On Art as Anti-Destiny: Foundations of André Malraux's Theory of Art

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As a first step in considering the foundations of André Malraux's theory of art, it is useful to reflect on a general theoretical issue which is not limited to Malraux in its application, but which is nevertheless vital to an understanding of his thinking. The issue is the relationship between art and 'reality'—or, as the same idea is also expressed at times, between art and 'the real world', or between art and 'human experience', or between art and 'life'.

Once one begins to ask fundamental questions about art and its purpose, the notion of 'reality', or 'the real world', or equivalents of the kind just mentioned, usually makes an early appearance. It is often suggested, for example, that art represents reality in some way, or that it expresses some aspect of reality, or that it provides a certain kind of knowledge about reality, or even, as some post-structuralist theorists have argued, that art reaches out to reality but is never quite able to grasp it. Much has been written for and against propositions of this kind. Some theorists opt for representation, some for expression, some for other alternatives. Irrespective of the choice, however, a noteworthy feature of such discussions is that attention usually fastens very quickly on the *relationship between* art and reality—that is, whether it takes the form of representation, expression or something else—without any sustained attempt to explain what precisely one might mean by 'reality' in this context. *This* question is typically discussed quite cursorily, if at all. Reality, it often seems to be assumed, is a self-explanatory idea—loosely conceived as something like 'the world we see and experience around us every day'. In the words of one theorist, it is simply 'the actual

world in which we live'.[1] Or as another puts it, reality is "the rest of the world in which [aesthetic objects] exist".[2] Reality or 'the real world', it is implied, is an idea one can more or less take for granted, moving quickly on to the more important question of what kind of relationship art might bear to reality.

As a preliminary to discussing Malraux's theory of art (and indeed to considering fundamental questions about art generally), it is important to see why this approach is not satisfactory, and why one needs to clarify the meaning of the concept 'reality', 'the world', or their equivalents, in this context.

In a brilliant chapter in *La Chartreuse de Parme*, Stendhal describes the rather unexpected reactions of his hero, the young Fabrizio del Dongo, on the field of Waterloo. An ardent admirer of Napoleon, Fabrizio has made his way onto the battlefield to witness the unfolding of a glorious historical event. But somehow the mighty spectacle he longs to see never materialises. Instead, his attention is constantly caught by what seem to be irrelevant, even absurd, details—like the dirtiness of the bare feet of the first corpse he encounters, or the little black lumps of soil flung inexplicably into the air in a field nearby (kicked up, he realises soon afterwards, by enemy cannon shot).

The scene is a masterly depiction of the yawning gulf between an historical event in the historian's sense of the phrase, and the perspectives of individual experience—that is, between 'reality' for the historian, and the 'reality' of the individual's immediate perceptions and emotions. The practised historian, whose perspective is that of *collective* experience, might well be able to furnish a convincing, even compelling, impression of the mighty spectacle Fabrizio hoped to see; but the novelist, who is committed to the portrayal of genuine *individual* experience (and not just to fabricating that experience) discovers that the 'reality' of the Battle of Waterloo is a corpse's dirty feet, and lumps of dirt flung inexplicably into the air.[3] In short, 'reality' for the historian seems to differ in a fundamental way from 'reality' for the novelist, and the notion of reality seems suddenly to be subdividing before our eyes.[4] The supposition that there is simply one undifferentiated entity that one might satisfactorily describe as "the actual world in which we live" or "the rest of the world in which [aesthetic objects] exist", already begins to look superficial and question-begging.

A further aspect of this issue merits consideration. When concepts such as 'reality' or 'the real world' are employed in the context of the theory of literature, or of art generally (as they often are), are they intended to imply something that the mind has grasped or comprehended in some way—or are they not? The difference can be illustrated by sentences such as: "out of this chaos there emerged a new reality" and "his schemes always foundered when they came into contact with reality". In the first, the word, reality, suggests something specific and identifiable—a particular set of circumstances that one might isolate and describe in some way. In the second, however, that implication has faded from view and the word, reality, now seems to signify something far more amorphous—something one might describe merely as the unpredictable, uncontrollable, brute facts of life, or in Shakespeare's phrase, "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to."

In the context of the theory of art, this difference in meaning is far from a mere semantic quibble. If one wishes to argue, as many theorists do, that part at least of the function of art is to *achieve a grasp* on reality in some way, then it clearly makes a difference whether or not one thinks that the term 'reality' signifies something that has *already* been grasped or comprehended in some form. If that is the implication, the function of art begins to look as if it might be supplementary, or secondary, in some way—a form of *extra* knowledge placed on top of pre-existent knowledge already formulated by some other means. If, however, 'reality' signifies something roughly equivalent to the "unpredictable, uncontrollable 'brute facts' of life", then art seems to have been assigned a much weightier task—that of furnishing the *primary* shape and form to a 'reality' that would otherwise, presumably, be mere anarchy and chaos. Here, in short, is another level of complexity lurking beneath the surface of the deceptively bland term 'reality' and its various equivalents. One is not only dealing with a term whose meaning seems to vary with the area of intellectual endeavour in question (history or art, for example), but also with one that harbours an ambiguity on an issue that seems to have a direct bearing on the function and importance one ascribes to art.

Enough has perhaps now been said to establish that in discussing the relationship between art and reality, one cannot simply take the idea of reality for granted, as so many theorists appear to do, or dismiss it with cursory phrases of the kind mentioned earlier.

The notion of reality in the context of art is not self-explanatory but is, at best, a kind of conceptual shadow whose substance one needs to identify and describe before it can be put to good explanatory use. This point, as we shall now see, is of key importance when one considers André Malraux's theory of art, because one quickly discovers that the concept of reality, and what Malraux understands the term to mean in the context of art, is of fundamental importance to his thinking.

What then does Malraux have in mind when he speaks of the reality to which art is addressed? A passage of key importance in this regard occurs in a major speech on the function of art that Malraux delivered in 1973, the text of which he later included in a work entitled *La Tête d'Obsidienne* (translated into English under the title *Picasso's Mask*). In the course of this speech, Malraux speaks of what he terms "the basic emotion man feels in the face of life, beginning with his own". This basic emotion, he writes, springs from certain fundamental questions. The question, "Why is it that something exists rather than nothing?", he explains, leads on to the question, "Why has life taken this particular form?" He then continues:

> 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 the most commonplace of them seem exotic. It is, undoubtedly, inseparable from the passing of time; a simultaneous awareness of the strange, the contingent, and the ephemeral.[5]

Malraux's meaning here becomes clearer if we relate it to the sphere of religious belief, which has, in his view, been one of humanity's principal means of responding to the basic emotion he describes. Civilisations with a strong religious sense, or even with a strong attachment to a secular absolute of some kind, respond to the question, "Why has life taken this particular form?", by providing an *explanation* of things. The Christian, for example, replies that the world is the way it is because it is God's Creation. A believer in a secular absolute, such as the perfectibility of Man, might find the explanation in the progressive unfolding of History. The specific content of these responses is not important for present purposes. The key point is that once an explanation is provided (and, of course, genuinely believed), existence in general, and the existence of man in particular, are rendered 'natural', in the sense of being there, and

being the way they are, *for a reason*. Seen in this light, the world is as it was intended to be, and man is 'at home' in the world, even if, as Christianity and many other religions taught, the home is only temporary, and frequented at times by various malevolent forces.

In the absence of such an absolute, however (and Malraux believes this is essentially the case in what he terms our "agnostic" Western culture today),[6] there is no longer any explanation. Instead, one is left face-to-face with the bewildering sense, expressed in the "fundamental questions" to which Malraux refers, that everything *lacks* a reason for being, or for being the way it is. The way things are, including the most commonplace objects or events, seems no more significant, definitive, or intended than any other way they might possibly be. In place of the deep-seated conviction that has been man's constant, reassuring companion for millennia, that the world is *the* world, the *only* world, there is a strange sense of the arbitrariness and contingency of things—as if the world and everything it contains were no more than a façade behind which might lurk unknown other worlds. There is, in other words, no longer any possibility of 'going behind' the phenomena of experience to justify or 'ground' them. The world is apprehended solely in terms of *appearance* —not appearance in the sense of something behind which one might hope to discover a hidden reality (the way things 'really' are), but appearance behind which *nothing can be known*: appearance *per se*, or in Malraux's own phrase, "appearance in the metaphysical sense."[7] Unlike even the humblest believer in an absolute—religious or otherwise—one is no longer 'at home' in the world, but instead inhabits a universe which seems, at bottom, mere formlessness and void, and in which the presence or absence of man seems a matter of indifference.

Implicit in this, as Malraux points out, is a profound sense of the ephemeral.[8] The believing Christian, for example, knew that the Gospel contained an 'imperishable' message—because it spoke of the unchanging 'nature of things'—and he or she therefore knew that actions carried out in obedience to that message, no matter how insignificant they might appear, would partake of that imperishability. What is experienced now could merge with 'what once was' to create a sense of timelessness—as the Angelus every evening recalled the Annunciation, or Christmas signified a reliving of 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, even if of seemingly minor importance, will partake of the revolution's enduring 'historical significance'. In the absence of an absolute, however, there is no such assurance. Cut off from the unchanging nature of things, one senses that the significance of all human action, from simple daily tasks to the most ambitious undertaking, is easy prey to the ravages of time. Man inhabits a universe in which all action seems at risk of counting for nothing, and in which, once again, human existence seems a matter of complete indifference.

These considerations lead one directly to the heart of Malraux's thinking about the purpose of art. The "basic emotion man feels in the face of life" discussed above is, in his view, as fundamental to art as it is to the pursuit of an absolute. In the terminology of the earlier discussion, it is the 'reality' to which art, as well as religion or a secular absolute, respond. Not that Malraux is claiming, as commentators have occasionally suggested,[9] that art is a new absolute in the sense in which that term is being used here. This is a misunderstanding of his position that will be addressed below. Malraux is, however, arguing that art, like religion or a secular absolute, is addressed to the reality of the "basic emotion" in question—the "simultaneous awareness of the strange, the contingent, and the ephemeral". As one can immediately see, there is a vast distance separating this from bland formulations of the kind quoted earlier which suggest that reality, where art is concerned, can be adequately described in phrases such as "the actual world in which we live" or "the rest of the world in which [aesthetic objects] exist". For Malraux, the reality to which art is addressed needs to be understood against the background of the issues raised in the earlier parts of this discussion: it is a reality experienced directly by the living individual (albeit not *as* an individual, but in virtue of something shared with all humanity), and a reality not in the sense of something endowed with pre-existent meaning, but of something much closer to a sense of anarchy and chaos. For Malraux, art is addressed to the realm of mere appearance, in which the way things are seems no more significant than any other way they might be, and in which the presence or absence of man in the scheme of things seems a matter of no consequence. The fundamental purpose of art is, and has always been, to provide a *defence* against this reality—that is, to resist the chaos of appearances and to assert man's presence. In a well-known, though often misunderstood, statement in *The Voices of Silence*, Malraux defines art as an "*anti-destin*"—an "anti-destiny"—or, as the

line has been rendered, accurately enough, in English, "a revolt against man's fate".[10] The term "*destin*" here is not, as some critics have implied, a lapse into mystification.[11] It is Malraux's shorthand, as it were, for the sense of "counting for nothing" in the scheme of things analysed above, art being one of the ways, in his view, that humanity defends itself against destiny thus understood.

How does art achieve this? It may be useful here to draw a comparison with the thinking behind some of the more familiar claims of Western aesthetics. If one thinks of art in terms of traditional concepts such as mimesis, representation or expression, the entity denoted by terms such as 'reality' or 'the world', or sometimes 'nature', is usually understood as a basic reference point, or guide, to which the artist must remain faithful if a successful work of art is to result—whether this fidelity finds expression through the naturalism of, say, a Chardin or a Courbet, or through the quite different style of, say, a Cézanne or a Picasso (to choose examples from visual art). Malraux's argument constitutes a radical challenge to this theoretical schema. Far from being a reference point or guide, reality, for Malraux, as we are now in a position to see, is that *against which* art seeks to provide a defence, and a key feature of his account of art is his consistent and unambiguous rejection of traditional approaches of the kind just mentioned, even if proffered by artists themselves. "Whatever the artist himself may say on the matter", he writes in *The Voices of Silence*, "never does he let himself be mastered by the outside world; always he subdues it to something he puts in its stead".[12]

What is this "something he puts in its stead"? It is, Malraux answers unequivocally, "*another* world—not necessarily a supernal world, or a glorified one, but one different in kind from that of reality".[13] The "difference in kind" lies precisely in the elimination of destiny—that is, in the elimination of everything belonging merely to the chaos of appearances, and the creation in its stead of a world which, in Malraux words, is "scaled down to man's measure—and [in which] the outside world loses its autonomy".[14] In the case of visual art, for example, "the visible world" is, at most, Malraux writes, a "dictionary"—an assemblage of separate elements, individually capable of being invested with meaning, but combined in a manner that renders them incoherent—or "more accurately", Malraux writes, "the way in which they are assembled, their syntax, is not that of art".[15] Thus, he writes, "However complex, however lawless an art may claim to be—even the art of a Van Gogh or a Rimbaud—

it stands for unity as against the chaos of appearances".[16] Art functions, he asserts, "by wresting forms from the world which has man at its mercy, and transposing them into the world in which he is supreme—by changing destiny into significance".[17] It is a world constructed of those elements on which the artist has been able to impose meaning while excluding those he cannot. This is why the term "conquest" recurs frequently in Malraux's account of art, and why a prominent theme in his theory of art is the link between art and the "dignity of man"—leading him to write in *The Voices of Silence*, for example, that "an art museum is one of the places that shows man at his noblest".[18] For Malraux, art is a human creation with a quite specific purpose: it has nothing to do with the representation of reality—however broadly one likes to interpret the term "representation"—its purpose is the creation of *another* world, and in doing so asserting man's presence in a universe in which his existence seems a matter of indifference.

If one now thinks back to the earlier discussion, one can see why it would be a mistake to claim that Malraux regards art as a new absolute—a kind of secular religion—in the sense in which these terms have been used above. A religion, or a secular absolute, as indicated, involves an affirmation about the nature of things. It implies that the form of the world is the only form it could have, since, as the handiwork of a higher power, it is the form it was intended to have. Art as Malraux understands it makes no such affirmation. Art, as he says, "stands for unity as against the chaos of appearances", but does not affirm that appearance is merely an illusion beneath which lies a permanent and universal reality, or truth. Art, in short, makes the world one, but does not, like a religion, affirm that there is only one world.[19] Both art and religion certainly seek to combat what Malraux terms "destiny", but art does so not by vanquishing it once and for all as an absolute does, but by a continual struggle *in the face of it*. Art is a "revolt against man's fate", but at no point can it claim a definitive victory.

These comments on Malraux's theory of art have been limited to one aspect of his thinking only—though the claim here is that it is a fundamental aspect. The notion of art as an "anti-destiny" is the key insight, the fundamental, generative idea, so to speak, that underlies the theory of art Malraux goes on to develop. There is much more to be said about that theory, and the purpose of Malraux's extensive writings on art is to explore those implications in depth. They

include, for example, issues such as the nature of the creative process, the relationship between art and history, the significance of the notion of beauty (which, for Malraux, relates to an experience of art that has now lost its hold on us), and, above all, the vexed but crucial question of the relationship between art and time, where, arguably, Malraux makes one of his most fascinating, original, and truly illuminating contributions to the theory of art.

Yet even without examining those matters, and confining one's attention to the issues discussed here, one can see why Malraux's theory of art is worthy of close attention. A key aspect of his theory is that he gives us a way of conceptualising the basic human purpose of art—an issue which aesthetics has in recent times, and certainly in the Anglo-American sphere, tended to shy away from. Moreover, the purpose Malraux assigns to art is far from peripheral. Malraux has suggested that to ask the question, "What is art?", is also, by implication, to raise the question "What is man?"[20] One may perhaps feel that such implications are often rather distant in much contemporary aesthetics, but they are nonetheless very close at hand in Malraux's own case. Malraux approaches art in terms of fundamental human responses to existence—in terms of what he calls "the basic emotion man feels in the face of life, beginning with his own". The purpose he assigns to art is as fundamental—as 'metaphysical', if one likes—as those questions: it is, he argues, one of the ways man responds to that basic emotion, and has done so since the dawn of human history. A theory of art framed in those terms—particularly when presented as powerfully and in such a well-informed way as Malraux presents it—merits our close attention.

Notes

1 David Novitz, *Knowledge, Fiction and Imagination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), p. 118. Novitz uses a number of similar expressions such as the "actual world", "our world", and "our nonfictional world". A similar approach is widespread in discussions of the relationship between art and reality. See for example: Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); and Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

2 Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), p. 436.

3 I am indebted for this example to the Italian critic Nicola Chiaromonte. See "Malraux and the Demons of Action", in *Malraux: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R. Lewis (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pp. 98-99.

4 I have examined these issues in more detail, extending the discussion to cover science as well, in my article, "Literature and Reality", in *Journal of European Studies*, vol. 31, part 2, no. 122 (June 2001), pp. 143-156.

5 André Malraux, *La Tête d'Obsidienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), pp. 221-222. Malraux's most vivid descriptions of the "basic emotion" in question are to be found in certain key episodes in his later novels and in his Antimémoires. For reasons of space it is not possible to consider any of these episodes here.

6 Malraux frequently applies this term to contemporary Western culture. Cf. *The Voices of Silence*, for example, where he writes: "Agnosticism is no new thing; what is new is an agnostic culture" (*The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 496.)

7 Malraux often capitalises and writes "Appearance", signifying that he is not simply referring to the look, or the outside of things, but to the fundamental sense of contingency that has been described here. See for example André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: L'Intemporel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 78, p. 130.

8 The analysis in this paragraph is largely based on Malraux's interview with Guy Suarès, published in Guy Suarès, *Malraux, celui qui vient* (Paris: Editions Stock, 1979), esp. pp. 15-22.

9 See for example, Claude Tannery, Malraux, *L'Agnostique Absolu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), pp. 300-301.

10 *The Voices of Silence*, p. 639.

11 Cf. Dennis Boak, *André Malraux* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 219.

12 *The Voices of Silence*, p. 324

13 *The Voices of Silence*, p. 320. Emphasis added.

14 André Malraux, "De la représentation en Orient et en Occident", in *Verve*, no. 1 (Summer, 1938), p. 69.

15 *The Voices of Silence*, p. 350.

16 *The Voices of Silence*, p. 324.

17 "De la représentation en Orient et en Occident", p. 71.

18 *The Voices of Silence*, p. 15.

19 This insight has far-reaching consequences for Malraux's analysis of the temporal nature of art. A further implication, he argues, is that art now constitutes an absolute of a new kind—which he terms a "relativised absolute" (Cf. *The Voices of Silence*, p. 619). It is not possible to discuss these issues here.

20 In an interview in *Les Nouvelles littéraires* in 1952, cited in Claude Tannery, *Malraux, L'Agnostique absolu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 304.