

## **André Malraux Centennial: 1901-2001 and The First American Doctoral Dissertation on Malraux**

A fitting tribute as we witness to André Malraux , in celebrating the centenary of his birth at the turn of this millennium, is to pay homage at the same time to one of his earliest admirers : Louise Rowan Whiterell, residing in Madison, Wisconsin. Professor Whiterell has the distinguished honor of having spearheaded Malraux studies in North America by writing, in 1948, the first major doctoral dissertation on Malraux's novels: "The Literary Development of André Malraux from his Earliest Writings Through Volume I of *La Lutte avec l'Ange*."<sup>1</sup> Although she states that her study is incomplete, given that Malraux is still a relatively young writer in the 1940s, Prof. Whiterell writes with the confidence that she is dealing with an exceptional writer who would not only mark his century but also, in the future, stand as a major French literary figure. A brief passage taken from her introduction summarizes the intent and scope of her study:

From our study of Malraux , we shall see that he progressed first from a primary concern with single individuals to a concern with the individual as related to society. Then he proceeded to a consideration of many individuals bound to society and making up its varied nature. Finally, Malraux has undertaken the problems of man in general. But through all these stages, he never loses a sense of the importance of the individual life. We shall see that as a literary artist Malraux evolved from use of a fantastic sort of neo-symbolism or surrealism to a powerful evocation of reality. Once he had chosen a realistic form for his novels, he changed their subject matter and their scope, but kept the same basic literary techniques – improving these techniques as the years went by, varying their use according to the demands of each novel, but not altering them in their essential character. (p. 2)

The clarity in direction and expression exemplified in this paragraph marks the entire study. Each chapter focuses on a literary work and on a stage of Malraux's life, first summarizing with admirable conciseness the essence of the story and then tracing, with

careful notation and analysis, the development of character, ideas and stylistic and esthetic traits.

The following excerpt from the Conclusion describes succinctly Malraux's ideological evolution:

Let us take a final glance at the progress of his ideas. The first two "novels" hardly count here: they are almost fantasies. However, they do show an early interest in death and man's painful state of existence. In *La Tentation de l'Occident*, he comments on the conflicting attitudes of East and West, perhaps in an effort to clarify his own thoughts and attitudes. He weighs Christian civilization and finds its wanting, and again shows his concern with the position of man in this world – man whose only certainty is death. In his early realistic novels, such as *Les Conquérants* and *La Voie Royale*, he has concerned himself primarily with the interests and problems of the individual man. Society is but a pale but necessary background, perhaps to some extent, to the individual's search for meaning in life and death for personal worldly power. In *La Condition Humaine* Malraux presents the individual opposing the absurdity of life and the finality of death by serving humanity – individual life completed and given meaning through its sharing of the fortunes of society and one's fellow man. Malraux the communist-sympathizer naturally showed this service to humanity through Communistic movements with which he had been personally acquainted. However, in *La Condition Humaine*, Malraux is not a mere Communist propagandist. He is objective enough to criticize some of the Communistic practices. We feel that he is humanitarian rather than Communist in this book. In *Le Temps du Mépris*, Malraux has given us a single individual, again serving his fellow man through Communistic activities. Here there is no contrast between the individual's aims and those of his social group with which he works, no criticism of any of the procedures of the Communists. But perhaps the most significant thing about this book, marking a stage in the development of Malraux's ideas, is its anti-fascist propaganda. In the middle of the 1930's Malraux was an impassioned anti-fascist – a stand which was to lead him later to oppose Communism itself. With *L'Espoir* Malraux detaches himself almost completely from individual characters. He puts before the reader not one or several individuals but many characters which seems to represent the many facets which made up the complicated prism of society in Loyalist Spain at the time. All the nuances of Communism, liberalism and socialism, even the broad social implication of Christianity, are included in his sweeping picture. It marks a step beyond a consideration of man in society (*La*

*Condition Humaine*) to a consideration of men as society. With *La Lutte avec l'Ange : les Noyers de l'Altenburg*, Malraux goes a big step further. His main characters here are not mere individuals in society, nor men seen as society: they are representatives of Man, and as representatives of the whole human race, they struggle with the eternal problems of life and death and man's position in the world. The emphasis here seems to be shifting from death and man's unhappy position in the world to the values of life – which Malraux had not admitted heretofore. From smallest concerns Malraux has progressed to the largest. Where it will lead him, only the next installments of *La Lutte avec l'Ange* can tell us. (p. 223-25)

Prof. Whiterell touches here on central Malraux traits, and especially what Frohock called the “tragic imagination”, on his anti-fascism, his realistic concerns and his humanistic values, – concepts which would find echo in almost all subsequent critical studies of Malraux. Reading this study, with its directness, clarity and sobriety, is a refreshing experience. It brings one back to an appreciation of the fundamentals of literary study, unobstructed by the obscurantism of critical pedanticism. For any student, it still constitutes a solid, insightful introduction to Malraux, one that invites closer reading and suggests further explorations.

This pioneering study of André Malraux, as well as the examples of her promotion of Paul Claudel studies in America, testify to Prof. Whiterell's passion for literature and the arts, a devotion and contribution that merit singular recognition and appreciation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Department of French and Italian, University of Wisconsin, June 1948.