the Bible. Idols become works of art when they change their frame of reference, entering a world of art that no civilization has known before ours.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the crucial factor, Malraux argues, was not simply an increase in knowledge – any more than the Renaissance enthusiasm for Graeco-Roman art resulted simply from excavations. What mattered fundamentally was the new “frame of reference” that the West began to adopt in the decades before and after 1900. The vast expansion in the domain of art involved nothing less than a new way of seeing the

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<sup>21</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 24. Malraux is not of course denying the *value* of historical and archaeological research. His argument is that this was not the decisive factor in the context under discussion.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* The *Warka Head* is a life-size, Sumerian female head in alabaster from Uruk (Warka) dating from 3500-3000 BC. Malraux includes a reproduction at: *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale*, vol. I (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), Plate 11.



Fig. 23. *Warka (Uruk) Head*

Baghdad Museum, Iraq. Distribution: bpk, Berlin.

objects in question. “The metamorphosis of the past” that took place, Malraux writes

was from the outset a metamorphosis of our way of seeing. Without an aesthetic revolution, the sculpture of early times, mosaics, and stained glass windows, would never have come to rank beside the painting of the Renaissance and of the great [European] monarchies; and without that, the ethnographical collections, no matter how extensive they might have become, would never have crossed the barrier that kept them out of art museums.<sup>23</sup>

What, then, brought about the “metamorphosis of our way of seeing” – the aesthetic revolution – to which Malraux refers? His response is quite clear. This event, he contends, was the direct conseq-

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<sup>23</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 25.

uence of the development discussed in Chapter Five – the discovery by Manet and subsequent painters of an art no longer linked to any value outside itself but reliant solely on its own power to create another world – an art dependent solely on “the age-old urge to create an autonomous world, which, for the first time, has become the artist’s sole aim”.<sup>24</sup> Just as the Renaissance had brought about a metamorphosis of the art of Antiquity, producing “not only a new art of the living but a new art of the dead”,<sup>25</sup> so the birth of modern art (together with the agnostic culture that went with it, as we shall see in a moment) has led to a metamorphosis of the art of *all* cultures including, as we shall see, the art of the previous centuries of the West itself. The Renaissance, as discussed earlier, had not revived the works of Greece and Rome as part of its religious life (they had become gods “to whom no-one prayed”<sup>26</sup>) but as part of its new world of the *irréel* – the exalted fictional world outside of which “man did not fully merit the name man”. Now, at the close of the nineteenth century, art post-Manet was reviving the works of *all* cultures, once again divorced from their original significances (there was no question of making ritual offerings to the Egyptian sculptures now entering art museums, and, in any case, the original significances of many objects from ancient cultures were unknown) but now as part of a *new* world of art made possible by modern art – made possible because, as Malraux writes in a crucial sentence, “in ceasing to subordinate creative power to any supreme value, *modern art was revealing the presence of that same creative power throughout the whole history of art*”.<sup>27</sup> In the terminology discussed in the previous chapter, there has been a process of dialogue and metamorphosis. Works from non-Western cultures and from earlier periods of the West itself such as Byzantium, which had long been beyond the pale of art, became part of a dialogue, just as the works of Greece and Rome had become part of a dialogue with the works of Raphael, Michelangelo and their successors; and this vast range of works, from cultures as diverse as ancient Egypt, India, and Pre-Columbian Mexico, have undergone a metamorphosis, henceforth

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<sup>24</sup> See page 156.

<sup>25</sup> See page 208.

<sup>26</sup> See page 207.

<sup>27</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 871. Emphasis added.

speaking a language quite different from that which they had originally spoken but now disclosing art's fundamental power to create "another world" – the same "age-old urge to create an autonomous world" revealed by Manet and the painters who followed in his wake. The metamorphosis of our way of seeing of which Malraux speaks is thus a newly-revealed awareness of this power in a wide range of works from all cultures past and present. The result is "another Renaissance" but this time of much larger proportions. In an unprecedented development – in the strict sense of the word unprecedented – we today have discovered "the first universal world of art", a world in which, Malraux writes, "a Mexican god becomes a statue, not a mere fetish, and Chardin's still-lives join the Chartres *Kings* and the gods of Elephanta in a common presence".<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, Malraux argues, we can now see clearly why this dialogue had previously been a dialogue of the deaf and why a universal world of art had never been possible before. "In the twelfth century," he writes,

there could have been no question of comparing a Weï statue with a Romanesque statue: one would have been comparing an idol with a saint. Similarly, in the seventeenth century a Sung painting would not have been compared with a work by Poussin: one would have been comparing a "strange-looking" landscape with a noble work of art. Yet if that Sung landscape were not seen primarily as a work of art, it was nothing at all. Its significance was repudiated not by Poussin's talent but by the conception of art for which that talent catered and from which it was inseparable.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, for those who first worshipped before the Romanesque statue, or for the seventeenth century admirers of Poussin (and even as late as Delacroix, Malraux might have added<sup>30</sup>), to compare those

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<sup>28</sup> *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 25. In French: "le premier monde de l'art universel." Stuart Gilbert renders this as "the first world of a truly universal art". André Malraux, *The Metamorphosis of the Gods* trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960), 21. This is misleading, as the context indicates. It is not a question of a new form of art – a "universal art". Malraux's claim is that, for the first time, the category "art" encompasses the works of all cultures. (Gilbert's translation would in any case be more likely to translate French which read: "Le premier monde d'un art réellement universel".)

<sup>29</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 864.

<sup>30</sup> Malraux saw Delacroix as the last major representative of the post-Renaissance notion of art. See page 148.

images with objects from other cultures would have meant comparing objects of *different kinds* – objects that could not sensibly *be* compared. For their contemporaries, Romanesque statues, like Byzantine images, were not, as we have seen, “works of art”; they were manifestations of a revealed Truth. As such, they were images besides which *all* those of other times and places – including the often still visible works of classical Antiquity – were worthless products of error and delusion. For Poussin’s contemporaries, his paintings *were*, certainly, “works of art”, but in the specific post-Renaissance sense discussed earlier in which they, also, stood for an absolute – an exalted, harmonious world outside of which “man did not fully merit the name man” – albeit one that depended on painting and sculpture (and the other arts) for its existence. *All* other painting (and even that of Giotto by this time) was at best a failed attempt to achieve the same goal. In both contexts – the Romanesque and the seventeenth century – as in so many others, painting and sculpture was enlisted in the service of an absolute which was both source and guarantor of the “other world” they bodied forth. There could be no question of placing such objects on equal footing with those of other cultures, as one might do in an art museum (an institution which, significantly, did not exist). The images of foreign cultures, unconnected as they were with the *only* “other world” that mattered, could only be products of error and delusion. As such, they were beneath serious notice: they were “nothing at all”.

The quite different contemporary attitude that allows us to see selected objects from all cultures as “works of art” is thus due not only to the birth of modern art post-Manet but also to the emergence of an agnostic culture – a culture in which art is no longer linked to an absolute (though, as we saw in Chapter Five, both events, in Malraux’s eyes, are closely connected). This, Malraux stresses, is an entirely new development. “In the past,” he writes, “no art was viewed separately from the exclusive ... values it served – and which made all art that did not serve them invisible”. Our present-day, very different, approach may seem quite natural and unremarkable to us; but, he reminds us,

It must not be forgotten that we are the first to accept that every art is closely bound up with a significance peculiar to itself; until our times such forms as did

not tally with a preconceived significance of art ... were not linked up with *other* significances, but cast out into some remote limbo.<sup>31</sup>

For the first time in human history, in other words, one culture – modern Western culture – possesses a frame of reference into which it fits not only its own works but those of other cultures as well. Each work is now seen, first and foremost, in terms of the specific, coherent world it embodies – effectively in terms of its *style* since this, as we have seen, is Malraux’s definition of style.<sup>32</sup> The modern world of art is thus made up not only of works created in our own time but of a vast range of *resuscitated* works, drawn not just from two specific cultures, as in the Renaissance, but from *any* culture in which objects possessing the creative power in question have originated. “The decisive metamorphosis of our time,” Malraux writes, “is that we no longer apply the term ‘art’ to the forms it may have assumed in this or that time or place, but that we accept from the outset that art has no cultural boundaries”.<sup>33</sup>

Some brief points of clarification are in order. First, when Malraux writes, in the key sentence quoted above, that “modern art was revealing the presence of that same creative power throughout the whole history of art”, he is speaking not only of the art of non-Western cul-

<sup>31</sup> Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, 866, 871. Malraux’s emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> See page 82.

<sup>33</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 882. It might perhaps be objected that Malraux is not the only one to discuss the transformation of works from other cultures into art in the modern Western sense. Arthur Danto writes, for example: “Picasso discovered ... the fact – known or not – that the master carvers of Africa were artists and that artistic greatness was possible for them, not simply within their own traditions but against the highest artistic standards anywhere. It was a discovery in the same sense that Columbus discovered America, or Freud discovered the Unconscious, or Roentgen discovered X-rays ...” The problem such statements pose is that, while acknowledging the transformation in question, they provide *no explanation* for it – no reason why it should have occurred, or how. (And simply calling it a “discovery” does not advance the matter further). By contrast, Malraux, as we have seen, has provided an explanation – one based on his fundamental propositions about the nature of art. In passing, one might also query Danto’s comment that “... the master carvers of Africa were artists and that artistic greatness was possible for them not simply within their own traditions ...” This appears to assume that within the African traditions the “greatness” in question was viewed in terms of “art” – an assumption which, as we have seen, is highly questionable, and which also obscures the full significance of the metamorphosis that occurred. Danto, “Artifact and Art,” 19.

tures and of pre-Renaissance works such as those of Cimabue and Byzantium but also of the works of the post-Renaissance Western tradition as well. That is, he is arguing that the effects of the aesthetic revolution brought about by modern art were not limited to works previously excluded from the art museum but encompassed *existing* inhabitants as well. His reasoning in both cases follows the same path. The absolute to which works of artists such as Michelangelo, Titian, Rembrandt, Watteau and Delacroix were devoted – the supramundane world of the *irréel* – is now as enfeebled as the religious absolute it replaced, and today the works of artists such as these are also seen in terms of “significances peculiar to themselves” – that is, in terms, first and foremost, of their *styles*. The consequences, Malraux points out, have varied according to the artist in question. Many have retained their importance although even these are now seen in a new light. (“What do we care about the identity of the *Man with the Helmet* or the *Man with the Glove*?” (Fig. 24) Malraux asks. “For us their names are Rembrandt and Titian”<sup>34</sup> – implying that we no longer care if these are suitably noble portraits of the persons who sat for them, any more than we care if Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* represents Venus “as she ought to be represented”, but that now, in each case, we are conscious above all of the transformative power of the artist – embodied in his style – that has brought these specific “other worlds” into being.) For a number of other artists, such as El Greco and Grünewald, the “new way of seeing” brought about by modern art had more dramatic consequences and meant rescue from semi-oblivion. (“It is not research work that has led to an understanding of El Greco,” Malraux writes. “It is modern art”. And later: “It is in the light of those pathetic candles that Van Gogh, already mad, placed on his hat to paint the *Café d’Arles* by night that Grünewald has re-emerged”.<sup>35</sup>) And finally, there were many previously popular artists – usually those who had relied on little more than what Malraux terms “anecdotal” elements – who fell from grace and whose works have often been quietly moved into storerooms. The effects of the aesthetic revolution have, in short,

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<sup>34</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 204. More recently, *The Man with the Helmet* has been attributed to “Rembrandt’s circle” rather than to Rembrandt himself. The point Malraux is making in the present context remains, however, unaffected.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.





Fig. 24. Titian, *The Man with the Glove*  
Louvre. (C) RMN/© Thierry Le Mage.

been far-reaching: they have, as Malraux writes, affected “the whole history of art”, and post-Renaissance Western art has not been exempt

Second, Malraux is not asserting that the art of the past has been revived simply as “form”. As we saw earlier, it is a mistake even to claim that he views *modern* art in these terms;<sup>36</sup> and as our analysis implies, one would be equally mistaken in concluding that the revival it has brought about can be understood in this way. For Malraux, the

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<sup>36</sup> See page 158.

key characteristic of modern art is that it relies solely on its power to create an autonomous, coherent world, and his argument, as we have now seen, is that modern art has revealed “the presence of that same creative power throughout the whole history of art”. This is not an argument about “form” (an idea which, in any case, Malraux uses very sparingly) but about a *power*. Even this does not mean, one should add, that the art of the past has somehow become “the same as modern art”. Many Gothic and Sumerian figures, for instance, have been resuscitated as works of art because we discover in them the same power to create an autonomous world that we find in modern art; but this resuscitation has necessarily occurred via a metamorphosis – a metamorphosis of what were, at their origins, religious images. Thus, Malraux writes,

A Gothic head that we admire does not affect us merely through its “volumes”, and we discern in it across the centuries a distant gleam of the face of the Gothic Christ. Because that gleam is there. And we have only a vague idea of what the aura emanating from a Sumerian statue consists of; but we are well aware that it does not emanate from a Cubist sculpture.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, although the significance of such objects today is no longer what it was for their makers, they have not been somehow transformed into modern art. They are now viewed first and foremost as “autonomous worlds” but, like all art, they are nonetheless autonomous worlds *of particular kinds* – in these instances ones that retain something of their religious origins. Malraux applies precisely the same reasoning to the art of the *irréel*, using Rembrandt’s *Slaughtered*

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<sup>37</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 260. This statement contains one of Malraux’s rare uses of the term “aura”. Despite what critics have occasionally suggested (see, for example, Rosa da Silva, “La Rupture de l’aura et la métamorphose de l’art: Malraux, lecteur de Benjamin?,” 55–78) the meaning Malraux attaches to this word is quite different from Walter Benjamin’s. Malraux does not argue that an original of a work of art possesses a special “aura” *qua* original. In the present context, the term is clearly linked to the idea of metamorphosis and its effects. Thus, while the original meaning of the Sumerian sculpture is lost to us (we today do not treat it as an object of worship or veneration), metamorphosis does not transform it simply into the equivalent of a modern work of art. *Something* of the original sense of sacredness survives for us, which Malraux describes here as an “aura” – an aura, in that specific sense, which a modern work of art does not possess. There is, of course, no suggestion that the ancient work is in some way superior. Malraux is simply distinguishing the effects of works of art of different kinds – works created in different contexts for different purposes.

*Ox* and a Soutine painting of the same subject as his examples. “We should be wrong,” he writes, “to think that the difference between the two is only one of talent”.<sup>38</sup> (Fig. 25 and Fig. 26).

Third, there is no suggestion in Malraux’s argument that our contemporary attitude is somehow *superior* to those that have preceded it or that have held sway in other cultures. Nothing in what he says implies, for example, that we today are somehow “more sensitive” to the works in question than were their original audiences or – to recall Jerrold Levinson’s argument discussed in the previous chapter – that we “find more” in these works than those for whom they were created, or have “access to the full extent of [their] content”.<sup>39</sup> Nor even, to anticipate an issue to be considered shortly, does Malraux regard our contemporary response as definitive – as a kind of *terminus ad quem* or apotheosis of art. His points are simply: first, that the nature of the contemporary response is radically *different* from that which preceded it (for the reasons we have examined); and second, that it is an *unprecedented* response, not only because “we are the first to accept that every art is closely bound up with a significance peculiar to itself” but also because, in so doing, we have come to recognise that art, as we now understand the term, has no cultural boundaries and that we are inheritors of the first universal world of art.

Finally, Malraux would not agree that the incorporation of the art of other cultures into art museums as part of a “universal world of art” necessarily entails what some writers have termed a process of “appropriation” or “commodification”,<sup>40</sup> implying that removal of the works from their original cultural contexts somehow deprives them of

<sup>38</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 868. Soutine painted a number of works on this subject. A reproduction of the one Malraux includes in *Les Voix Silence* (866) was not available. The work shown here is very similar.

<sup>39</sup> See page 224.

<sup>40</sup> See for example: George Marcus and Fred Myers, “The Traffic in Culture, An Introduction,” in *The Traffic in Culture* ed. George Marcus and Fred Myers (London: University of California Press, 1995), 1–51, 33. Also, Lynn M. Hart, “Three Walls: Regional Aesthetics and the International Art World,” *Ibid*, 127–150. There were echoes of these claims in some of the objections raised to the establishment of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. See for example: Bernard Dupaigne, *Le Scandale des arts premiers: la véritable histoire du musée du quai Branly* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2006), esp. 20, 21. As his title suggests, Dupaigne was a critic of the decision to establish the new museum.



Fig. 25. Rembrandt, *The Slaughtered Ox*  
 Louvre. Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art  
 Library.



Fig. 26. Soutine, *Beef Carcass*

Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art  
 Library.

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their “true” or “authentic” meaning. First, one needs to bear in mind that the aesthetic revolution under discussion has, in Malraux’s eyes, affected perceptions of *Western* art, past and present, as much as the art of other cultures: it has, as he says, affected “the whole history of art”. Second, there is, as we have said, no implication that the contemporary Western response is somehow superior, and Malraux is not suggesting that where there continue to be communities for whom a work still holds its original sacred significance (for example), the modern Western response should somehow displace or supersede this. In such cases (no doubt steadily decreasing in number as the influence of Western culture becomes more pervasive) the object may well evoke *two quite different* kinds of response simultaneously, depending on its “audience”. Western eyes – assuming it finds its way into a

Western context – may view it first and foremost as an “autonomous world”, as all objects regarded as art are now viewed; members of the culture for whom it was created might still regard it as a sacred object – and thus not as “art” at all. From Malraux’s standpoint, in other words, simply asking whether placing such an object in an art museum “appropriates” it to Western purposes and denies its “true” or “authentic” nature would be a misleading question. Neither significance – the original sacred significance or the significance today as art – rules out the other, any more than regarding the statues at Luxor or the cave paintings at Lascaux as works of art denies their now vanished significance as sacred or (as some have conjectured) “magical” objects. Where Luxor and Lascaux are concerned, the original cultures have, of course, long since disappeared, and with them the original significances of the objects concerned (and those for whom these significances were important). In the case of non-Western communities still extant, the situation is different and, as Malraux would be the first to agree, there is obviously an obligation to respect these communities’ religious beliefs and the status this might confer on the objects in question – a status that might well, if the communities in question so decide, rule out their inclusion in an art museum. If Malraux’s analysis is correct, however, the notion of one “true” or “authentic” meaning in some definitive sense is a red herring. The Western observer, if he or she is permitted, may well discover in such objects the “immemorial voice” of which Malraux speaks, just as he or she may discover it in the cave paintings at Lascaux, the sculpture at Luxor or Chartres, the paintings of Titian or Picasso. For a culture in which the objects in question still play a part in a living system of beliefs, their significance may well be quite different, and that significance may be quite incompatible with the idea that they can be regarded as “works of art” and displayed in an art museum. *Both* significances, Malraux would argue, are “authentic”; neither is definitive.

As we saw earlier, Malraux has sometimes been accused – without sufficient grounds as we have argued – of superficiality and inaccuracy where the history of art is concerned.<sup>41</sup> The issues currently under discussion suggest, however, that in some respects at least he

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<sup>41</sup> See page 174 et seq.

has been rather more perceptive than many professionals in that field. The plurality of our modern world of art – the fact that it no longer has any cultural boundaries – is “so familiar to us now,” he writes, “that we forget just how recent it is”.<sup>42</sup> And many art historians do indeed seem to have forgotten. True, many histories of art now include discussion of the art of other cultures – such as that of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and Africa. The overwhelming tendency, however, is to view these topics solely in terms of an “evolution of styles” and as part of a general account of what is simply termed, without further commentary, “world art”. Conspicuous by its absence is a clear recognition that the art of other cultures (and of the pre-Renaissance stages of our own) *only became* “art” as the West understands that idea over the course of the past century, and indeed that the very notion of “world art” *only arose* during that period – that is, very recently in terms of the time scale of several millennia that art history now encompasses. Art historians – at least as represented by well known titles such as Gombrich’s *The Story of Art*, Janson’s *History of Art*, and Gardner’s *Art through the Ages* – seem to have forgotten the testimony of their own earlier confreres, such as Tietze and Faure, who, living in the midst of this sea-change, wrote, as we have seen, of the “daily discoveries of new worlds” and saw the development then taking place as “one of the miracles of this time.”<sup>43</sup> This is not simply a matter, one should stress, of a forgotten episode in the history of art. It is, if we accept Malraux’s argument, a forgotten episode in the history of the *very notion* of art, and an obliviousness to an event that radically altered – and vastly enlarged – the optic of what the “history of art” encompasses, and the very nature of the world of art.

A similar criticism can be made of aesthetics. As noted earlier, the general approach of contemporary aesthetics, especially in the Anglo-American arena, tends in any event to be ahistorical, treating art as a universal, timeless category, and keeping questions of historical change at arm’s length.<sup>44</sup> Not surprisingly therefore, it is exceedingly

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<sup>42</sup> *L’Intemporel*, 1015.

<sup>43</sup> See page 238.

<sup>44</sup> “Continental” aesthetics tends to place more importance on history, influenced as it often is by Hegelian and Marxist thought. But history in this context usually has a modern Western focus, frequently treating the more distant past, and other cultures, somewhat cursorily as a kind of generalised prehistory of modern times. One example

rare to encounter any consideration by modern aestheticians of the development under discussion, or even any sign that it is regarded as significant.<sup>45</sup> To the extent that modern aesthetics delves into the past at all, it tends to focus heavily on the period during the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century which saw the emergence of what Paul Kristeller terms “the modern system of the arts” – that is, the grouping together of the visual arts, literature and music under the general heading of the “fine arts”, a development roughly coinciding with the emergence of aesthetics itself as a discrete discipline.<sup>46</sup> Yet while this period may be important in the history of *aesthetics*, at least as aesthetics has largely been understood since then, its importance in the history of *art* (coinciding simply, as it does, with the baroque and rococo styles) scarcely compares with that of the period under discussion which has seen, for the first time in human history, the emergence of a concept and experience of art embracing the works of all cultures. It is by no means clear, one might add, how modern aesthetics might go about offering an explanation of this event, given the static notion of art with which it usually works and its tendency to play down the importance of historical evidence (such as that indicating that there have been many cultures in which the idea of art was non-existent). If we accept Malraux’s analysis – an analysis which, as we have seen, is supported by enough historical evidence to make it very difficult to ignore – the conspicuous silence of contemporary aestheticians on this topic is a matter of real concern. An aesthetics or philosophy of art that ignores what appears to be a radical and unprec-

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is Walter Benjamin’s essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, which proposes, in effect, a two-stage historical process: art’s early “cultic” phase, and modern times. Close examination of other cultures, and comment on (for example) the fact that the concept art was generally unknown in non-Western contexts, is no more frequent in continental aesthetics than in its analytic counterpart.

<sup>45</sup> The book by H. Gene Blocker cited earlier (page 238) is a rare exception.

<sup>46</sup> Kristeller, “The modern system of the arts: a study in the history of aesthetics (I),” 3–34. Kristeller, “The modern system of the arts: a study in the history of aesthetics (II),” 35–64. Aesthetics often places major importance on developments in the eighteenth century, which is understandable enough since this was the period that saw the birth of the discipline. It cannot be assumed, however, that developments in aesthetics are necessarily an accurate guide to developments in art itself. Cf. the remarks earlier concerning Larry Shiner’s book *The Invention of Art*. Chapter Five, note 68.

edented transformation in the meaning of the concept “art”, and in the range of works encompassed by that concept, is arguably turning its back on an event of key significance in the very disciplinary field in which it stakes its intellectual claims.<sup>47</sup>

This study has not yet broached the topic of the *musée imaginaire* which must surely be the single most frequently quoted idea from Malraux’s books on art – and also, as we shall see, among the most frequently misunderstood. The topic has been delayed until this point because it involves a number of major aspects of Malraux’s thinking which required discussion beforehand. We are now in a position to consider the matter.

The aesthetic revolution ushered in by Manet transformed the previous world of art (as exemplified by Baudelaire’s *Les Phares*) in a number of ways. One, as we have seen, was that it gradually opened the doors of the art museum to works from non-European cultures, allowing Pre-Columbian figurines or African ceremonial masks, for

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<sup>47</sup> Just why this development is so often ignored is a matter of conjecture, but one might hazard a guess. One factor, no doubt, is the essentially ahistorical outlook of much modern aesthetics: there is a tendency to play down questions of historical change anyway. But another may be that the expansion of art museum collections associated with the development Malraux describes was not an overnight event. It took place progressively, and usually undramatically, over a period of decades (usually beginning with more “familiar” works such as Mediaeval and Egyptian sculpture and only later taking in works from more remote regions such as Oceania). By contrast, contemporaneous developments in Western art itself from Manet onwards were often quite sensational and “newsworthy” – beginning with *Olympia* itself which had to be guarded by police to protect it from the ire of the crowds, and going on to include a succession of similarly conspicuous developments such as abstract art, surrealism, “ready-mades” such as Duchamp’s *Fountain*, facsimile pieces such as Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, pop art, ephemeral works like Christo’s “wrappings”, and works featuring the preserved bodies of dead animals. Events of this kind have perhaps tended to monopolise attention, encouraging aesthetics to develop a fore-shortened view of art history focusing heavily on developments in recent times. Whether or not this explanation is correct, it is certainly true that, to the (relatively limited) extent modern aesthetics discusses individual artists and their works, names such as Duchamp and Warhol occur far more frequently than artists or works of other periods and cultures. It is also true that, despite the undoubted interest of some of these more recent events (which Malraux acknowledges, with reservations in certain cases), none of them has caused a transformation of the landscape of art comparable in kind and extent with that which Malraux highlights.



instance, to join general collections alongside the Titians and Rembrandts. The consequences did not, however, end there. The art world of the post-Renaissance centuries had consisted primarily of objects easily accommodated within art museums: it was largely (though not exclusively) a world of easel paintings and moveable sculpture such as Graeco-Roman statues. Many objects in the new world of art were also readily transportable – such as African masks – but there were also large numbers that were not. There could be no question, for example, of detaching the sculptures at Notre Dame de Chartres, or removing Giotto's frescos at Assisi, the Romanesque tympanum at Moissac, the mosaics at Ravenna, the frescos at Ajanta, the bas-reliefs at Borobudur, the Buddhist sculptures at Lung-Mên, or the cave paintings at Lascaux. Thus, the new world of art was not only more diverse than its predecessor but in many cases less adaptable to the art museum. And even when moveable, the objects that were now raised to prominence were quite frequently not to be found in European art museums but were scattered across the world in museums in countries in which they originated, or which could more easily afford to purchase them, such as the United States.

As a first approximation (but *only* that, for there is more to be said) this is the meaning of Malraux's well-known phrase *le musée imaginaire* – often translated as “the museum without walls”, or “the imaginary museum”. Given that the breadth and diversity of today's world of art far surpasses the capacities of any single art museum – even the wealthiest – and that many of the most celebrated objects are in any case not moveable, the *musée imaginaire* is an imaginary collection of all the works, *both inside and outside* present day art museums, that we today regard as important works of art – ranging from contemporary works, to those of Renaissance and post-Renaissance European culture (re-ordered as we have said by the post-Manet aesthetic revolution<sup>48</sup>), to pre-Renaissance works such as those of Byzantium and Romanesque Europe, to works from a wide range of non-Western cultures stretching back to the earliest urban civilizations, and even to Palaeolithic cultures.<sup>49</sup> Here, of course, one can

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<sup>48</sup> See page 247.

<sup>49</sup> The explanation of the *musée imaginaire* in this and the preceding paragraphs is based on *Les Voix du silence*, 203–206 and *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 7–37.

again ask “Who is ‘we?’” But the answer is the same as that given earlier. First, Malraux is not seeking to be prescriptive and is happy to acknowledge that everyone for whom art is important will have their own *musée imaginaire* – although, as indicated earlier, he would anticipate large areas of agreement.<sup>50</sup> And second, the question is not new. The post-Renaissance Europe that raised Raphael, Leonardo, Poussin, Rubens and others to prominence and excluded Byzantine and Gothic art, together with all non-Western styles, also involved a “we” – a rough consensus, albeit formulated on a different basis. The important change, Malraux is arguing, is, as indicated earlier, the “way of seeing” on which the consensus is built. Today’s *musée imaginaire*, as distinct from the collections of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, involves a way of seeing that welcomes a wide range of works which our forebears – only a century ago – would have disqualified on the spot.

Malraux, as we have said, was a tireless traveller and there were probably few works in his own imaginary museum that he had not seen *in situ*, including those in locations as far-flung (and, in practical terms, more so in his own lifetime) as Borobudur in Indonesia, Lung-Mên in China, and Palenque in Mexico. He willingly recognises, nevertheless, that photographic reproductions have played a vital part in familiarising us with the works of other cultures (and of course with many important works of the Western tradition scattered throughout the art museums of the world) and that everyone’s *musée imaginaire*, including his own, is indebted to a greater or lesser degree to illustrated art books and to television programs featuring works of art.<sup>51</sup> This raises the question of the role of photography and, more broadly, of what Malraux sometimes terms *l’audio-visuel* in the formation of the *musée imaginaire*, an issue which, as we shall discuss shortly, has been the subject of widespread misunderstanding.

Although he felt photography rarely did justice to architecture, especially in conveying the atmosphere and sense of space of inter-

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<sup>50</sup> See page 236.

<sup>51</sup> Malraux died before the Internet came into its own. There is little doubt that he would have welcomed it as an important new means of access to photographic reproductions of visual art.

iors,<sup>52</sup> Malraux was enthusiastic about its achievements in relation to painting and sculpture, and welcomed the technological advances that were permitting more and more faithful reproductions. With photography, the plastic arts had “invented their printing-press”.<sup>53</sup> Previous centuries needed to rely on engravings to gain some impression of works they were unable to see, and travel was then, of course, considerably more difficult. “Today,” Malraux writes (in 1951), “a student has access to colour reproductions of most of the world’s great paintings, can acquaint himself with a host of second rank works, archaic arts, Indian, Chinese and Pre-Columbian sculpture of the best periods, Romanesque frescos, ‘primitive’ and ‘folk’ art, and a fair quantity of Byzantine art”.<sup>54</sup> Malraux nowhere suggests that reproduction can simply *replace* the original (although there is little sign that he shares Walter Benjamin’s view that the original possesses a special “aura” *qua* original<sup>55</sup>) but he nonetheless insists on its importance. Just as the printing-press represented a quantum leap in the dissemination of written works, so photographic reproduction has been a giant step forward in promoting familiarity with the visual arts, and a vital force in the formation of the *musée imaginaire*.

It is vital to stress, however, that, despite the comments of certain critics to be considered shortly, the *musée imaginaire*, for Malraux, is not *simply* a vast collection of photographic reproductions or, in the words of one of the critics in question, a collection of “any work of art that can be photographed”.<sup>56</sup> The concept of the *musée imaginaire* has a much deeper meaning, and to appreciate it fully one needs to reflect briefly again on the fundamental significance Malraux places on art.

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<sup>52</sup> Malraux has sometimes been accused of neglecting architecture. In fact, where relevant, he refers to it quite frequently, often with great admiration. See, for example, *La Métamorphose des dieux*, 11–24. The fact that it receives less attention than painting and sculpture in his books on art is due to his feeling that still photography seldom did it justice, especially where interiors were concerned. He considered television to be more successful in this field. See *L’Intemporel*, 987, 988.

<sup>53</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 206.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> See note 37.

<sup>56</sup> Donald Crimp, “On the Museum’s Ruins,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 43–56, 50.

As we have said, art, for Malraux, whether visual art, music or literature,<sup>57</sup> is not simply a “representation of the world” – a kind of “artistic rendering” of objects and events located in some vaguely conceptualised “world around us”. Art is a response to a reality of a specific kind. It is a response to the same fundamental sense of arbitrariness and contingency that lies at the basis of absolutes such as religious faiths. It is a defence against the fundamental sense of bewilderment and insignificance evoked by the questions “Why does something exist rather than nothing?” and “Why has life taken this form?”<sup>58</sup>

In Malraux’s eyes, as we have seen, the door to the absolute has closed – at least for the present.<sup>59</sup> Western societies – and most Westernised societies<sup>60</sup> – have become essentially agnostic. Western man no longer has any response – at least any definitive response of the kind provided by an absolute – to the bewildering awareness that, in Berger’s words, “all this might not have been, might not have been as it is”.<sup>61</sup> The Christian (for example) knew that he was a sinner in the sight of God, but that was at least to know why all things are, and why they are the way they are – and there was, in any case, the promise of God’s redeeming love. The men and women of modern Western and Westernised cultures (and Malraux certainly includes himself here)

<sup>57</sup> The *musée imaginaire* is a concept Malraux applies to visual art in particular but the fundamental principles involved apply as much to literature and music. Cf. *L’Homme précaire et la littérature* 255, 256: “Although not confronting us with the same dramatic summons as the *musée imaginaire* – which has made us the inheritors of the art of the whole planet – literature interrogates us in much the same way.”

<sup>58</sup> See Chapters Two and Three.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Malraux’s comments in his interview with Guy Suarès in 1974 in the context of a discussion of the disappearance of the absolute: “The door is closed. We keep pushing against it, trying to break it down.” Shortly after, when asked about his hopes for the future, he replied: “I have no idea. And I will systematically exclude all prophecy from our conversation”. Suarès, *Malraux, celui qui vient*, 21, 22.

<sup>60</sup> Cf., for example, Malraux’s speech on the occasion of the Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres in Dakar in 1966 where he comments to his audience that “I do not think that any of my African friends – writers, poets, sculptors – experiences the art of the masks or the Ancestors as their creators did”. The gap is the same, he suggested, as that separating the modern European from the sculptors of the *Kings* at Chartres. André Malraux, “Préfaces, articles, allocutions: ‘Premier festival mondial des arts nègres, Dakar’,” in *Ecrits sur l’art (II)*, 1183.

<sup>61</sup> See page 54.

have no answers. There seems no “reason for it all”, no assurance of man’s place in the scheme of things, no “present help in time of need”.

Art, however, remains. Art, as we have seen, is not a religion, nor an absolute of any kind, and it provides no definitive answers.<sup>62</sup> But it does *create* a world (or, more accurately, a series of worlds) scaled to man’s measure, a world in which everything *has* a reason for being and for being as it is – a world in which, in Malraux’s words, “man senses, even if obscurely, that [he] has intruded into a realm in which he had previously been without significance”.<sup>63</sup> And even though located now within an agnostic culture, severed from all absolutes, this fundamental power of art has not been extinguished. Art post-Manet falls back on this power alone and although, as always, offering no definitive answers, can still manifest man’s power to “humanise” the world – to reject the crushing sense of insignificance inherent in a destiny-ridden universe (in the sense in which the word “destiny” has been previously defined). Art, Malraux writes, is “a series of provisional responses to a question that remains intact”<sup>64</sup> but its responses

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<sup>62</sup> See page 201. As indicated earlier, the art of the *irréel* did provide an absolute, but that is no longer the meaning of art for us today. See pages 142 to 165.

<sup>63</sup> See page 87.

<sup>64</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 887. The critic Claude Tannery has sought to mount a case that Malraux underwent a change of heart after *Les Voix du silence* and that he abandoned, or at least modified, the idea that art is an “anti-destiny”. His principal piece of evidence is a brief exchange in an interview Malraux gave to Roger Stéphane after the publication of *Les Voix du silence*, which reads: “Stéphane: André Gide has said that there is no problem to which art does not provide a sufficient response. *Malraux*: That’s just nonsense. Art resolves nothing. It only transcends.” Roger Stéphane, *André Malraux, entretiens et précisions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 101. This evidence, and the very limited additional arguments Tannery provides, are unconvincing. First, Malraux’s response needs to be taken in context: he is replying to what he clearly sees as an extravagant claim. Second, his theory of art is not in any case built around the idea that art “resolves” something. As noted in the present discussion, *Les Voix du silence* describes art as a series of “provisional responses to a question that remains intact”. Malraux’s rather cryptic additional comment (which Tannery does not mention) that “It only transcends” is probably an allusion to art’s power to conquer time through metamorphosis, as explained in Chapter Six. André Brincourt, who also disagrees with Tannery’s claim, points out *inter alia* that Malraux repeats the idea that art is an anti-destiny as late as his speech to the Maeght Foundation in 1974 and in *L’Intemporel* in 1976 (the year he died). (Brincourt, *Malraux, le malentendu*, 128, 141.) Cf. also Malraux’s remark in an interview in 1965 (many years after the

are nonetheless an affirmation of man's significance, not an acquiescence to his nothingness.

The *musée imaginaire* – each person's ideal selection of the works of art that are important to him or her – is therefore not simply a vast, imaginary collection of paintings and sculptures, whether originals or reproductions; and indeed if it were only that, one might well wonder why the idea should have merited the level of attention it has attracted. At its deepest level, the *musée imaginaire* has a *metaphysical* significance in the sense of that word, used previously in this study, in which it refers to man's fundamental sense of meaning or meaninglessness. Art, for Malraux, is an "anti-destiny" and the *musée imaginaire* is that collection of works (variable to some degree as we have said) in which, in our contemporary agnostic culture, the power of art<sup>65</sup> to affirm man's significance against destiny is most manifest. It is, to borrow the title of the last section of *Les Voix du silence*, the "small change"<sup>66</sup> that remains after the passing of the absolute: it is not an absolute itself, but nonetheless offers its votaries a sense of what Malraux describes as "that profound communion which would otherwise have passed away with the passing of the gods,"<sup>67</sup> "communion" here signifying a sense of belonging to a humanity – a human adven-

appearance of *Les Voix du silence*): "For me, art is essentially one of man's fundamental defences against destiny. This, it seems to me, is what the modern world is progressively coming to understand." Malraux, "Malraux: un nouveau musée imaginaire," 7. Cf. also the statement in *L'Homme précaire et la littérature*, published posthumously in 1977: "In a very powerful way, literature replaces destiny undergone by destiny mastered." Malraux, *L'Homme précaire et la littérature* 274. The abandonment of the idea that art is an anti-destiny would have meant the abandonment of a fundamental tenet of Malraux's theory of art. There is no sign of this. Indeed, the evidence is all the other way: the three volumes of *La Métamorphose des dieux* and Malraux's other writings on art following *Les Voix du silence* are further *explorations* of, not ruptures with, the ideas found in that work. Certainly, Tannery would require much stronger evidence than the brief and somewhat cryptic exchange he quotes from Stéphane's book. See Tannery, *Malraux: The Absolute Agnostic*, 234.

<sup>65</sup> As we have said, the *principe* involved here includes music and literature as well. Malraux speaks of a "musée" because his immediate subject is visual art, but one might just as readily speak of *collections imaginaires* of music or literature – aided in these cases by sound recordings and printing (and increasingly the Internet).

<sup>66</sup> "La Monnaie de l'absolu". The phrase has also been translated as "The Aftermath of the Absolute" which, while less exact, seems a reasonable alternative.

<sup>67</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 894.

ture – affirming itself against an indifferent universe.<sup>68</sup> “The *musée imaginaire*,” Malraux writes, “teaches us that destiny is threatened when a world of man, whatever form it may take, arises out of the world *tout court*”.<sup>69</sup>

It is important to stress these points because there is a widespread tendency among Malraux’s commentators to suggest that his concept of the *musée imaginaire* relates simply to photographic reproduction and its effects. As early as 1969, E.H. Gombrich wrote that “some time ago André Malraux launched the slogan of the ‘Museum without Walls’ to indicate the changes that have come about in our attitude to the art of the past through the ubiquity of photographs and other reproductions”.<sup>70</sup> Variations on this theme have been repeated many times since. In 1972, Cecil Jenkins saw Malraux’s “pivotal idea” as the “the Imaginary Museum ... this new photographic temple of art”.<sup>71</sup> Donald Crimp argued in the 1980s that photographic reproduction is the key idea of the *musée imaginaire*, even claiming that “any work of art that can be photographed can take its place in Malraux’s super-museum”.<sup>72</sup> More recently, Alberto Manguel has suggested in his book

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<sup>68</sup> It is important to bear in mind that, for Malraux, as we have seen, art affirms man as *human adventure* as earlier defined. Hal Foster makes the puzzling claim that “the subject” of the *musée imaginaire* is “the Family of Man.” Hal Foster, “Archives of Modern Art,” *October* 99 (2002): 93. The phrase is not explained but if it implies that Malraux views the *musée imaginaire* as revealing a notion of human *permanence* – an eternal, universal Man, there is no evidence to support such a proposition. As we have seen, Malraux had accepted the need for an understanding of man free of any “fixed point” as early as *D’une jeunesse européenne*; and the “human adventure” is, as discussed earlier, an image of man, *without eternity*, who lives and dies in time (see page 63). There is a clear distinction in Malraux’s thought between art and an absolute. (See, for example, pages 133, 201, 260.) Art establishes no permanent truths; it is “a series of provisional responses to a question that remains intact”.

<sup>69</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 887.

<sup>70</sup> E. H. Gombrich, “New Revelations on Fresco Painting,” in *Reflections on the History of Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 46-53, 53. The essay first appeared in *The New York Review of Books* in 1969.

<sup>71</sup> Cecil Jenkins, *André Malraux* (New York: Twayne, 1972), 128.

<sup>72</sup> Crimp, 50. Crimp argues later that there is a “fatal error” in Malraux’s thinking because he admits photography itself into the *musée imaginaire*. Malraux’s concept, he contends, thus becomes incoherent since “even photography cannot hypostatize style from a photograph” (“hypostatizing style” being, in Crimp’s view, what the *musée imaginaire* does via photography). Leaving aside the detail of this argument (whether photography “hypostatizes” styles), it is clear that the *premise* is mistaken –

*Reading Pictures* that the “rich display of reproduced images, open to us on page and screen, [is what] Malraux called ‘the imaginary museum’”,<sup>73</sup> while a contemporaneous study commented that “we should bear in mind what André Malraux has defined as the ‘museum without walls’, the recurring issue of reproduction”.<sup>74</sup> And in 2005, Matthew Kieran commented that “in a way we are already within Malraux’s imaginary museum. There is no end of beautifully produced art works in monographs on particular artists, movements or epochs”.<sup>75</sup>

All this is a serious oversimplification. Certainly, as we have said, Malraux believes that photographic reproduction plays a vital role in fostering familiarity with the visual arts, especially works difficult of access. It is visual art’s printing press. But important as this is, it is not the fundamental point. In principle, and although it would be handicapped, the *musée imaginaire* could exist *without* photography in these days of rapid and relatively affordable travel.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, although an incomplete substitute, the art museums of artistically well-endowed cities such as Paris, London and New York which exhibit major works from a variety of cultures within short distances of each other, togeth-

the apparent assumption that the *musée imaginaire* exists simply in virtue of a capacity to present works in photographed form. See Crimp, 51.

<sup>73</sup> Alberto Manguel, *Reading Pictures* (New York: Random House, 2000), 13.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Meecham and Julie Sheldon, *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), 206.

<sup>75</sup> Matthew Kieran, *Revealing Art* (London: Routledge, 2005), 8. Cf. Douglas Smith’s even more extreme claim that the *musée imaginaire* is “the exhaustive photographic archive of the art of all the civilizations of the world, both past and present, that will render the traditional physical museum, with its limited holdings and predominantly Western canon, redundant. In other words, the illustrated art book is to replace the museum”. Douglas Smith, “Funny Face: Humanism in Post-War French Photography and Philosophy” *French Cultural Studies* 16, no. 1 (2005): 45. Malraux nowhere suggests that the traditional museum will become “redundant” or that it will be “replaced” by the illustrated art book, and there is nothing in the logic of his position that would lead to such a conclusion. André Brincourt’s comment is to the point. He writes: “Malraux is not claiming that imaginary museums replace the works themselves. He is simply stating a fact. Reproductions exist and they contribute to a new approach.” Brincourt, *Malraux, le malentendu*, 104.

<sup>76</sup> Thus it is not even correct to say with Fredric Jameson that “the very proposition of some new ‘imaginary museum’ has as its fundamental precondition the existence of photography as a new technological medium”. Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 122.



er constitute a kind of *musée imaginaire* in microcosm. The crucial point, as we have said, is art's fundamental power to "humanise" the world. Photography has certainly played a vital role in making us aware of this power by providing high quality reproductions of an unprecedented range of works (just as sound recordings have with music); but photographic reproduction is, to borrow Malraux's own term, the "instrument"<sup>77</sup> of the *musée imaginaire*; it is not the thing itself. To suggest that "any work of art that can be photographed can take its place in Malraux's super-museum" or that the *musée imaginaire* is "the recurring issue of reproduction" – which suggests that it is little more than a well-stocked library of illustrated art books – is a trivialisation of Malraux's position. Important though photographic reproduction has been, there is much more at stake.

It should be added that Malraux does not regard the *musée imaginaire* as, in some way, his own invention. This observation may seem superfluous but, oddly enough, some critics tend to suggest that he somehow sees it in this light. Donald Crimp, as we have noted, speaks of "Malraux's super-museum"; Matthew Kieran refers to "Malraux's imaginary museum"; and it is not difficult to find other commentators who imply, unintentionally perhaps, that Malraux regards the "museum without walls" as his own creation – that is, as something that depends for its existence on his own theorisation of it. This also is a misunderstanding. For Malraux, the *musée imaginaire* is simply a fact of modern civilization, and something that has come into being quite independently of anything he might have thought or written. It is not "*Malraux's* super museum"; it is simply the context in which (if we accept his analysis) we view and respond to works of art in the modern world. In that sense, we do not *choose* whether or not a particular work will belong to the "museum without walls": if it is widely regarded as a work of art, and especially if it has been made accessible through photographic reproduction (although, as indicated, this is not essential), it *is there anyway*. It may of course be part of person A's imaginary museum and not of person B's – although as we have seen, Malraux believes there will be large areas of overlap. Due allowance made for such variations, however, the *musée imaginaire* is simply the context – the mental environment, so to speak – in which we view

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<sup>77</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 212.

works of art today, whether we are conscious of it or not. Malraux has certainly drawn attention to this development in a clear and emphatic way – and seems to have been the first to do so – but nothing he writes suggests that he regards it as an artefact of his own theory of art, or something that would not have existed in the absence of that theory.

This explanation, it is worth noting, helps us see the art museum – and the *musée imaginaire* as the art museum writ large, so to speak – in a positive and creative light, and dispels the sense of negativity and disquiet sometimes associated with the institution in recent decades. Theodore Adorno writes, for example, that

The German word “museal” [museum-like] has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are the family sepulchres of works of art.<sup>78</sup>

Similar ideas have occasionally coloured the views of Malraux’s own critics. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for instance, suggests that Malraux has forgotten that the artist is “a person at work”,<sup>79</sup> that he is a person, who in the words quoted earlier, is “in contact with his world”, whose “secret” does not lie “in some realm beyond his empirical life” but is “modestly confused with his perception of the world”.<sup>80</sup> On this basis, Merleau-Ponty claims that

The museum gives us a thieves’ conscience. We occasionally sense that these works were not after all intended to *end up* between these morose walls, for the pleasure of Sunday strollers or Monday “intellectuals”. We are well aware that something has been lost and that this meditative necropolis is not the true milieu of art – that so many joys and sorrows, so much anger, and so many labors were not *destined* one day to reflect the museum’s mournful light.<sup>81</sup>

An immediate problem here – a problem that also arose in our earlier consideration of both Merleau-Ponty’s and Blanchot’s commentaries on Malraux – is the meaning to be assigned to the word “world”.

<sup>78</sup> T.W. Adorno, “Valéry Proust Museum,” in *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986), 173–185, 175.

<sup>79</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 73.

<sup>80</sup> See page 104.

<sup>81</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 78. Italics in original. In a similar vein, William Righter protests that Malraux wants to isolate works of art in the “chill” of the museum where they risk becoming “abstract and bloodless”. Righter, 86, 87.

Although not defining his usage with any precision, at least in the article under discussion, Merleau-Ponty appears to imply that the world, or “empirical life”, he has in mind – the world Malraux is alleged to have forgotten – is the world of what, in the same article, he terms “visible things”,<sup>82</sup> and that (as one might expect, given his own theoretical orientation) he regards art as somehow closely linked to processes of physical perception and to various forms of concrete human activity (such as “work”). If this is what Merleau-Ponty means, one can perhaps understand why he might argue that the art museum is a “necropolis”, since presumably one might claim that a “world” or “empirical life” of that kind seems divorced from the art museum. As we have seen, however, Malraux’s thinking does not proceed along those lines at all. He has not “forgotten” the world to which Merleau-Ponty refers; he simply views it in a different light. For Malraux, the world of “visible things” and transient events is not at all art’s “true milieu”: where art is concerned, *that* world is the incoherent world of appearances – a dictionary at most – which the artist seeks to *replace* with a rival, unified world affirming man’s presence. There is, in other words, a parting of ways between Malraux and Merleau-Ponty at a fundamental level – of which the latter appears unaware. The premise of Merleau-Ponty’s criticism is a premise Malraux simply would not accept.

More importantly for present purposes, Malraux’s own theoretical position leads to a very different understanding of the role of the art museum. Far from being a necropolis – or a mausoleum or sepulchre as Adorno would have it – the art museum (and the *musée imaginaire*) is, in Malraux’s view, the context in which, in contemporary Western culture, works of art *come most fully to life*. Malraux’s thinking here follows directly from his fundamental claim, discussed in the previous chapter, that “metamorphosis is the very life of the work of art”, and the point can perhaps be best explained through reflecting briefly on that earlier analysis. As we saw, Malraux argues that Graeco-Roman art, disdained for a millennium, was resuscitated through a metamorphosis brought about by the emerging forms of Renaissance art.

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<sup>82</sup> He writes for example: “As long as [the artist] paints, his painting concerns visible things.” Merleau-Ponty, 73.

The “dialogue” (to use Malraux’s term<sup>83</sup>) between prevailing forms and the forms of an earlier culture ceased to be a dialogue of the deaf and the latter were “recalled to life” speaking the new language of “art” – the language of an exalted, imaginary world – first hinted at by Giotto. In that context, the dialogue involved two cultures only – Renaissance Italy and Graeco-Roman Antiquity. The aesthetic revolution post-Manet has, however, brought about a dialogue between the works of *all* cultures, based this time on a radically different concept of art founded exclusively on art’s fundamental power to create an autonomous world. Thus, the art museum, which brings together a range of works from different cultures possessing this power, is, in Malraux words, “a confrontation of metamorphoses”.<sup>84</sup> It reveals the modern, universal world of art in its most vital form, accentuating *both* the newly discovered common language of art *and* the specific features of the autonomous worlds that each work embodies. Far from being “in the process of dying” as Adorno argues, the varied exhibits of the art museum (and the *musée imaginaire*) are therefore, in Malraux’s eyes, *animated* – in the two senses indicated – by the dialogue fostered by the context in which they are placed. Viewed in this light, the art museum is the very reverse of a “mausoleum”. On the contrary, it is a key part of the very dynamic of the modern world of art – the locus of a colloquy in which all participants speak the same language and in which new light is thrown on each contribution by the contributions of the others.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> See page 204.

<sup>84</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 204. André Brincourt offers an interpretation similar to that given here when he writes that “imaginary museums allow us to ... see works as living forms, that is to say as forms that change continually, that ... can take on very different aspects according to the conditions in which we see them – in which we *confront* them”. Brincourt, *Malraux, le malentendu*, 104.

<sup>85</sup> This is particularly the case when it involves superior works of quite different styles. Thus Malraux can write: “The dialogue between frankly opposing forms is richer in intimations than that between a genius and his lesser followers. It is when we confront [Michelangelo’s] *Night* or his *Rondanini Pietà* with a New Hebridean figure or a Dogon mask that we appreciate their significance most intensely.” *Les Voix du silence*, 863. One should perhaps add that although, for brevity, Malraux often speaks in terms of “the museum” in contexts such as this, his frame of reference is usually the larger *musée imaginaire* which, as we have said, takes in works *outside* the museum as well. Critics have sometimes misunderstood this point, suggesting that Malraux is intent on removing all works from their original contexts and placing them in art

Merleau-Ponty's comment raises another issue relevant to present concerns. He writes, as we have seen, that "we occasionally sense that these works were not after all intended to *end up* between these morose walls" and that "we are well aware that ... so many joys and sorrows, so much anger, and so many labors were not *destined* one day to reflect the museum's mournful light". (The emphases are Merleau-Ponty's.) Since this claim forms part of a commentary on Malraux, one is presumably entitled to assume that Merleau-Ponty ascribes the view he is criticising to Malraux and that he assumes Malraux *does* regard the art museum (or the *musée imaginaire*) as the context in which art is destined to "end up" – its ultimate destination where it finds its definitive expression. Signs of similar thinking can be detected in Maurice Blanchot's essay on Malraux and the art museum, where he writes that

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museums. One writes for example: "Museums, [Malraux] believed, revealed truths about the human condition in general that leaving art in its original, specific and sacred contexts could not." Kevin Hetherington, "Museum," *Theory, Culture & Society*, no. 23 (2006.): 598. This is misleading on two grounds. First, as he makes clear early in *La Métamorphose des dieux*, Malraux fully accepts that many important works (such as the sculptures at Chartres or the frescos at Assisi) could never be moved into museums and would always need to be visited *in situ* or viewed via photographic reproductions. (Cf. page 256.) He nowhere suggests that our responses to such works suffer as a result. Second, even when remaining in their original physical contexts, such works, he argues, are, nevertheless, usually divorced from the *cultural* contexts in which they originally functioned: for example, they have ceased to be religious images and have become "works of art". Thus, they take their place in the *musée imaginaire* irrespective of where they might be. Placement in museums certainly facilitates the kinds of "colloquies" we have discussed (although, even then, only with other works in the same museum); it is not, however, a necessary condition for participation in the *musée imaginaire*. The suggestion by Griselda Pollock that "Malraux regrets the museum as desacralizing" because it "extracts" objects from their original contexts and turns them into "art" is similarly misleading. For Malraux, the birth of "art" in the modern sense is, as we have seen, due to cultural changes more fundamental than the emergence of the art museum (although he sees the art museum in its modern form as a natural complement to those changes). And there is no suggestion anywhere in his writing (or in his work as Minister for Cultural Affairs) that he "regrets" the art museum. Indeed, the evidence is all the other way. Griselda Pollock, "Un-Framing the Modern: Critical Space/Public Possibility," in *Museums after Modernism: Strategies of Engagement*, ed. G. Pollock and J. Zemans (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 1–39, 15,16.

It is clear that for Malraux, and doubtless for each of us, the present time is not – insofar as the plastic arts are concerned – an era like others. It is the radiant world of “the first time”. For the first time art is revealed both in its essence and its totality – both closely related. Art abandons everything it was not and extends to everything it has been.<sup>86</sup>

These ideas are misleading. The art museum, in Malraux’s eyes, certainly offers us that range of objects which – due allowance made for differences in preferences – we today, in our contemporary agnostic culture, regard as works of art; and if, more broadly, one thinks of the *musée imaginaire*, this includes works both inside and outside the walls of art museums, as diverse as the paintings of Picasso, Giotto’s frescos, the mosaics at Ravenna, the *Victory of Samothrace*, the frescos at Ajanta, and the cave paintings at Lascaux. But this in no sense implies a definitive state of affairs – a *terminus ad quem* where art “ends up” or to which it was “destined” in Merleau-Ponty’s words. Malraux is quite explicit on this point. “The *musée imaginaire* is not eternal,”<sup>87</sup> he writes, and “should a new absolute emerge, a large part of this treasured heritage would doubtless fade away like a shadow”.<sup>88</sup> Or, more specifically:

If it became generally accepted that the supreme purpose of art is (for instance) to serve politics, or to act on its audience in the manner of the advertisement, the art museum and our artistic heritage would be transformed in under a century.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Blanchot, 27. Blanchot’s comment seems to have exerted some influence. Henri Godard quotes the second two sentences and suggests (contrary to what will be argued here) that they are an accurate reflection of Malraux’s thinking. Godard, *L’Expérience existentielle de l’art*, 108. Jean-Claude Larrat appears to give qualified support to Blanchot’s view, suggesting that Malraux “sometimes” posits an “apotheosis of art finally recognised for its own sake, and no longer the auxiliary of idols, myths and sublimations of all kinds to which it had been subordinated for so long”. Jean-Claude Larrat, “En relisant Maurice Blanchot: le musée, l’œuvre et la métamorphose,” in *Les Ecrits sur l’art d’André Malraux*, ed. Jeanyves Guérin and Julien Dieudonné (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2006), 159–180, 162. Jean-Pierre Zarader comments that “the Musée Imaginaire ‘delivers’ the work from the religious or profane content it first possessed, and with which it was first identified. Thus displaced from its original context, the work finds its proper location. It is in this sense that the Musée Imaginaire is the *place* of art: here the work finds its true essence ...” Zarader, *Le Vocabulaire de Malraux* (Paris: Ellipses, 2001), 48. Emphasis in original.

<sup>87</sup> André Malraux, *La Tête d’obsidienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 240.

<sup>88</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 696.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

Malraux, in short, accepts the full consequences of his theory of art. Consistent with his fundamental position, he recognises that the modern notion of a “work of art” and the responses associated with it are *themselves* subject to metamorphosis and potential consignment to a limbo of forgotten things. This is not a prediction, in the sense of a statement about an historical inevitability. As we have seen, the future of a work is always unpredictable: it is an adventure launched onto the unknown seas of the human future. Malraux, however, makes no attempt to evade the implications of his thinking. If metamorphosis is “the very life of the work of art”, the responses evoked today by any given work – whether it be a painting by Picasso, a fourteenth century Christian fresco, a Byzantine mosaic, a Hellenistic votive statue, a Buddhist fresco, or Palaeolithic cave art – are no less subject to the consequences of metamorphosis than those which that work evoked (or failed to evoke) at any time since the moment of its creation. The emergence of a new absolute might well, therefore, usher in a change sweeping enough to cause much of our treasured *musée imaginaire* to “fade away like a shadow” – perhaps to re-emerge at some future time, though once again with a different, and quite unforeseeable, significance.<sup>90</sup> Art in the fundamental sense of the creation of a rival, autonomous world may take a multitude of forms, and the modern form in which it is *nothing but that* is no more definitive, no more an “end”, than were the forms it adopted in early Renaissance Italy, Byzantium, Greece, Buddhist India, or prehistoric times, when the “other world” it embodied was of a very different order. The modern world of art represented in today’s art museums is certainly a world of “the first time” in Blanchot’s words because, as Malraux frequently reminds us, the “universal world of art” that dawned in the closing years of the nineteenth century, and has flourished since, is unprecedented: there has been nothing like it before. But while it may be a “first”, Malraux is by no means suggesting that it is a “last”, and if Blanchot’s claim that “for the first time art is revealed both in its essence and its totality” is intended to imply that art has arrived at an

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<sup>90</sup> François de Saint-Cheron expresses the point well when he writes: “Metamorphosis does not only assure ‘the presence in life of what should belong to death’, it is also the unknown language that the work may yet speak in times to come: metamorphosis is the unpredictable life on which a work embarks from the moment of its creation.” François de Saint-Cheron, *L’Esthétique de Malraux* (Paris: Sedes, 1996), 45.

end-point (his claim, like much of his essay, is not as clear as one would like) this would conflict with Malraux's thinking at a fundamental level and is, as we have seen, contradicted by Malraux's own quite specific statements. Neither modern art itself nor the contemporary universal world of art *in toto*, is an end-point in Malraux's eyes, and there is no suggestion anywhere in his writings that modern Western culture is witnessing a kind of apotheosis of art – as if we today were able, for the first time, to witness art as it was always “destined” to be.<sup>91</sup>

The point merits emphasis because here again one sees why Malraux's theory of art presents such a radical challenge to traditional aesthetics. A clear implication of his thinking is that art as we now know it – the contents of our *musée imaginaire* and the associated concept of art – can no more be regarded as a permanent feature on the human landscape than art as previously understood in the post-Renaissance period, or as responded to in earlier times and other cultures when the very concept of art was unknown. This is not, one should stress, a “death of art” thesis in the manner of, say, Hegel or Arthur Danto (for whom different considerations apply as we shall see later), and Malraux, as we have seen, is not making a *prediction* about the future of art. The proposition that the Western notion of art is inherently transient is, nonetheless, a fundamental challenge to traditional thinking in aesthetics. Since its inception as a formal area of philosophical inquiry in the eighteenth century, the discipline of aesth-

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<sup>91</sup> The contrast here with Walter Benjamin is worth noting. As noted earlier, Benjamin, in his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, proposes, in effect, a two-stage historical process: art was originally cultic; now, in the age of technological reproduction, it is emancipated from “its parasitical subservience to ritual”. See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (second version),” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19–55, 24, 25. Malraux's account differs in at least three respects. First, for Malraux, there is no suggestion that the relationship between art and an absolute (such as Christian faith) is “parasitical”; second, for Malraux there is in principle *no* finite number of stages: the future of art is unknown and unknowable; and third, as we shall stress in Chapter Nine, Malraux is not speaking, as Benjamin appears to be, in terms of an *historical theory*. As indicated earlier, the foundations of Malraux's theory of art are essentially metaphysical.



etics (or the philosophy of art) has, explicitly or implicitly, treated art and the human responses associated with it (however defined) as, in effect, anthropological “givens” – universal and permanent aspects of human activity and experience. Opinions about the *nature* of art have, of course, varied widely; but, setting aside writers such as Hegel and Danto who envisage a “death of art” in some form, the possibility that the very subject of inquiry – “art” – might denote a form of human endeavour that is inherently *impermanent*, and that art as we now know it, or have known it since the Renaissance, is a phenomenon no more definitive than, for example, the state of mind that saw many of the objects we now regard as art adored or feared as gods, has never been seriously entertained. For thinkers as different in their approaches as Hume, Kant, Taine, Croce, Collingwood, Clive Bell, Adorno and, more recently, writers of the Anglo-American school of “analytic” aesthetics, art and the human response to art are treated, implicitly or explicitly, as permanent features of human experience.<sup>92</sup> The possibility that this might not be so is simply not raised. A key feature of Malraux’s account, as we can now see, is that he calls this basic assumption into question. He is not suggesting that the fundamental urge to resist the chaos of appearances through the creation of a rival, unified world has not persisted throughout the ages, but this urge, he argues, has by no means always manifested itself as “art” (and in fact has done so only relatively recently in terms of human history as a whole). Art as we now know it, or as it was known pre-Manet, is in Malraux’s eyes no more permanent – no more an anthropological universal – than the emotions, long since lost in time, that the ancient Egyptians experienced as they made offerings to the image of their God-King, or even than those, now only dimly understood, of the assembled faithful who first worshipped before the Torcello *Virgin* (Fig. 6) or Giotto’s frescos at Assisi. This is not to suggest, one should stress, that Malraux is seeking to devalue art as we know it today. On the contrary, he regards it, as we have seen, as one of the ways in which man defends himself against his fundamental, metaphysical sense of bewilderment and insignificance. It is an “anti-destiny” in the sense defined earlier. Malraux is arguing, nonetheless, that the present

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<sup>92</sup> Some writers are quite explicit. Cf., for example, the earlier discussion of Denis Dutton’s article “But they don’t have our concept of art”. See page 169.

manifestation of the urge to create a rival, coherent world is ultimately only one possibility among others – no more definitive than those that preceded it, or which, perhaps, may follow. Art, as we experience it today, or as it was experienced pre-Manet, is not a permanent feature of human experience; it is subject to further, endless metamorphosis. Indeed, art as we now know it, Malraux is suggesting, *defines us* as much as we define it because it is a form of human response *specific to us* – specific to modern, agnostic, Western culture and its fundamental needs.

This analysis shows, incidentally, how futile it would be from Malraux's standpoint to try to formulate rules separating art from non-art – that is, to establish fixed boundaries separating objects which, in the terminology of analytic aesthetics, should “count” as art from those that should not. Not only is art, for Malraux, always creation in the full sense of the term – so that it becomes art not through what it perpetuates but through what it invents<sup>93</sup> – but, as we can now see, the very notion of art as we know it today, and the range of objects it encompasses, are themselves inherently transient. Under the previous dispensation, pre-Manet, when art signified (briefly put) a harmonious imaginary world, the “rules” of art excluded a wide range of objects that now figure prominently in our contemporary imaginary museum (for example, the statues at Chartres, the mosaics at Ravenna, and Pre-Columbian art). Prior to that – in Egypt or Africa for instance – the very notion of rules separating art from non-art would have been incomprehensible for the simple reason that the notion of art itself was non-existent. And the future, Malraux is arguing, is entirely unpredictable – and may well see a major transformation, or even the disappearance, of the notion of art familiar to us today, leading to the emergence of something quite unlike our contemporary imaginary museum. For Malraux, in other words, the attempt to capture and “freeze” art once and for all in a system of rules separating it from non-art (“recognition criteria” for art, in one writer's phrase<sup>94</sup>) would be the pursuit of a chimera; and this would apply as much to what analytic aesthetics calls “extrinsic” rules<sup>95</sup> (since an “artworld” implies

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<sup>93</sup> See page 126.

<sup>94</sup> See Dutton, “A Naturalist Definition of Art,” 367–377.

<sup>95</sup> See page 220.

a community thinking in terms of current notions of art) as it would to “intrinsic” rules based (for example) on notions of “harmony”, “balance” or “beauty”.<sup>96</sup> For Malraux, there is no “essence” of art apart from the urge to create – the possibility of creating – a rival world different in kind from the fleeting world of appearances, and this can find expression just as readily in cultural contexts in which the notion of art is, as now, taken more or less for granted as it can in contexts in which, in his words, that notion has “never crossed men’s minds”.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Stephen Davies, to give one example, claims that properties “such as beauty, balance, tension, elegance, serenity, energy, grace, vivacity” constitute a “trans-cultural notion of the aesthetic”. Stephen Davies, “Non-Western Art and Art’s Definition,” in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 199–216, 207.

<sup>97</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 764.

## Chapter Eight

### The Anti-Arts

“... la fausse peinture *est née*.”<sup>1</sup>

Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Intemporel*

This chapter examines what Malraux terms the arts of mere delectation, or *les arts d’assouvissement* (arts of gratification), or at times the “anti-arts”. In a sense the chapter is something of an interlude. The broad aim of the present study, as indicated earlier, is to examine the major elements of Malraux’s theory of art, and the question of the “anti-arts” is perhaps not as central to his thinking as those considered to this point. There are, however, three good reasons for its inclusion: it links up directly with the issues discussed so far and throws further light on them; it has been the subject of frequent critical misinterpretation; and it is of immediate relevance to the modern world in which we live. Thus, although an interlude, the chapter is nonetheless an important one.

To engage with Malraux’s thought in this area, one needs to recall his account of the collapse of Christian belief discussed in Chapter Five. He argues, as we saw there, that after a lengthy period of gradual decline, Christian faith received its *coup de grâce* at the hands of the eighteenth century *philosophes*. For the first time, he wrote, “a religion was being threatened otherwise than by the birth of another,” the result eventually being the emergence of an agnostic culture – a culture no longer under the sway of any absolute, religious or secular. As discussed, Malraux then went on to argue that this development had major repercussions in the field of art, leading, from Manet onwards, to a form of painting no longer linked to any value outside itself, and also, as a consequence, to the immense resurrection which made possible “the first universal world of art”.

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<sup>1</sup> “... false painting *was born*”. Malraux’s italics.



Fig. 27. Horace Vernet, *Napoleon at the Battle of Jena* (1836)

Versailles, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, (C) RMN/© Droits réservés.

“... Vernet, proud of his exact uniforms painted in the name of reality.”  
Malraux, *L’Intemporel*, 711.

These, however, were not the only effects in the domain of art of the dawning of an agnostic culture. Another major consequence, Malraux argues, was the emergence of new visual, literary, and musical forms for which the death-blow to the Christian absolute acted, in effect, as a death blow *to art itself* – forms which, for the first time in human history (with certain minor exceptions to be mentioned shortly) *abandoned the fundamental ambition on which art rests*. There were, in other words, two unprecedented developments emerging in parallel. Alongside the new trails blazed by Manet, Cézanne and others, and beginning somewhat before them with painters such as Horace Vernet (Fig. 27), there appeared a new school of painting – often termed the nineteenth century “Academic” school, or “Salon painting” – which

simply accepted the disappearance of fundamental values, made no attempt, like Manet, to discover a new form of art that could respond to this predicament, and aspired to nothing more than *acquiescence* to the world of appearances. Here, for the first time, Malraux argues, the word “vision”, often employed ambiguously in the field of art theory (because frequently conflated with the idea of an artist’s interpretation) takes on a quite precise meaning. The painter’s aim now was to depict the world *simply as the eye sees it* – the eye without the mind (that is, without any attempt to create a rival, unified world).<sup>2</sup> The goal was no longer – as it had been with the mosaics of Byzantium, the frescos of Giotto, the paintings of Picasso and so much else – to create a rival world *proof against* the world of fleeting appearances. The goal now was simply submission to, and complicity with, that world, resulting in an “art” of a reality not created but *imposed* – an art that evoked not veneration or admiration, but simply the pleasures of the sensations. Thus, Malraux argues, it was not only genuine painting that underwent a radical change at this time, beginning with Manet; so also did false painting. Or, more accurately, he writes, “false painting *was born*”.<sup>3</sup>

A leading characteristic of this school was a new form of illusionism – an illusionism that abandoned the pursuit of pictorial unity. European painting, Malraux argues, had made extensive use of different forms of illusionism for some four hundred years,<sup>4</sup> but at no stage had this been allowed to undermine the fundamental *unity* of the work. The precise drawing of the human figures in thirteenth and fourteenth century paintings, for example, had matched “the minute detail of the landscapes in the background”; and in Venetian painting “the aggressive relief of the principal figures links up with the calligraphy of the distant silhouettes”.<sup>5</sup> The new form of illusionism sponsored by “Salon” or “Official” painting (Malraux often uses the latter term to highlight the powerful influence at the time of France’s Ministry of Fine Arts and Académie des Beaux-Arts) destroyed this unity, replacing it with a purely optical, “stereoscopic” relief based on

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<sup>2</sup> *L’Intemporel*, 713.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 706. Malraux’s italics.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. pages 142 to 148.

<sup>5</sup> *L’Intemporel*, 717.

the separation of planes like the scenery in a stage setting, the focus resting on specific figures or objects.<sup>6</sup> Hence, Malraux argues, the sense of *intrusiveness* found in many such works – the uneasy sense that the subjects are somehow “visitors” in the painting, not *part* of it – not unified with it. Hence too, he writes, “the hard-to-conceal sexuality of many of these works despite the outward show of chastity,” the optical vision inevitably evoking a sense of real bodies located in a physical world.<sup>7</sup>

It is here, Malraux argues, and not as a catalyst in the emergence of modern art (as one popular idea has it), that one sees the principal influence of the new technology of photography. Photography gave a powerful impetus to Official painting because it, too, offered an implacably optical image of the world free of any unifying principle: it was a way of “grasping reality,” Malraux writes, “without conferring order on it”.<sup>8</sup> In a very real sense, he suggests, photography was an invention whose time had come, appearing precisely at the moment when European culture – or at least a large part of it – was in search of “images free of all values”.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, alongside the art of Manet and those who followed in his footsteps, there emerged, for the first time, a form of painting (and literature and music<sup>10</sup>) that represented an abandonment of the fund-

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 715–726.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 717, 724.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 743.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* Malraux would therefore disagree with Lyotard’s comment that “[photography] was only putting the final touch to the program of ordering the visible elaborated by the Quattrocento”. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 74.

<sup>10</sup> Malraux makes it clear that he does not see this development as restricted to visual art alone. He writes for example: “The intoxication that every publisher (and author) of crime stories hopes to induce in his readers is different in kind from the effect produced by the adventures of *Don Quixote*”; and “Toselli wants to get his music played and achieves it by a sentimental sexuality”. Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, 767. Cf. also *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, 262: “The physiological effect crime stories have on the reader is quite alien to the purpose of genuine literature. People mix them all together in libraries, nonetheless, thinking that Stendhal (for example) simply has more talent than the crime story writer ... But we will soon come to see that genuine literature and so-called popular novels (adventure, crime stories, historical tales, romances) are not separated by a difference in talent, of degree, but of *function*. The only common factor between the crime story and genuine literature is the printing press.” Malraux’s emphasis.

amental purpose of art. It was an art of passing gratification alone – of delectation, of mere entertainment. “No school so futile is known to us,” Malraux writes, “though something of the kind may have existed in Rome before the Retrogression and in China after the end of the Ming Dynasty,” adding, “All true painters, all those for whom painting is a value, were nauseated by these pictures – *Portrait of a Great Surgeon Operating* and the like – because they saw in them not a form of painting, but the negation of painting”.<sup>11</sup> As we have seen, Malraux defines all artistic styles as “significations ... [that replace] the unknown scheme of things by the coherence they impose on all they ‘represent’”.<sup>12</sup> He thus describes the form of painting now in question as a “universal antistyle”<sup>13</sup> – universal because it appeals simply to vision, not to the mind (and thus eliminates any question of values – exclusive or not); and “antistyle” because it renounces any ambition of imposing coherence on the world of appearances, content merely to yield to it. Painting, literature and music of this kind, are “in no sense just inferior arts”, Malraux argues, “but operating as they do in the opposite direction to all true art, might be called anti-arts”.<sup>14</sup> Such works differ from true art *toto caelo*. “If one day,” he writes, “our works of art are the sole survivors of a Europe blasted out of recognition and lost to memory, the historians of that age will be led to assume that in Paris between 1870 and 1914 there existed two antagonistic civilizations, in water-tight compartments”.<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 28 and Fig. 29).

This is not just a thing of the past. Gradually, Malraux argues, the Official style lost out in the field of painting because technological advances such as colour photography, and especially the cinema, provided much more effective ways of achieving the same aims. Thus,

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<sup>11</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 734, 735.

<sup>12</sup> See page 82.

<sup>13</sup> *L'Intemporel*, 746.

<sup>14</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 771. The term “anti-art” has sometimes been applied to the Dada movement and aspects of Surrealism on the grounds that they involved a protest against the very idea of art. This (semi-political) meaning is quite different from Malraux’s usage.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 734.





Fig. 28. Léon Bonnat, *Madame Albert Cahen d'Anvers* (1891)

Bayonne, Musée Bonnat. (C) RMN/© René-Gabriel Ojéda.

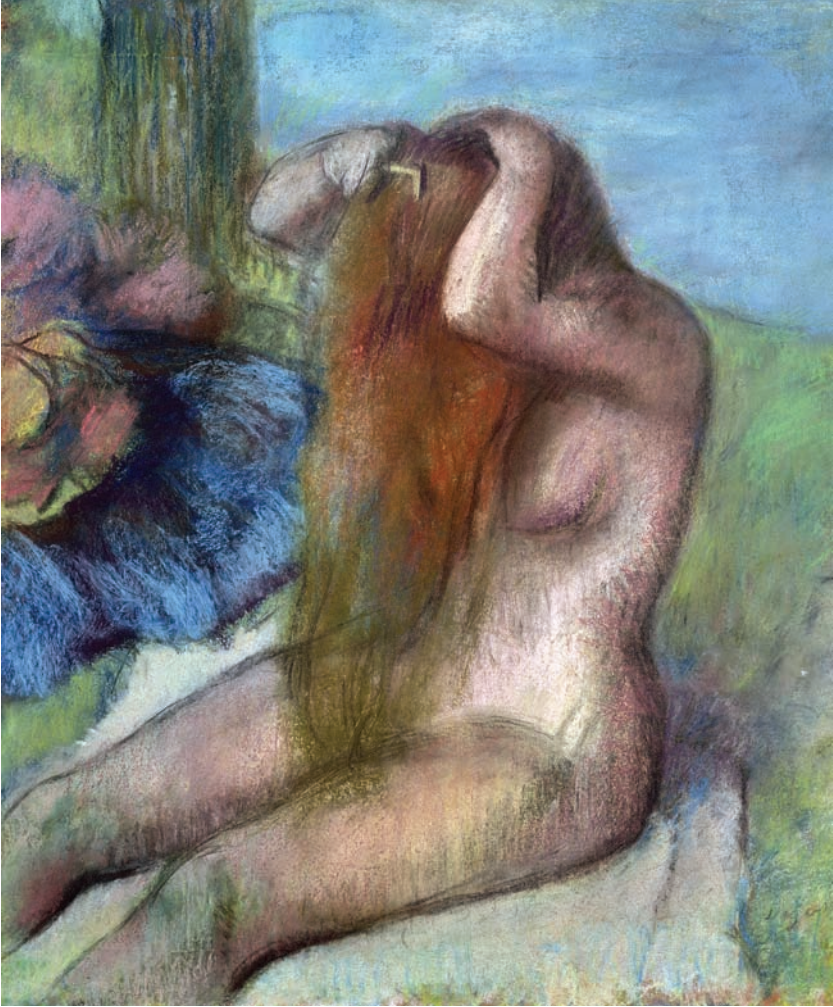


Fig. 29. Degas, *Woman doing her Hair* (c.1895)

Private Collection/ Photo © Lefevre Fine Art Ltd., London/ The Bridgeman Art Library.

“Between Giotto and the Gaddi [followers of Giotto] there is a difference of talent; between Degas and his contemporary Bonnat there is a schism.”  
Malraux, *Les Voix du silence*, 761.

suitably modernised, the anti-arts now dominate the fields of popular illustrated magazines, the cinema, popular music and fiction, and of course television. The Official aesthetic, Malraux writes, “has been expelled from painting, but elsewhere it reigns supreme”. While the paintings of Rochegrosse and Bouguereau have faded into obscurity, their spirit flourishes and “more than holds its own against reproductions of Picasso”.<sup>16</sup>

Critical commentary has frequently distorted these elements of Malraux’s thinking. E.H. Gombrich produces a thoroughly garbled account when he writes that, for Malraux, “modern art came into being as a protest against the commercial pseudo-art of prettiness”<sup>17</sup> – a comment that deftly confuses two quite distinct components of Malraux’s thought. Modern art for Malraux – the art that began with Manet – was no more a protest against “pseudo-art” than it was a protest against photography. *Both* modern art and Academic painting (and its contemporary avatars) are, as we have seen, responses to a much more profound development in Western culture – the death of the Christian absolute – the crucial difference being that while the former discovered a new form of art that could flourish *as art* in the absence of an absolute, the latter capitulated, abandoned the central purposes of art, and settled for an anti-art. Although Malraux writes that “all those for whom painting is a value were nauseated by these pictures,” the idea that modern art began as a “protest against” Academic art is quite alien to his argument.

Denis Boak offers the equally misleading observation that

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 766. This is not a blanket condemnation of all cinema (or photography). For example, Malraux admired the work of Eisenstein, wrote an essay on the psychology of the cinema, and directed his own film based on episodes from his novel *L’Espoir*. The concluding sections of *L’Intemporel* also make it clear that he saw enormous potential in documentaries on visual art. But as he notes from time to time, the cinema is for the most part an industry. “Dream factories did not exist until modern times,” he writes; and “The cinema did not come into being to serve humanity, but to earn money.” Malraux, “Préfaces, articles, allocutions: ‘Premier festival mondial des arts nègres, Dakar’,” 1187.

<sup>17</sup> Gombrich, “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” 83.

Simple pleasure in artistic beauty – “delectation” – is ... rejected. Malraux exhibits the same contempt for the “arts d’assouvissement” as Sartre for the “romans de consommation”, and the word “beauté” rarely occurs in his works.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, as we have seen, the idea of beauty plays an important part in Malraux’s thinking, but specifically in connection with the period of Western art which he terms the *irréel* – the period from Botticelli to Delacroix in which art aspired to be the expression of “a harmonious imaginary world”. In this context, as he makes clear in an early section of *Les Voix du silence* and in the second volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux (L’Irréel)*, the notion of beauty – and the related idea of *le beau idéal* – was central both to the aspirations of artists and to the very concept of art itself as then envisaged. Malraux is by no means “contemptuous” of the art of this period (although he argues, as we have seen, that the metamorphosis it has undergone presents it to us today in a different light<sup>19</sup>). Indeed, some of the artists he praises most highly – Botticelli, Michelangelo, Titian, Tintoretto, Poussin, and Delacroix, for instance – belong to this very period of Western art. More importantly in the present context, there is a clear distinction in Malraux’s theory of art between the art of the *irréel* and the *arts d’assouvissement* – the anti-arts. As we have seen, he views the latter as products of an abandonment of the central purposes of art, and to this extent they are certainly worthy of “contempt” – which is precisely how they were regarded by the artists who followed in the footsteps of Manet. But the former were, in Malraux’s vocabulary, the works of “true artists”, and no less so for their embodiment of a world of harmony and beauty than were the works of Van Gogh, Picasso, or Miro, for example, whose purpose is quite different. Like Gombrich, Boak manages to confuse two quite separate elements of Malraux’s thinking and, as with Gombrich, the misinterpretation spills over into other issues as well.

Distortions of this aspect of Malraux’s thinking show no sign of abating. A contemporary French critic, Stéphane Guégan, writes that Malraux “condemns” the *arts d’assouvissement*

with hints of the kind of Puritanism that would have made Bataille smile. These arts, Malraux says, show a will to seduce, to play on the emotions, or deceive,

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<sup>18</sup> Boak, 181.

<sup>19</sup> See page 247.

through means he regards as alien to autonomous art. His blacklist lumps together a certain mannerism, all Italian Baroque, the Bolognese painters of the seventeenth century, the English portraitists, Boucher and Greuze, David, Romanticism, etc. The great realists, from Caravaggio to Courbet, only escape proscription because their genius transcended their corrupted aesthetic.<sup>20</sup>

There is no space to discuss this alleged blacklist in detail but some of its inaccuracies are blatant. Malraux's admiration for Delacroix – surely a Romantic – is unmistakable (as is, incidentally his admiration for many authors and composers of the Romantic period). It is not clear who exactly Guégan has in mind in his reference to “a certain mannerism”, but it *is* clear that in *L'Irréel* Malraux writes at considerable length – with the help of some excellent reproductions – on mannerist painters such as Pontormo, Rosso, Parmigianino, and Primaticcio and that his account exhibits none of the features one might associate with “condemnation”.<sup>21</sup> And while Malraux is certainly selective in his enthusiasm for English painters (Guégan mentions no names so it is difficult to comment further) and for the works of Caravaggio<sup>22</sup> and Courbet, there is again no sign of any blanket condemnation; and, indeed, as we have seen earlier, Malraux proposes Courbet's *The Painter's Studio* as a worthy candidate for an “ideal museum”.<sup>23</sup>

The errors do not end there. As we have seen, Malraux's thinking in relation to the *arts d'assouvissement* primarily concerns nineteenth century Salon painters – figures such as Cabanel (Fig. 14), Bonnat, Bouguereau, Rochegrosse, Cormon, Détaille, and Bonnencontre,<sup>24</sup> and their successor photographic and cinematic anti-arts. He does on occasion refer to certain earlier painters such as Boucher and Greuze (who figure on Guégan's list), and to the late Hellenistic artists of Alexandria, who also tended to rely heavily on sentimentality and/or

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<sup>20</sup> Guégan: 89.

<sup>21</sup> During his tenure as Minister for Cultural Affairs, Malraux initiated the restoration of the frescos of Rosso and Primaticcio in the Galerie François I<sup>er</sup> at the Château de Fontainebleau.

<sup>22</sup> Malraux includes a discussion of the work of Caravaggio in *Les Voix du silence*. He clearly regards him as an important artist but one who perhaps failed to achieve his full potential. See *Les Voix du silence*, esp. 604, 605.

<sup>23</sup> See page 234.

<sup>24</sup> As well as the somewhat later “official” art of the Soviet era, which Malraux saw in the same terms. See *Les Voix du silence*, 766, 777.

sensuality, but he treats these as isolated and episodic forerunners. The decisive development in Malraux's eyes was the nineteenth century Academic school.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, Malraux's argument has nothing remotely to do with the kinds of prurient attitudes evoked by Guégan's term "Puritanism" or Bataille's supposed "smile", and nor does it rest on a preference for something called "autonomous art". (As discussed earlier, Malraux speaks of art creating an "autonomous *world*"; but the notion of "autonomous *art*" plays no part in his thinking.<sup>26</sup>) The concept of the "anti-arts" is linked directly to the fundamental tenets of Malraux's thinking which have nothing to do with "Puritanism". They are forms of "art" – visual, musical, or literary – that employ the means at art's disposal for ends contrary to those of art. "Our sensibility" he writes, "is worked on by exactly the same means (sounds, rhythms, words, forms, colours) as those employed by art. The question is: in the service of what are these means employed?"<sup>27</sup> The anti-arts, irrespective of their subject-matter (which may, as Malraux notes, concern crime or action-adventure and often have little to do with sexuality), employ those means solely for passing gratification. Art, he insists, is something different in *kind* and directs these means to quite different ends. ("*Crime and Punishment*", he writes, "is not a great detective story, but a great novel whose plot happens to be based on a crime".<sup>28</sup>) Art is concerned with values, in the sense of something "valued" more than mere existence in a destiny-ridden world – or, in Malraux's words, than being merely "the most-favoured denizen of a universe

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<sup>25</sup> See *Ibid.*, 772–774. In *La Psychologie de l'art*, Malraux gives a list of schools and periods of art that he believes have "lost their hold" on us: "Hellenistic and Roman art, Italian eclecticism, the school of Bologna (the apogee of art for Stendhal); English painters who followed in Van Dyck's footsteps, and the academism of the nineteenth century." He adds: "If the lessons of Giotto and El Greco are more alive than ever, those of Raphael are no longer. Indeed, Raphael himself ..." *La Psychologie de l'art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 85.

<sup>26</sup> Unless Guégan is using this phrase to refer to Malraux's notion of art post-Manet. But even if this were so, the comment is misleading. Malraux considers the aims of the *arts d'assouvissement* to be foreign to the aims of art *tout court*, not to something called "autonomous art".

<sup>27</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 764.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 769.

founded on absurdity”.<sup>29</sup> “Men gratify their tastes,” he writes “but are *devoted* to their values,” and,

everything born of the desire for gratification, like sentimentality, like the sensuality of Alexandria, like everything rejected by modern art and by what is most vital in our culture, is born *when values die*. It does not replace them.<sup>30</sup>

Malraux’s criticism of the anti-arts – the arts of mere delectation – is, in short, based on something far deeper than mere prurience. Their emergence in the modern world, and the dominant role they now play in the audio-visual realm, stems from the same collapse of values that led to the birth of modern art – the crucial difference being that, unlike the new world of art inaugurated by Manet, the anti-arts represent an abandonment of the fundamental ambition on which art depends.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 774. Emphasis in original.

## Chapter Nine

### Art, History, and the Human Adventure

“Rendre l’aventure humaine intelligible, quelle tentation!”<sup>1</sup>  
Malraux, *La Tête d’obsidienne*

The preceding chapters have suggested how misleading it would be to regard Malraux’s theory of art as dependent in some way on a unified theory of history, or of the history of art. It is certainly true, as we have seen, that his account is *inseparable* from the history of art, understood as a sequence of specific creations: art, he argues, is a series of inventions or it is nothing: art in itself does not exist. This in no sense implies, however, that he locates art within a unified theory of history, such as a teleology – as Hegel, for example, does in his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*.<sup>2</sup> Malraux simply traces a particular trajectory that art has followed. He explains, for example, how the notion of art first emerged as a result of developments initiated by Giotto and vigorously pursued by successors such as Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and a series of major artists up to and including Delacroix. He explains how, with the advent of an agnostic culture, art underwent a major transformation beginning with Manet, a transformation that also resulted in the emergence of the first universal world of art. This account, however, is simply a *narrative of specific events*. Certainly, it is a narrative focusing on successive realisations of one and the same urge to create a rival, unified world; but there is no attempt to propose a theory of history – no claim that this sequence of events was in some way inevitable or “rational” or that it reveals some underlying meaning, direction, “progress”, or goal in history or in the history of art. As argued earlier, art for Malraux is an affirmation of man *as human adventure* and it is in this sense only that his-

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<sup>1</sup> “To confer a meaning on the human adventure – what a temptation!”

<sup>2</sup> As mentioned earlier, Hegel places art firmly within an historical teleology – so that Egyptian and Asian art, for example, belong to an early “Symbolic” phase of art, manifesting a “primitive artistic pantheism”. Hegel, 83. As we have seen, the idea of artistic “progress” is quite foreign to Malraux’s theory of art.



tory figures in his account. The notion of the human adventure, as we have seen, is a simultaneous awareness of duration, specificity, and finitude: an awareness of humanity as bounded in time – of having had a specific origin, of having traced a particular course (and not another), and enduring until now, but lacking any unifying meaning or end-goal.<sup>3</sup> It is an “adventure” not, as indicated earlier, in the colloquial sense of a remarkable exploit, but in the strict sense of an endeavour definable only in terms of its discoveries – the regions it traverses – and which knows nothing of an ultimate destination. Thus, while the history of art for Malraux can certainly be *narrated* in the sense that one can describe the particular manifestations so far of the fundamental urge to create a rival, unified world, this is a narrative with no knowable end-goal, a narrative which, in the words of Berger in his dawning awareness of the human adventure, might just as readily “not have been as it is”.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, far from carrying the somewhat glamorous connotations of a remarkable exploit, the notion of the human adventure, as Malraux employs it, points ultimately to a *tragic* view of human life and all its endeavours – including art. True, art affirms man against the mute indifference of things but there is no definitive victory, no revelation of an ultimate Truth, no “unravelling of the mystery of things”, to employ again Malraux’s characterisation of the Romantic concept of the artist.<sup>5</sup> The human adventure, like the “drone of the centuries” Berger hears on the morning following the tank trap, is something with a beginning, a duration, and ultimately, no doubt, an end. In his speech to the Maeght Foundation in 1974, in the context of a discussion – and a rejection – of the idea that art is explicable in terms of historical theory (Taine, Hegel and Marx are mentioned in particular), Malraux exclaims: “To confer a meaning on the human adventure – what a temptation!”<sup>6</sup> The comment neatly sums up the point at issue. The human adventure, like the adventure of art since the earliest times

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<sup>3</sup> See page 63.

<sup>4</sup> See page 54.

<sup>5</sup> See page 127.

<sup>6</sup> In French: “Rendre l’aventure humaine intelligible, quelle tentation!” Malraux, “Discours prononcé à la Fondation Maeght,” 884. Cf. “... the attempt to render the human adventure intelligible, which we call history.” *L’Homme précaire et la littérature* 47.

through which it is affirmed, *has no* discernible, underlying meaning, and the temptation to give it one – to confer a larger purpose on its trajectory – springs precisely (or so one might readily suppose) from an anxious awareness that this is the case – that is, from the desire to suppress the tragic sense of the adventure’s finitude. Art certainly affirms man as against the blind forces of destiny that would reduce him to insignificance and futility, and in this sense Malraux’s view of art can properly be described as a humanism. But it is a tragic humanism – one that offers no ultimate recourse, no reassurance beyond man’s repeated efforts to assert his significance.<sup>7</sup> To ground art in a theory of history and give it a unifying meaning would, for Malraux, be to deny this tragic element – an understandable *temptation*, certainly, but one which, in his eyes, would mistake art’s true nature.<sup>8</sup>

These points need to be stated firmly and clearly because commentators have sometimes attempted to paint Malraux’s argument in quite different colours. A prominent example is the essay by Maurice Merleau-Ponty mentioned earlier, which merits particular attention here because it seems to have influenced a number of other critics.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Malraux’s comment during a speech for UNESCO in 1946: “A form of humanism is still possible but we need to be quite clear that it is a tragic humanism.” André Malraux, “L’Homme et la culture artistique,” in *Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 1216. As indicated earlier, Malraux is not suggesting that art is the *only* means by which this can be achieved. The other possibilities, which are the subject of his later novels and *Le Miroir des limbes*, are beyond the scope of the present study. See page 76.

<sup>8</sup> Claims to the contrary can sometimes take quite subtle forms. Jacqueline Machabéïs, for example, suggests that Malraux’s humanism is linked to a progressive “humanisation” of art and a gradual shedding of its links with the sacred. This claim would confer a direction and an underlying meaning on art history and is incompatible with Malraux’s notion of art as an affirmation of the human adventure. See Jacqueline Machabéïs, *Malraux: La tentation du sacré* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 314, 315. Another recent writer argues that Malraux saw painting post-Giotto as moving through an “increasingly emancipatory era”. (Victor E. Taylor, “Recalling Modernity: Aesthetics before the Abyss,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 14, no. 2 (2000): 413.) Yet, as we have seen, while Malraux’s account of this development involves the discovery of a “new power of painting”, there is no question of a progressive “emancipation”, or a progress of any kind. The discoveries post-Giotto and post-Manet altered the *function* of painting, but Malraux nowhere suggests that this involved a forward movement towards an end-goal, explicit or implicit.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: Richter, 85. Johnson and Smith, eds., 20. Oliver Mongin, “Since Lascaux,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, 245–

Merleau-Ponty argues that “[Malraux] can explain the convergence of separate works only by invoking some destiny that rules over them”. In support of this claim he quotes a passage from *La Psychologie de l’art* which reads:

... As if an imaginary spirit of art pushed forward from miniature to painting and from fresco to stained-glass window in a single conquest which it suddenly abandoned for another, parallel or suddenly opposed, as if a subterranean torrent of history unified all these scattered works by dragging them along with it ... a style known in its evolution and metamorphoses becomes less an idea than the impression of a living fatality. Reproduction, and reproduction alone, has introduced into art these imaginary super-artists of indistinct birth, possessed of a life, of conquests and concessions to the taste for wealth or seduction, of death and resurrection – known as styles.

“Thus,” Merleau-Ponty writes,

Malraux encounters, at least in metaphor, the idea of a History which unites the most disparate attempts, a Painting that works behind the painter’s back, and a Reason in history of which he is the instrument. These Hegelian monstrosities are the antithesis and complement of Malraux’s individualism.<sup>10</sup>

We have had occasion previously to notice Merleau-Ponty’s tendency to remove Malraux’s statements from their context (for example, in his mistaken claim about Malraux’s “individualism”, which is repeated in this passage<sup>11</sup>), and here we encounter another, quite dismaying instance. The passage Merleau-Ponty quotes occurs towards the end of a relatively lengthy section in *La Psychologie de l’art* in which Malraux’s principal concern is to explore the part played by photographic reproduction in the formation of contemporary responses to art.<sup>12</sup> One consequence he mentions – which we have noted earlier – is that modern audiences have access to good quality reproductions of many

255, 247. Jean Lacoste, *La Philosophie de l’art*, 8 ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006), 119–123. See also, Pollock, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 81. Despite the title of his essay, Merleau-Ponty is in fact quoting from *La Psychologie de l’art* not *Les Voix du silence*, his essay having been written shortly before the latter work was published. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, 76–120, 88, note 84. In *Les Voix du silence* Malraux makes some small but significant changes to the passage Merleau-Ponty quotes, one of which is noted below.

<sup>11</sup> See page 159.

<sup>12</sup> *La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 18–52.

works which might otherwise be difficult of access. But there are other effects, Malraux points out, of which we tend to be less aware. As noted earlier, a key characteristic of the modern response to art, in Malraux's view, is that we are "the first to accept that every art is closely bound up with a significance peculiar to itself", this peculiar significance being embodied in the work's *style* as Malraux defines that term.<sup>13</sup> Now, one effect of photography, he argues, is that it often makes us more sensitive to these "peculiar significances" – these individual styles – than we might otherwise be. Black-and-white photography, for example, can intensify the "family likeness" of different kinds of objects from the same period (such as a miniature, a picture and a statue) which might otherwise seem to have little affinity with each other, and a similar effect can arise when works of different sizes (a miniature and a large sculpture, for example) lose their dimensions and become images of similar size on the pages of a book. In such cases, each work loses something of its individuality, Malraux writes "but their common style is so much the gainer".<sup>14</sup> In general, whether shown in colour or in black-and-white, he argues, objects of many kinds – "from miniatures, to frescos, to stained-glass windows, to tapestries, to Scythian jewellery-work, to paintings, to Greek vases, and even to sculpture" – tend to lose their properties as objects but to gain "the utmost significance as to style they can possibly acquire".<sup>15</sup> Or, translated into the terms employed earlier, their peculiar significances as autonomous worlds become as pronounced as they could be.

Now if, by virtue of reproduction, works of the same culture are gathered together in an album – for example of Chinese or Babylonian art – and especially if the images are arranged in chronological order, the trajectory followed by a series of works in similar styles is thrown into prominence; and since works of art are, Malraux argues, not mere historical specimens but living presences,<sup>16</sup> such trajectories can give the impression of a living organism changing over time. That is, the images seem to be much more than mere samples of a particular

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<sup>13</sup> See pages 82 and 245.

<sup>14</sup> *La Psychologie de l'art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> As discussed in Chapter Six in the analysis of the relationship between art and time.

stylistic classification (as labelled in a history of art, for instance) and appear, as Malraux writes in a phrase that Merleau-Ponty omits, to have “a life of their own”,<sup>17</sup> as if “an imaginary spirit of art” were at work. There is of course no suggestion that there *is* such a spirit – which is why Malraux qualifies it with the word “imaginary”, just as he speaks in the same passage of “imaginary super-artists”. His point is simply that such a juxtaposition of images – which, as he says, is only made possible by reproduction – can *appear as* a continuous stream of creativity (due allowance made, as he indicates, for intermittent periods of regression) *as if* one were encountering a “spirit” that had “a life of its own”.

Nothing in the passage Merleau-Ponty quotes, or in the discussion of the effects of photographic reproduction preceding it, supports his claim that Malraux is thinking in terms of an “idea of a history which unites” these various works or of “a Reason in history of which [the painter] is the instrument”. Malraux’s reference to “a subterranean torrent of history” (which, in any case, he deletes in the equivalent passage in *Les Voix du silence*<sup>18</sup>) is preceded by an “as if” and is, like his “imaginary spirit of art”, clearly intended as a metaphor (a point Merleau-Ponty acknowledges but then disregards). In reality, Malraux’s proposition is the very reverse of the one Merleau-Ponty is ascribing to him. The idea is not that art is somehow controlled by an external force – as if it were a response to an outside stimulus – but precisely, as Malraux says, that it seems to have *a life of its own*. Basically, there are two intertwining themes in the passage: the idea of an apparently living entity (not just “an idea”, as Malraux says) known “in its evolution and metamorphoses”; and the sense that this is a specific, finite event – an event with a beginning, a varied and eventful life, and a death (and, of course, a later resurrection since it is through that process that we have become aware of the styles – the “peculiar significances” – in question). The passage is in fact, as one might have expected, an image in microcosm of the human adventure. There is no question of a teleology – no ultimate aim or historical Idea being realised, no underlying meaning to confer unity or rationality on the process and transform it into the manifestation of a hidden Truth

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<sup>17</sup> *La Psychologie de l'art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 238.

or “Reason”, or the workings of “some World Spirit”, as Merleau-Ponty claims a few paragraphs further on.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, it is an encounter, as Malraux writes, with a “fatality” – a fundamentally *inexplicable* sequence of events – but a “*living fatality*” nonetheless: not *simply* part of the vast swirl of chaos and indifference, but something imbued, for a period of time at least, with “a life of its own”, as if animated by an “an imaginary spirit of art”.<sup>20</sup> Like the human adventure it affirms, this living fatality has no predestined goal, but it is nonetheless alive, and for a time at least, proof against the insignificance thrust upon it by an indifferent universe. There is no question of “Hegelian monstrosities” or, indeed, of Marxist monstrosities, or any other form of historical determinism (a notion that Malraux explicitly rejects on a number of occasions elsewhere in his writings on art – which Merleau-Ponty seems to have missed<sup>21</sup>); but there is a question of man *differentiating* himself, for a time at least, from a destiny-ridden world – from “that which crushes him” – through the creative achievement of art.

It is of course undeniable that historical events *sometimes* play a role in Malraux’s account of art. Egyptian art, for example, ends with the decay of ancient Egyptian culture; traditional African art is progressively extinguished by its encounters with Europe;<sup>22</sup> Giotto’s discovery of the “new power of painting” emerged as a response to (though not as a “product of”) the transformation of the dualistic faith of Byzantium; the radical transformation that took place with Manet was a response to the emergence of an agnostic culture after the intellectual upheavals of the eighteenth century; and the emergence of a

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<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Le Langage indirect et les voix du silence,” 82.

<sup>20</sup> Malraux revisits this issue in *L’Intemporel*. In the context of a discussion of how styles might be presented via film or television, he likens the effect that could be produced to the way accelerated images of a bud coming into flower seem to create the impression that the flower has “a will” of its own. Once again the thought is the reverse of what Merleau-Ponty suggests. *L’Intemporel*, 1000. In fact, Malraux makes the same point in a footnote to the very page of *La Psychologie de l’art* from which Merleau-Ponty draws his quote, the emphasis once again being on the “life” of the plant itself, not on the effects of external forces. See *La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. for example: “The artist is no more ‘conditioned’ by a past to whose forms he looks back than by some spirit of the future”. *Les Voix du silence*, 643.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 772.

new absolute, Malraux suggests, might well see a major change to our contemporary universal world of art.<sup>23</sup> But art itself, as we have seen, is always, for Malraux, an activity *sui generis*. Major cultural changes such as these have certainly altered its course, but they have done so episodically, so to speak, and only when, as in cases such as these, they have been of sufficient magnitude. This is why Malraux writes in *Les Voix du silence* that “the relationship between art and history ... would seem less puzzling if we ceased regarding it as systematic”,<sup>24</sup> and why he also writes that “art is more affected by the deep underlying currents than by the tidal waves”.<sup>25</sup> Art in Malraux’s eyes is not the “product” (or “expression” as Gombrich would have it<sup>26</sup>) of anything. It is a human achievement as specific as the discovery of an absolute such as a religious faith, but of a different kind: it is the creation of a rival world, not a once-for-all explanation of things; and it proceeds first and foremost via its own creative processes. The “tidal waves” of history – wars, famines or pestilences – will often have only marginal effects, major transformations requiring cultural changes working at a level as deep as itself – such as the death of a

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<sup>23</sup> See page 269.

<sup>24</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 637. Malraux’s term is “rigoureuse”. Stuart Gilbert translates this as “uniform and invariably decisive” which, though a liberal rendering, probably conveys Malraux’s meaning quite well.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 647.

<sup>26</sup> As mentioned earlier, Gombrich’s first and most influential essay on Malraux takes him to task for espousing an “expressionist” theory of art – the view, in Gombrich’s words, that “each style of a period or race directly mirrors its group-mind”. Gombrich, “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” 80. As discussed earlier, this interpretation is inconsistent with Malraux’s view that art is an activity *sui generis*. (See page 140.) It is worth adding here that Gombrich’s thesis would imply that Malraux posits a systematic link between art and history – which, as we are arguing here, is clearly not the case. In fact, Malraux *explicitly* rejects this view – and the expressionist thesis in particular – on more than one occasion. He writes, for example: “Thus we perceive that art is not the result of any pressure brought upon the artist from without – a ‘conditioning’ – but from within: a pressure that is in no sense a compulsion. But to express a community in terms of its values is far from expressing its nature or its totality ... The mosaics of Byzantium do not express tortures, the finest Aztec sculptures do not express massacres ...” *Les Voix du silence*, 880. There is considerably more in this vein (see, for example, *Ibid.*, 642, 651). None of it seems to have deterred Gombrich.

religion, or the decay of a whole culture.<sup>27</sup> But there is no question – contrary to Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion – of a *systematic* link between art and history. Art for Malraux is not the manifestation of a “World Spirit”, of class struggle, or of any other predeterminable set of forces. Which is why – to return to a point left in abeyance earlier – there is a fundamental difference between theories of “the end of art” such as those developed by Hegel and, more recently, by Arthur Danto,<sup>28</sup> and the attitude Malraux adopts towards the future. For Malraux, as we have seen, the modern “universal world of art” is as vulnerable to metamorphosis as Byzantine or mediaeval art, both of which were eclipsed by the new direction taken by painting from Giotto onwards. Our universal world of art, like the art of those periods – and like all art – is inherently “precarious”, to borrow Malraux’s term, and its future entirely unpredictable, and there is no historical theory – no theory of “late capitalism”, for instance, to choose one currently influential idea<sup>29</sup> – that is likely to alter that. For Hegel and Danto, propositions about the end of art have, essentially, the character of predictions (whether one regards them as sound or not) because they are part of an historical theory; for Malraux, the history of art is simply a narrative of events “so far”, not a unified process, not the manifestation of an underlying Reason working itself out in human events. Viewed from Malraux’s standpoint, the accounts of art provided by thinkers such as Hegel and Danto (or by Taine, and Marxist and post-Marxist thinkers) succumb to the “temptation to confer a meaning on the human adventure”. Malraux himself resists that temptation. Art is an affirmation of the human adventure – and therefore of

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<sup>27</sup> Although, even then, not necessarily immediately. As noted earlier, Malraux points out that both Christianity and Buddhism took some five centuries to discover styles befitting their teachings. See Chapter Five, note 24.

<sup>28</sup> For example in his book *Art After the End of Art*. Danto’s position, however, seems somewhat involved. He argues that he “in no sense [claims] that art was going to *stop being made!*” but that the end of art “[means] the end of a certain narrative which has unfolded in art history over the centuries, and which has reached its end in a certain freedom from conflicts of the kind inescapable in the Age of Manifestos”. (The “Age of Manifestos” seems, for Danto, to be essentially the period of “Modernism”, and particularly the first half of the twentieth century.) See Danto, *After the End of Art*, 28, 29, 37. Emphasis in original.

<sup>29</sup> See for example Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, 35, 139.



immense importance – but beyond that affirmation the adventure *has no* discernible meaning. Malraux's theory of art is a humanism – no small thing, after all, in the modern world – but it is also, just as surely, a tragic humanism.

## Conclusion

The Introduction to this study quoted Malraux's statement in 1973 that "Of all my books, those I've written about art are certainly the ones that have been most seriously misunderstood". The particular misunderstandings Malraux had in mind can, of course, only be a matter of conjecture, but if the analysis of his theory of art offered in the present study is accurate, there seems to be an abundance to choose from.

A basic mistake many critics have made is to assume that Malraux is not presenting a theory of art at all but only what Denis Boak called a "lyrical and imaginative, rather than rational" account of art, or what E.H. Gombrich scornfully described as "a mere string of accumulated *aperçus*".<sup>1</sup>

It is, of course, plain to see that Malraux does not write about art in the idiom of many contemporary textbooks on aesthetics – in the somewhat dry and clinical mode, for instance, of the contemporary Anglo-American school of analytic aesthetics. At the core of his argument, as we have seen, is the claim that art, at its deepest level, is a response to the "fundamental *emotion* man feels in the face of life" – the same sense of bewilderment and transience to which the major religions of the past have responded. If his prose is to succeed in conveying some sense of this fundamental emotion, and of the kind of response art represents, he cannot, obviously, confine himself exclusively to abstract terminology, but must also make use of the *evocative* powers of language – the striking image, for example, or the arresting turn of phrase (such as "the presence in life of what should belong to death"). But it would be an elementary mistake to infer, as Gombrich, Boak and others have done, that this automatically removes Malraux from the ranks of lucid, systematic thinkers. Clarity of thought and the use of stylistic devices such as the striking image are not mutually exclusive – any more than a preference for purely abstract terminology is always a guarantee of good sense and intelligibility.

In fact, as the preceding chapters have sought to show, all the key elements of Malraux's thinking proceed directly and naturally from

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<sup>1</sup> Gombrich, "André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism," 78.

the basic propositions on which it is founded, and his theory of art is *wholly systematic and perfectly susceptible to analysis in terms of its interlocking, component parts* – even if demonstrating this requires a certain dismantling of elements that Malraux, for reasons explained earlier, often strives to keep together. In style and manner of presentation (for example in the abundance of reproductions), *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* certainly break with the conventional mould of textbooks on aesthetics and the philosophy of art but it would be a grave error to brush them aside on those grounds. Closer inspection reveals that they are very carefully thought out, and offer a fully-developed, thoroughly coherent theory of art.

An unfortunate consequence of the tendency to dismiss Malraux's thinking as little more than "a mere string of insights" has been that critics have repeatedly overlooked the powerful, and highly thought-provoking *challenges* he presents to traditional aesthetics. These have been examined in some detail in previous chapters but it may be useful to recall some of the key points here.

The most radical challenge, perhaps, is that Malraux shifts the very foundations on which aesthetics has been based. As discussed earlier,<sup>2</sup> the central tradition of Western aesthetics since the eighteenth century has grown out of concerns which are essentially epistemological, psychological, or historical in nature – concerns about the nature of human knowledge, the part played by different forms of cognition in the workings of the human mind, and the relationship between art and history (the last issue, whose contemporary influence is mainly confined to varieties of "continental" aesthetics, having been added in the nineteenth century by thinkers such as Hegel, Marx and Taine). Malraux challenges this tradition in a quite direct and fundamental way. His point of departure is not epistemological, psychological, or historical, but *metaphysical*, his basic questions being: "Does art play a part in responding to humanity's fundamental sense of the arbitrariness and mutability of all things? Does it merely acquiesce to a scheme of things which seems implacably indifferent to man's presence, or does it in some way *deny* this insistent sense of subjection and futility, and affirm man's significance?" Malraux is not the only twentieth century figure to have thought about art in these terms.

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<sup>2</sup> See page 50 et seq.

There are occasional intimations of similar ideas in the reflections on art of Albert Camus and Eugene Ionesco, for instance. Malraux is unique, however, in having pursued this approach in a thoroughgoing and systematic way, and in building a comprehensive theory of art on these foundations. Viewed against the background of prevailing practice in modern aesthetics, still very much in thrall to eighteenth and nineteenth century traditions, his thinking is nothing short of revolutionary.

We have seen the consequences of this radically new approach. Whether we are speaking of visual art, literature or music, art is no longer understood simply as a source of sensual and/or intellectual pleasure – “aesthetic pleasure” to give this idea its usual, somewhat nebulous, label. Nor does it exist simply to “gratify tastes” (although gratification, as we saw, is certainly a function of the *anti-arts*), or to “represent the world”, to afford an avenue for self-expression, to mediate social or political experience, or as a manifestation of qualities such as beauty, harmony or “the sublime”. This is not to deny that some of these factors have played a role in art at different times. Despite what is sometimes alleged, Malraux has no animus against beauty, harmony, or the sublime, and many of the works he admires exhibit those very properties. Similarly, he has no *parti pris* in favour of, or against, abstract art or representational art. But none of these qualities, in his view, is fundamental: none of them captures what art is as a form of human endeavour. Fundamentally, art for Malraux has a *metaphysical* significance. This, as indicated earlier, does not imply that every artist is necessarily concerned with questions of a metaphysical nature: it does not imply privileging Goya over Watteau (whose *L’Enseigne de Gersaint* happened to be among Malraux’s favourite works) or Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed* over *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (about which he wrote an excellent essay). But as an activity, as a form of endeavour, art exists as a response to a metaphysical reality – to man’s fundamental sense of the arbitrariness and contingency of all things. While varying enormously in its manifestations – and for lengthy periods of human history not even regarded as “art” – its fundamental role is to “deny man’s nothingness”.

One immediate consequence of this, as we saw, is a challenge to the long-standing assumption in aesthetics that the human response to

art should be understood as a “judgment”.<sup>3</sup> As a response to a fundamental *emotion* – and not merely to an intellectual capacity – art, Malraux argues, acts on its audiences (as on the artist) in a manner akin to a revelation – through the “hold” or “fascination” it exerts, not as an object for judgment. As we noted, Malraux is not denying that one often makes a judgment *post facto*: one decides to see a play a second time, purchase the illustrated catalogue of an exhibition of paintings one has visited, or buy the CD of a piano concerto one has heard. But the *psychology of the response itself*, he is arguing, is not, as aesthetics has claimed for so long, a judgment, and *a fortiori* not, as Kantian aesthetics would have it, a “disinterested” judgment.

Malraux also issues a challenge to aesthetics to begin taking the history of art seriously. The comment quoted earlier that aesthetics and art history pass each other “like ships in the night” is only a slight exaggeration. As noted earlier, and as a reading of compendiums such as *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* or *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* quickly confirms, contemporary aesthetics, particularly in the Anglo-American arena, continues to encourage an *ahistorical* approach to its subject matter,<sup>4</sup> focusing heavily on general concepts such as “beauty” or “aesthetic experience” treated from a static, atemporal standpoint; and when, on occasion, it ventures briefly into the history of art, attention is confined principally to the twentieth and twenty-first century, leaving the rather odd impression that the preceding several millennia are of little or no consequence (despite their heavy representation in today’s art museums<sup>5</sup>). In Malraux’s case, by contrast, the gap between the theory

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<sup>3</sup> See page 109.

<sup>4</sup> As noted earlier, “continental” aesthetics differs somewhat in this respect, although the scope of the history involved is usually quite limited. See note 44, Chapter Seven.

<sup>5</sup> The aesthetician, Dennis Dutton, has recently made a similar point. He writes that “aesthetics at the outset of the twenty-first century finds itself in a paradoxical, not to say bizarre, situation. On the one hand, scholars and aesthetes have accessible to them – in libraries, in museums, on the Internet, first-hand via travel – a wider perspective on artistic history across cultures and through history than ever before ... Against this vast availability, how odd that philosophical speculation about art has been inclined toward endless analysis of an infinitesimally small class of cases, prominently featuring Duchamp’s readymades, or boundary-testing objects such as Sherry Levine’s appropriated photographs and John Cage’s 4’33”.” Unfortunately, while evoking this “wider perspective on artistic history across cultures and through history”, Dutton

and the history of art is closed, and the history of art – the art of all cultures, not just of Western art – functions as an integral part of his thinking. For Malraux, there is no such thing as a static “art in itself”: like an adventure (or a “living fatality”, to quote the phrase Merleau-Ponty so comprehensively misunderstood) art is inseparable from the specific course it has followed, the specific regions it has traversed. In a very real sense, one might almost say that art, for Malraux, *is* its history (both its past *and* its present<sup>6</sup>). In his case, aesthetics and art history have most certainly ceased to be “ships that pass in the night”.

Perhaps the most remarkable challenge Malraux presents to modern aesthetics, however, is his explanation of the relationship between art and time. In this context, as we have suggested, Malraux not only questions traditional patterns of thought, he also remedies a major, and pressing, area of neglect. In a sense, of course, the question of the temporal nature of art has only emerged as a conspicuous theoretical dilemma in the last hundred or so years – since the appearance of what Malraux terms “the first universal world of art”. Prior to this, when “art” principally signified the art of the post-Renaissance West (Baudelaire’s “beacons”, for example), the familiar notion that art, or at least great art, is timeless, or “immortal” must presumably have seemed reasonably plausible. At that time, the only art that had been resuscitated – that had been recalled to life after having been ignored for long periods of time – was the art of Greece and Rome, and that circumstance could be explained readily enough by the assumed cultural decadence and artistic insensitivity of the intervening “Dark Ages”. But the emergence as art, from about 1900 onwards, of works from sources as various as ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Africa, Pre-Columbian Mexico, India, Byzantium, and Romanesque Europe (the last two belonging to those very “Dark Ages”) poses a problem of a

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himself clings essentially to the traditional ahistorical approach of analytic aesthetics and, minimising the importance of cultural differences, attempts to draw up the list of universal cross-cultural features of art discussed earlier. See above, page 169.

<sup>6</sup> There has been a tendency among some critics to suggest that Malraux is *only* interested in the art of the past. (See for example Guégan: 89.) Having died in 1976, Malraux did not of course comment on art after that date, but the final volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux*, and *La Tête d’obsidienne*, contain numerous references to twentieth century artists and movements. On the other hand, he also takes the previous millennia seriously. Hence the importance they assume in his writings.

quite different order. Clearly, it will not do simply to say that these works had only recently come to light: as we have seen, many had been discovered centuries before,<sup>7</sup> but had been ignored, placed in collections of “curios”, re-used as building material, or melted down for precious metals. Moreover, it is not quite so easy to accuse the centuries prior to 1900 of cultural decadence and artistic insensitivity when, after all, they produced such figures as Leonardo, Rembrandt, Mozart, Beethoven, Racine and Goethe, not to mention a series of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophers (including some, like Hume and Kant, who figure prominently in aesthetics itself) whom one would surely hesitate to accuse of such failings. Thus, the dilemma suddenly becomes very difficult to ignore: the notion that art is eternal having begun to look quite untenable, and the idea that it belongs within historical time scarcely looking like a promising alternative (since how, as Marx himself recognised,<sup>8</sup> does one explain its apparent power to *transcend* its historical moment?) what then *is* the relationship between art and time? If it is neither impervious to time, nor wholly part of it, what *is* its temporal nature?

Modern aesthetics, as we saw, has essentially ignored the problem. Apart from the rare foray into the field by writers such as Anthony Savile – whose account fails to grasp the nature of the key issue at stake – aesthetics and the philosophy of art have said almost nothing about the temporal nature of art for many decades; and if recent compendiums such as those mentioned above are any guide, there is scant indication that this situation is about to change. In effect, the problem is not a problem because it is never raised. Hence the importance of Malraux’s contribution: he both raises the problem in a quite direct and specific way, and provides a solution. As we saw in Chapter Six, he seems to have been well aware of the dilemma at least as early as 1930 when, in *La Voie royale*, he was already speaking (in a comment that some writers, Gombrich aiding, mistakenly took to be his definitive thoughts) of art’s “power of resuscitation”. His answer – the concept of metamorphosis – is a central theme of his theory of art, a

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<sup>7</sup> And in the case of Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic art, of course, there was no need of discovery since, unless destroyed or covered over, they had always remained in plain view.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter Six, note 10.

theme he was still stressing in 1976 in the final volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux* when he wrote that metamorphosis “is the very life of the work of art in time, one of its specific characteristics”.<sup>9</sup> In a world in which everything is subject to the passing of time, he commented in a television program not long before his death,<sup>10</sup> art alone is “both subject to time and yet victorious over it” – subject, because inseparable from its history; victorious, because, though not eternal, it is born to metamorphosis and possessed of a power of resurrection.

Closely linked to this issue is Malraux’s account of the changing meanings of the term “art” and his explanation of the function of art in civilizations in which the concept was unknown. Here again he presents a major challenge to modern aesthetics. To the limited extent this question has been addressed, the prevailing response in aesthetics has been, as we have seen, to marginalise it and simply treat art as the West has understood the term as a universal feature of all human societies. Thus, if any culture seems to have regarded their painting or sculpture (for instance) in ways that differ from ours – if, for example, they worshipped them instead of placing them in art museums – and even if their language possessed no word similar in meaning to our word “art”, those facts, according to this prevailing view, are of peripheral importance because fundamentally all cultures viewed their art as we do, and the cultural meanings *they* attached to the objects in question can be safely ignored. What really matters everywhere and at all times, it is said, are certain fundamental and enduring features which, in Denis Dutton’s phrase, “characterise [art] throughout the whole of human history”.<sup>11</sup>

Malraux, as we have seen, rejects this thinking entirely. Every work that we today call “art”, he argues, is a realization of a fundamental urge to construct a rival coherent world, but this urge has by no means always been directed to the creation of “art” in any of the senses in which the term has been understood in the West. To state the matter summarily, our notions of “art”, whether that symbolised by Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, or later by Manet’s *Olympia*, are as imper-

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<sup>9</sup> See page 202.

<sup>10</sup> André Malraux, *Promenades imaginaires dans Florence*. (Television series: *Journal de voyage avec André Malraux*.) (Paris: Interviewer: Jean-Marie Drot 1975).

<sup>11</sup> See page 169.



anent as the now imperfectly understood form of Christian spirituality to which the Romanesque tympanum at Moissac responded (Fig. 30), or the beliefs, about which we understand even less, which resulted in the ceremonial masks of the Pacific Islands (Fig. 11), or the view of the world that led to the Bulls of Lascaux (Fig. 4), of which we know



Fig. 30. *Christ in Majesty*, Moissac, France.

nothing at all. Such images, Malraux would agree, are assuredly worthy candidates for our *musée imaginaire* but not because they were created, or originally regarded, as “art”, nor because we respond to them as their contemporaries did, but because they have re-emerged for us via a metamorphosis through which they have *become* art in our contemporary sense of the term – a condition which is itself no more definitive, and no less subject to metamorphosis, than their original condition as sacred or ritual figures. The challenge this argument presents to traditional aesthetics is obviously fundamental, placing its very subject matter – art – under a sign of impermanence. Not, as we have said, that Malraux is seeking in any sense to devalue art. Quite the contrary. But “art” in his eyes is the name we, in the third millennium AD, give to a series of objects, drawn from a range of cultures worldwide, living and dead, that manifest a specific power – a power to create a unified “other world” – that has only gone by that name in its current sense,<sup>12</sup> and manifested itself in its current form, for a little over a century. If we could genuinely experience the responses of the men and women for whom objects such as Oceanic ceremonial masks or the Moissac tympanum were originally created, Malraux argues, our first impulse would be to remove them from our art museums and our *musée imaginaire*. And, similarly, if a new absolute were born, as powerful perhaps as the ones that gave those objects birth – heralding a new “aesthetic revolution”, albeit of a different kind – they, along with many other inhabitants of our contemporary imaginary museum, could well be swept into a limbo of indifference along with the very notion of art they now exemplify. It is not our modern notion of art that is fundamental – a notion that has, after all, held sway for a very limited period of human history – but the power to resist the “chaos of appearances” and its associated sense of human insignificance, a power that art as we know it certainly manifests, but which also found ready expression in objects created by cultures in which the idea of art was completely unknown.

Implicit in this discussion, of course, is Malraux’s challenge, both to aesthetics and to art history, to provide an explanation for the

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<sup>12</sup> As distinct from the previous, post-Renaissance sense. See especially page 144 et seq.

enormous expansion of the domain of art over the past century – the emergence of what he aptly terms “the first universal world of art”. Malraux’s own explanation was discussed in some detail in an earlier chapter and will not be repeated here. As indicated there, however, modern aesthetics and art history have not only left this event unexplained; they have effectively ignored it. This, surely, is a major omission. Here, after all, one is speaking of our modern world of art – the *universal* world of art that distinguishes us so sharply from the much narrower one that held sway in the West for several preceding centuries. Certainly, as Malraux acknowledges, we now tend to take this world of art for granted: “We are not constantly talking about the gigantic Resurrection surrounding us”, he writes in *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, “because we accept it without question”.<sup>13</sup> But one only needs a perspective on art history stretching back further than the past century – a very short period indeed in the overall history of art – to see that not only is our world of art strikingly different from the one that preceded it, but also that, in its universality, it is quite *unprecedented* – that, stated bluntly, things have never been this way before at any time in human history. The importance Malraux places on this point in both *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* is unmistakable and the explanation he provides is an integral part of his theory of art, linked to the basic propositions on which it is founded. Again, the challenge to aesthetics and art history is quite plain.

What general conclusions can one draw about the critical response to Malraux’s writings on art? In too many cases, to quote André Brincourt’s apt words again, these works seem to have been “skimmed a lot but very little read”. As a result, there has grown up over time a cluster of simplistic and misleading myths about Malraux’s thinking which have done duty by default for careful, reasoned interpretation. There is the myth of Malraux the unsystematic thinker who offers us a “lyrical and imaginative, rather than rational” account of art. There is the myth set in train by early commentators such as Gombrich and Duthuit that Malraux is merely an amateur dabbler in art history who either gets his facts wrong or resorts to outright falsification. There is

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<sup>13</sup> *L’Homme précaire et la littérature* 276. Cf. the similar statement from *L’Intemporel* quoted above, page 253.

the myth of Malraux the indiscriminate borrower of other thinkers' ideas – recycling Focillon, for example, or offering us “Spenglerian metaphysical bric-a-brac” as Bourdieu alleges. There is the myth, due in large measure to Merleau-Ponty, of Malraux the adept of an Hegelian “World Spirit”. There is the myth of the *musée imaginaire* as merely a vast collection of photographic reproductions. There is the widespread myth that Malraux believes that every work of art “develops into myth”. There is the myth of Malraux the despiser of beauty; the myth of Malraux the “formalist” (or alternatively, the “subjectivist”); the myth of Malraux bent on shutting works of art away in the “sepulchre” of the art museum; the myth of Malraux the mystifier – the purveyor of “sophisticated double-talk” as Gombrich claims, or “the magical but meretricious juggler of glittering words,” as Righter writes.<sup>14</sup> There is the myth of Malraux the “expressionist”, or the Romantic; the myth of Malraux seeking refuge from “collective praxis” in the tranquil world of art. And the list could go on.

Within the space available, this study has sought to debunk these various myths and this is not the place to rehearse the counter-arguments that have been provided. It should be added, moreover, that Malraux has been badly served not only by what critics have *said* about his theory of art, but also by what they have *not* said. As indicated in the Introduction, a striking feature of the fate of *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* is the neglect they have suffered at the hands of those whom one might have expected to offer careful and thoughtful analyses – writers in the fields of aesthetics, the theory of art, and art history. In part, perhaps, the neglect is understandable: who, after all, might not feel a little discouraged by the catalogue of intellectual sins alleged in the list above? In addition, readers in the English-speaking world have not had access to translations of the major works on art Malraux published in the later years of his life, above all the last two volumes of *La Métamorphose des*

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<sup>14</sup> Righter, 77. One is tempted to point out that it is quite frequently Malraux's critics rather than Malraux himself who seem vulnerable to the charge of empty rhetoric. One writes, for example: “[Malraux's] conception of art was based on a neo-Nietzschean, quasi-existentialist image of the true artist as isolated individual heroically facing up to the black void of death, and momentarily transcending his mortal limits.” Potts, 95. The rather opaque comments by Blanchot quoted earlier are another case in point. See, for example, page 211.

*dieux*, and *L'Homme précaire et la littérature*. Nevertheless, the widespread neglect of Malraux in so many books on the philosophy of art and art history, and in leading academic journals, is quite remarkable – and much to be regretted. Malraux has far more to offer than the present dismissive attitude towards his works might lead one to conclude. It is certainly true that his thought represents a major challenge – possibly a disconcerting challenge – to current thinking in aesthetics and art history, but both fields would seem to be diminished, not enhanced, by a reluctance to take up that challenge.

Early in *L'Intemporel*, as a prelude to his description of the changes that took place after Manet, Malraux provides an interesting comparison between the Renaissance and Romantic notions of genius. For the Renaissance, he writes, the great artist was someone who “had” genius – who happened to possess a special gift, which was “as distinct from the man as, in our eyes, the discoveries of a physicist are from the physicist himself”.<sup>15</sup> For the Romantics, by contrast, the artist was one of the few privileged beings throughout history, such as Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, or Aeschylus, who “was a genius” – who was not simply the possessor of a special talent, but who was “the symbolic hero of his works”, a “grandiose and mythic” figure whose Promethean powers placed him within reach of the infinite, of which “the beautiful” was the earthly reflection.<sup>16</sup> These remarks provide a useful background for a final comment on Malraux’s understanding of the significance of the artist and his or her works.

There is certainly no mistaking Malraux’s admiration for the achievements of those he regards as genuine artists – whether visual artists, writers or composers. Despite what is sometimes alleged, however, his theory of art has nothing to do with the kind of semi-deification of the artist he identifies here as a feature of Romanticism, nor (*pace* Merleau-Ponty) with an attempt to portray the artist as a

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<sup>15</sup> *L'Intemporel*, 661.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. “In the Renaissance, one had genius, one was not a genius ... Petrarch and Ariosto were regarded as good poets ‘and better than the others’; the Romantics regarded the worst poet as a Shakespeare but ‘not as good’”. *L'Homme précaire et la littérature* 86.

“superman”.<sup>17</sup> What matters essentially for Malraux is the *achievement represented* by the true work of art, and that achievement is important, in his eyes, not primarily as a testament to the power of the artist who brought it into being, but above all as testimony to a quality in *man* worthy of our admiration – man’s capacity to affirm his significance as against the blank indifference of the “sorry scheme of things”. As we have seen, Malraux was born on the cusp of cultural developments that are still very much our own today – the disappearance of religious belief, the disintegration of the nineteenth century’s optimistic faith in science and mankind’s golden future (the belief in a “new humanity” as Malraux terms it), the bewildering diversity of world-views revealed by anthropology, history and archaeology, the rapidity of technological change and the concomitant sense of what Malraux terms a “violent sense of transience”, the disorienting awareness of “being unable to grasp a reality of any kind” – a state of mind he had diagnosed by 1927 as “nihilistic, destructive and fundamentally negative” – and, ultimately, the desolate sense that human life seems to have no fundamental purpose – a sense that man is, in his words, merely “the most favoured denizen of a universe founded on absurdity”.<sup>18</sup> Malraux’s response, as we have seen, was not to cast about for a new sheet anchor of permanence in a world of relentless change but to embrace the world of change itself – to search for “a metaphysic in which there is no longer any fixed point”, a source of meaning compatible with constant change. In the first instance, this led to an exploration of the world of action, an alternative most vividly illustrated by his best-known novel, *La Condition humaine*. The second phase of his intellectual development, which began in 1934, saw the emergence of a concept of man – humanity in general – in which, similarly, there is no longer any fixed point – a concept of man not as enduring essence but as *possibility*, as a presence that *could* be more than the chaos of which it seems to be part but which, in order to be so, stands in need of affirmation: man understood as “human adventure”. Art, for Malraux, is one of the ways (although not the *only*

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<sup>17</sup> The suggestion that Malraux seeks to elevate the artist to the level of superhero somehow removed from “ordinary life” – “aristocrats of the mind” as an early critic alleged (Saisselin: 259) – has been a recurring theme amongst Malraux’s less sympathetic critics.

<sup>18</sup> See page 136.

way<sup>19</sup>) in which the human adventure can be affirmed. It is an “anti-destiny” – a means through which man constructs a rival, humanised world amidst the indifference of the “sorry scheme of things”.

Ultimately, therefore, Malraux’s concern is much less the individual artist – despite the obvious admiration he has for many artists, known or anonymous – than the achievement of art as a specific human invention. He writes in *Les Voix du silence* that “an art museum is one of the places that give us the highest idea of man” and, characteristically, as we have had occasion to note before, his words are chosen with care:<sup>20</sup> the art museum gives us the highest idea not of the artist, but of *man*. It is not a question of artist hero-worship, and still less, of course, of unquestioning admiration for anything that happens to be found in an art museum. (Malraux’s thinking, as we have seen, has nothing in common with so-called “institutionalist” theories.) His proposition, rather, is that many – not necessarily all – of the works one finds in an art museum, like many great works of literature or music, bear witness to a capacity, and a will, in man to be more than the blind forces that constantly threaten to reduce him to their level. The art museum, or the *musée imaginaire*, is an encounter with a world which, in one of his striking phrases “is an object lesson for the gods”,<sup>21</sup> not because it presents a series of imaginary utopias – which it seldom does – but because the world of art is one in which man is no longer mere subject – mere creature of “a kingdom of the blind” – but ruler. “Our imaginary museum teaches us,” he writes in the closing stages of *Les Voix du silence*,

that the rule of destiny is threatened whenever a world of man, whatever be the nature of that world, emerges from the world *tout court*. Every masterpiece, implicitly or openly, tells of a victory over the blind force of destiny.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, while Malraux has much to say about topics one might naturally expect to find in a theory of art (including a number of major topics that the philosophy of art has neglected), and while his account represents what one might, with little exaggeration, call a Copernican

<sup>19</sup> As argued earlier, Malraux also sought to show how this affirmation could take place in thought and deed. See page 76.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the earlier comments on the phrase “one of”, page 77.

<sup>21</sup> *Les Voix du silence*, 882.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 887.

revolution in our thinking about art – so radical are the challenges it poses – ultimately, his understanding of the nature and significance of art concerns more than art alone. At its deepest level, his thinking about art is inseparable from an understanding of the significance of man, and especially man in contemporary, agnostic, Western, and Westernised, cultures. There is no question of art as a substitute religion, and we have seen that Malraux draws a sharp distinction between the function of art and the function of an absolute. There is unmistakably, however, an insistence on the profound human importance of art, especially today in civilizations bereft of any fundamental value. Art does not link humanity up with the underlying nature of things: unlike a religion, it does not draw aside the veil of appearances to reveal the longed-for Truth. It does, nevertheless, affirm the significance of the precarious human adventure amidst the empire of blind, mute destiny.





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