

Anne Greenfeld

University of Louisville, Kentucky

From Solitary Confinement to Fraternité Virile: Kassner's Resurrection in *Le Temps du mépris*

When *Le Temps du mépris* first appeared in 1935 it received a poor critical response, and even today it is considered Malraux's least successful novel by most critics. James Robert Hewitt writes that *Le Temps du mépris* was originally attacked "both as propagandist and as artistically weak" (56); Pol Gaillard agrees with this initial critical reaction, saying that "*Le Temps du mépris* n'est pas son meilleur livre" (95). Cecil Jenkins attributes the artistic failure of this novel to its mixture of fantasy, allegory and history (84); Malraux himself considered the work a "navet" (Gaillard 95), and decided to exclude it from the Pléiade edition of his novels (Boak 96).

Most readers today would also agree that *Le Temps du mépris* is not Malraux's *chef-d'oeuvre*, but perhaps our negative response is intensified by our unfair comparison of this work with the two giants which surround it. While *Le Temps du mépris* is not of the stature of *La Condition humaine* and *L'Espoir*, it nonetheless serves as an intermediate step between Malraux's pessimistic view of the human condition in 1933 and his view in 1938 of human hope. At the end of *La Condition humaine* it is the egocentric individualist who survives — Clappique, Ferral — and members of the *fraternité virile* who die. In *L'Espoir*, on the other hand, fellowship and collective effort are shown to be keys to human survival and fulfillment. *Le Temps du mépris* can be seen as a transition between these two novels, for it involves the metaphorical death of an individual as a separate, isolated entity, and his rebirth as a member of the human community.

The theme of resurrection in *Le Temps du mépris* is manifested on three different but related levels: Kassner's portrayal both as a Christ and as a Prometheus figure, as well as his portrayal as a locus of name exchange. Kassner's resemblance to Christ is perhaps the most obvious of these: his imprisonment is represented as a kind of

burial, brought on by his decision to sacrifice himself in order to save others, and his flight to freedom can be seen as an ascension into heaven. Kassner also resembles Prometheus: both he and the Titan rebel against those in power by bringing knowledge and communication to those in ignorance; both must suffer a punishment which resembles death; both return to the land of the living only through another's sacrifice. Finally, Kassner's death-like imprisonment can be seen to represent his status as an isolated individual, and his liberation to represent his rebirth as a member of a *fraternité virile*. This aspect of Kassner's resurrection is underlined by his ultimate exchange of his name — marker of his separateness and individuality — for freedom.

The relationship between name exchange and resurrection in *Le Temps du mépris* is suggested in the Preface. Denis Boak claims that the Preface is only valuable for "indications of his [Malraux's] general aesthetic theory" and not for a better understanding of this particular novel. Indeed, Boak says that the Preface only "confuses the issue" (97). I disagree; it seems to me that the Preface has direct bearing on the text it precedes, and that it elucidates much of Kassner's experience. In the Preface Malraux calls into question a certain kind of unformulated individualism, considering it an enemy of "la fraternité virile;" he calls this individualism a "fanatisme de la différence" (10). The individual doesn't only stand in opposition to the group, however, according to Malraux; he/she also derives benefit from it: "l'individu s'oppose à la collectivité, mais il s'en nourrit" (11). This "nourishment" involves exchange between individuals in the group, and the value of each individual is based on what has been gained through this exchange: "[t]oute vie psychologique est un échange, et le problème fondamental de la personne concrète, c'est de savoir de quoi elle s'entend se nourrir" (12). Malraux explains that "l'individu vaut par ce qu'il renferme" (11). I suggest that Malraux's discussion in the Preface of the "différence" of individualism and the role of the individual in relation to the group relates directly to *Le Temps du mépris*, and that it pertains specifically to the exchange and loss of names as a way to achieve salvation and resurrection.

Kassner himself is a locus of exchange, as his own name indicates: Kassner, *kasse*, *caisse*. He saves his comrades by destroy-

ing a list of their names (132), exchanging his freedom for their salvation, and he in turn is saved when his own name is exchanged for anonymity. It is significant that Kassner *eats* the list of names, thus determining his value as an individual by how he is "nourished" by a group.

In destroying the names of his comrades Kassner destroys their *différence*: they have in a sense died as individuals and been reborn as a collective *in him*. Kassner himself is saved when he loses his own name, when someone else claims to be him (118); he exchanges his name and incarceration for freedom and detachment from his own individual *différence*. The loss of his name represents a kind of death of his former identity, and he is in a sense resurrected as an anonymous witness, detached from himself. He must put this detachment into practice as soon as he learns why he has been freed: "il était obligé de parler de lui-même comme d'un autre" (120). Indeed, Kassner feels so detached from himself that he has the impression that his wife has been saved and not he; this impression is so strong that it comes to him three times. His first experience of this feeling comes just after he is freed from prison, when "il sentit avec violence que sa femme venait de rencontrer une chance extraordinaire, comme si elle eût été libérée, et non lui" (124). He gets this feeling again on the plane to Prague, after having survived a storm: "Pour la seconde fois Kassner eut l'impression que c'était sa femme qui venait d'être sauvée" (143). He remembers both instances later in Prague: "Quand il avait été libéré, puis quand l'avion avait échappé à l'orage, il lui avait semblé qu'elle était sauvée et non lui" (154).

Kassner's wife Anna also perceives his detachment from himself: "Elle se taisait, et le regardait comme si une part de lui-même fût restée dans la mort avec celui qui s'était livré" (173). She underlines further her husband's detachment from himself when she tells him she thinks it is he who is outside, knocking on the door: "J'ai cru que c'était toi qui arrivais!" (181). Kassner is no longer sole owner of his name; from now on he will share himself with others.

This sharing is a fundamental aspect of Kassner's sacrificial role as a Christ figure. His resemblance to Jesus can first be seen when he eats the list of names and is arrested. Here he has taken on responsibility for others, and suffers so that they might be saved.

Furthermore, Kassner's incarceration is likened to a burial, and his ascension on the plane can be seen as an ascent into heaven.

While in prison Kassner compares the music he hears in his mind to death (55); he refers to some of the cells as "cercueils verticaux" (114) and to the prison itself as "l'enfer" (147) and "[le] néant" (149). His liberation involves a steady ascension, first from the "région souterraine" of the prison to the surface of the earth (57): we are told that soon after Kassner had been freed "[il] avait commencé à retrouver la terre" (124). Then he takes a plane, literally rising from the land of the dead into heaven. Kassner's burial in prison had involved isolation, separateness, *différence*; the heaven into which he ascends is represented by his *fraternité virile* with the pilot.

Il semblait soudain à Kassner qu'ils venaient d'échapper à la gravitation, qu'ils étaient suspendus avec leur fraternité quelque part dans les mondes, accrochés au nuage dans un combat primitif, tandis que la terre et ses cachots continuaient sous eux leur course qu'ils ne croiserait plus jamais. (134)

Finally, the parallel between Kassner's liberation and Christ's resurrection is underlined by a passage at the end of the novel. It seems to Kassner as if "un dieu vient de naître," and that "le sens du monde naissait, et que la vie la plus secrète des choses allait être accomplie" (183).

This passage also calls to mind Prometheus, said to have brought the fire of meaning and understanding to the world of human beings. Kassner's kinship with Prometheus has also been noted by Cecil Jenkins and Thomas Jefferson Kline, but neither elaborates on the resemblance. Jenkins simply suggests that *Le Temps du mépris* was Malraux's attempt at "a modern version of *Prometheus Bound*" (83), and while Kline calls Kassner a "Promethean figure," the only reason he gives for this comparison is Kassner's ability to "[deny] the nothingness of the universe through creativity" (98). It will be shown here that it is Kassner's role as *révolté*, as well as specific aspects of

his experience in prison, which underlies his resemblance to the rebel Titan.

In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus has rebelled against the other Titans and the god Zeus by giving fire to humanity; his gift also includes light, knowledge, language and power (20-22). Prometheus is punished for this gift by being chained to a rock, but because he refuses to divulge to Hermes the circumstances of the possible downfall of Zeus, he will be punished further (32). First he will be buried in rock, then he will be tortured by an eagle which will come daily to tear out and eat his liver (43). Since, as a Titan, Prometheus is immortal, he will not die, but must suffer a terrible death-in-life until a god will consent to suffer in his place.

HERMES: And do not look for any end to pains like these until a god appears to take upon himself your load of suffering, and is willing to go down to rayless Hades and the gloomy depths of Hell. (43)

There are a number of parallels between Kassner's experience and that of Prometheus. Kassner's work with the unions against the Nazis, for example, and especially his role with the "service d'information," can be likened to Prometheus' gift of light, knowledge and communication to humankind (Malraux 34). Kassner also endures a punishment similar to that of the Titan. First of all, he is imprisoned in darkness and isolation: like Prometheus, he suffers the lack of the very gifts he had brought to others. Secondly, Kassner, like Prometheus, has secret knowledge he wishes to keep from those who have imprisoned him. When Prometheus refused to divulge his knowledge to Hermes, he was threatened with having an eagle come to tear out and eat his liver. Kassner, in turn, fears divulging his secrets through his own insanity (50-51), a state of mind represented by his vision of a vulture.

Et sous la douleur la folie attendait, embusquée comme elle dans ses membres depuis qu'il avait cessé d'avancer. Il avait été obsédé par le cauchemar d'un vautour enfermé avec lui dans

une cage, et qui lui arrachait des morceaux de chair à chaque coup de son bec en pioche, sans cesser de regarder ses yeux qu'il convoitait. Le vautour approchait, gonflé depuis des heures de tout le sang noir de l'obscurité... (53)

Just as Prometheus' eagle would eat his liver, so Kassner's vulture threatens to eat his entrails, where he keeps his own secret knowledge. After all, Kassner had *eaten* the list of his comrades' names.

Kassner's choice of bird — one which eats carrion — underlines his view of himself as existing in a state resembling death. However, Kassner, like Prometheus, cannot actually die: although he tries to commit suicide to keep himself from giving up his secret knowledge, he is unable to do so (82-85). Just as Prometheus must endure his own death-in-life until someone else is willing to take his place, so must Kassner.

Considered in the context of his *parenté* with Prometheus, Kassner's resurrection can be seen to begin before he is actually freed from prison, for it involves his escape from the vulture of insanity. It is his own Promethean gift to humanity, communication, which saves Kassner from the madness of his separateness and isolation. His salvation through communication and understanding takes place in several stages. The first occurs when Kassner understands the messages conveyed by the taps on the wall, marking his rebirth as a member of the human community; the second takes place when he decides to tell his own story. At Kassner's departure from his cell he is overwhelmed by light, another Promethean gift; ironically, he himself is at first unable to "see" that the light is a sign of his liberation.

Ils l'emmenaient à travers de grandes vagues jaunes de lumière. On savait maintenant qu'il était Kassner [he thinks]. Tenter l'évasion? Il ne contrôlait presque plus ses gestes; il ne pourrait ni sauter ni se battre. Et à peine voyait-il clair. (113)

It is only when Kassner understands how and why he is being set free that he experiences his own resurrection. Just as Prometheus isn't free from his torments until a god consents to take on his load of suffering and go down to Hades, so Kassner is not fully resurrected from his death-like incarceration until he realizes that another man has taken his name to suffer in his place.

Clappique, who never leaves the alienation of his individualism, lives a life characterized as a "suicide sans mort" (*Condition* 360); Kassner's own solitary confinement is described as a death-in-life. It would seem that in the 1930s Malraux felt that to be isolated and alone was to be not entirely alive. It is not surprising, then, that Kassner's liberation from prison should be depicted as a kind of resurrection. It is clear from his role as a locus of name exchange, as well as his portrayal as a Christ-like and Promethean figure, that this rebirth involves not only his own salvation, but also that of others. Kassner's resurrection points the way to *L'Espoir*.

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