Art and the Human Adventure
André Malraux’s Theory of Art

Derek Wylie Allan

March 2007

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the Australian National University
Apart from acknowledged quotations, this thesis is entirely my own original work.

Derek Wylie Allan
# Contents

Abstract III

Acknowledgements V

List of Illustrations VII

Chapter 1 – Introduction 1

Chapter 2 – Background: The years before 1934 21

Chapter 3 – The Human Adventure 43

Chapter 4 – Art: A Rival World 68

Chapter 5 – Art and Creation 94

Chapter 6 – The Emergence and Transformation of ‘Art’ 127

Chapter 7 – Art and Time 182

Chapter 8 – The First Universal World of Art 217

Chapter 9 – Art and History. The Anti-Arts 256

Chapter 10 – Conclusion 276

Bibliography 292
Abstract

This thesis examines the theory of art developed by the French writer, André Malraux (1901-1976), particularly as expounded in his two major works on the subject, *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux*.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Malraux’s writings on art attracted strong interest, one commentator at the time observing that his ‘influence and renown in recent years is perhaps matched only by that of Sir Herbert Read’. In recent years, however, interest has waned and in fields such as the philosophy of art where one might expect this aspect of his work to be widely discussed, it is frequently ignored.

This thesis argues that Malraux’s theory of art has been widely misunderstood and its importance seriously underestimated.

The thesis examines the principal elements of Malraux’s theory of art, explains how they fit together to form a systematic whole, and highlights the striking explanatory value of the theory – its capacity to make sense of the world of art as we know it today, and as it has been in the past. The discussion also considers the principal lines of criticism that have been advanced and, at a number of points, compares Malraux’s thinking with that of other theorists.

The analysis begins by tracing the development of Malraux’s thought from its beginnings in the 1920’s, when he diagnosed the cultural crisis in which he believed Western culture to be plunged following the death of God and the death of ‘Man’. It argues that Malraux found his initial response to this crisis in the intensely pragmatic value embodied in works such as *Les Conquérants* and *La Condition humaine*, but that in 1934 his thinking underwent a major transformation which allowed him to develop both a general notion of man – as ‘human adventure’ – and a general theory of art closely linked to this idea.

Major issues covered in the thesis include: Malraux’s fundamental proposition that art involves the creation of a ‘rival world’ which affirms man, as human adventure, as against the ephemeral world of appearances; his explanation of the nature of artistic creation; his account of the emergence of the Western concept
of art from the Renaissance onwards, and the subsequent transformation of that concept that took place towards the end of the nineteenth century; his revolutionary understanding of the relationship between art and time – the idea that art lives through a process of ‘metamorphosis’; the emergence of what he terms the ‘first universal world of art’, which is the world of art we inhabit today; his understanding of the relationship between art and history; and his explanation of the emergence during the nineteenth century of what he terms the ‘anti-arts’, a development which, he argues, remains a major feature of the contemporary cultural landscape. The final chapter draws together the principal threads of the analysis, summarises the major misunderstandings of Malraux’s theory of art discussed in the course of the study, and offers a major re-assessment of the theory’s significance.
I should like to express my thanks to those who have assisted me in the preparation of this thesis, especially to my supervisor, Dr Udo Thiel and to the advisors on my supervisory panel, Dr Peter Brown and Dr Fiona Jenkins, all of the Australian National University. I should also like to thank the academic staff and students who offered comments on many of the ideas expressed in this study in the course of seminars and conferences at which I presented papers concerning aspects of Malraux’s theory of art. In addition to a number of occasions at the Australian National University, these included three conferences at Sydney University over the period 2003 and 2004 held under the auspices of the Sydney Society for Literature and Aesthetics, a conference in 2004 at Macquarie University entitled ‘Critique Today’ under the auspices of the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy, the Annual Conference of the British Society of Aesthetics in Oxford in September 2005, a conference at the Sorbonne in November 2005 organised by the Amitiés Internationales André Malraux, and the annual conference of the American Society for Aesthetics in Milwaukee in October 2006. As indicated at relevant points in the following chapters, some of the ideas presented in this study have been included in previous articles I have written on Malraux. Those relating to his early novels, which are discussed briefly in Chapter Two, are:


Those relating to Malraux’s theory of art, or to the theory of art generally, are:


List of Illustrations

Fig. 1 Extract from television program: *Dialogue imaginaire avec Picasso* .............................................. 25
Fig. 2 Vermeer, *Lady weighing pearls* ........................................................................................................ 92
Fig. 3 Goya, *The Third of May* .................................................................................................................. 92
Fig. 4 Pieter Lastmann, *The Prophet Balaam* (1622)................................................................................. 98
Fig. 5 Rembrandt, *The Prophet Balaam* (1626) ............................................................................................ 98
Fig. 6 *Sesostris II* ........................................................................................................................................... 114
Fig. 7 *Queen Nefert*...................................................................................................................................... 114
Fig. 8 Bull, Lascaux (Magdalenian) .............................................................................................................. 115
Fig. 9 Mathias Grünwald, *The Isenheim Altarpiece* (detail)................................................................. 117
Fig. 10 *Virgin and Apostles*, Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello, Venice ................................................... 135
Fig. 11 *Virgin, Torcello* (detail) ................................................................................................................ 135
Fig. 12 Giotto, *Marriage of the Virgin*, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua ......................................................... 138
Fig. 13 Botticelli, *Spring* (detail) .............................................................................................................. 139
Fig. 14 Botticelli, *Spring* (detail) .............................................................................................................. 139
Fig. 15 Watteau, *The Embarkation for Cythera* ....................................................................................... 142
Fig. 16 Picasso, *Little girl skipping* ......................................................................................................... 144
Fig. 17 Voodoo Mask, Dahomey ................................................................................................................. 144
Fig. 18 Manet, *Olympia* ............................................................................................................................ 148
Fig. 19 Titian, *Venus d’Urbino* ................................................................................................................ 148
Fig. 20 Boucher, *Girl resting* ................................................................................................................... 163
Fig. 21 Goya, *Saturn* .................................................................................................................................... 163
Fig. 22 Filippo Lippi, detail of rocks (*Madonna and Child with Angels*) ..................................................... 169
Fig. 23 Leonardo da Vinci, detail of rocks (*Mona Lisa*) ......................................................................... 169
Fig. 24 Attack of the Laestrygonians, *Odyssey Landscapes* (Rome, c. 50 B.C.) ...................................... 169
Fig. 25 Extract from television program: *Promenades imaginaires dans Florence* ............................ 202
Fig. 26 Headless statue of *Gudea, Prince of Lagash* .............................................................................. 215
Fig. 27 The Pharaoh Djoser (Third Dynasty) .............................................................................................. 220
Fig. 28 Vermeer, *The Lacemaker* .......................................................................................................... 220
Fig. 29 Warka Head ..................................................................................................................................... 226
Fig. 30 Rembrandt, *Man with the Helmet* ............................................................................................... 231
Fig. 31 Titian, *Man with the Glove* ......................................................................................................... 231
Fig. 32 Rembrandt, *The Flayed Ox* ......................................................................................................... 233
Fig. 33 Soutine, *The Flayed Ox* .............................................................................................................. 233
Fig. 34 Horace Vernet, *The Battle of Jena* 1836 ...................................................................................... 266
Fig. 35 Bonnecontre, *The Three Graces* 1903 ....................................................................................... 267
Fig. 36 Raphael, *The Three Graces* 1504-1505 .................................................................................... 267
Fig. 37 Roche, *The Fall of Babylon* 1891 .............................................................................................. 270
Fig. 38 Bouguereau, *Les Ondées* 1902 .................................................................................................... 270
Fig. 39 Feathered Serpent – Teotihuacan ................................................................................................. 284
Fig. 40 Cycladic feminine figurine (c. 2500 BC) ....................................................................................... 284
Chapter One

Introduction

'Of all my books,' André Malraux confided to a friend in 1973, 'those I've written about art are certainly the ones that have been most seriously misunderstood.' Given the large body of work Malraux had published on art by this time — at the age of seventy-two, just three years before his death — this state of affairs was no doubt a source of some disappointment to him. Although best known for his work in other genres, especially the novel, Malraux wrote extensively on art, his collected writings on the topic filling two of the five volumes of his complete works published over recent years in Gallimard’s Bibliothèque de la Pléiade series. By 1973, the titles included his three-volume La Psychologie de l'art, a revised one-volume version of this work re-named Les Voix du silence which is probably his best known work on art, a book-length study of Goya, an illustrated study of world sculpture entitled Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale, and the first volume of a trilogy entitled La Métamorphose des dieux which set out to discuss developments in art from the earliest times. In the years remaining to him, undeterred apparently by the lack of understanding he mentions, Malraux published the further two volumes of La Métamorphose des dieux and wrote a study of literature entitled L'Homme précaire et la littérature which appeared posthumously in 1977. In addition to this very substantial body of work, there are numerous shorter pieces on aspects of art, such as prefaces, speeches (often connected with Malraux’s work as France’s Minister for Cultural Affairs between 1959 and 1969), interviews, and contributions to television programs concerning visual art.

Malraux's writings on art are the central subject of the present study, and the aim will be, in essence, to analyse and evaluate the theory of art presented there,


2 These programs are conserved in the Inathèque de France in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. Comments from interviews with Malraux included in the programs are quoted on occasion in the course of the present study.
especially (although not exclusively) in the key works on visual art, *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux*. This introductory chapter will provide some preliminary comment on the works in question and the critical reception they have received, and also outline the aims and methodology of the study. It may, however, be useful to begin with some brief, background remarks about Malraux’s writing career as a whole.

Malraux was born in Paris in 1901. In 1928 he published his first novel, *Les Conquérants*, which aroused widespread interest and stimulated vigorous debate amongst intellectuals at the time.³ He went on to write six novels in all. The third, *La Condition humaine*, which, like *Les Conquérants*, concerned an early phase of the Chinese Revolution, won the Prix Goncourt for 1933 and continues to be widely regarded as one of the outstanding works of twentieth century French literature. His fifth novel, *L’Espoir*, concerned the Spanish Civil War, in which he himself had participated; and his final work in the genre, *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*, which included episodes from the Second World War, was first published in Switzerland in 1943. The remaining two novels, somewhat less well known, are *La Voie royale* (1930) and *Le Temps du mépris* (1935). All six have been translated into English and a number of other languages, and form a major part of the literary achievement on which Malraux’s reputation as a writer is based.

A further important component of his writing is a series of works which, while not autobiographical in the usual sense, often describe events in Malraux’s own life. Collectively entitled *Le Miroir des limbes* and published over the period 1967 to 1976, they are perhaps best described by the title of the first volume—*Antimémoires*—because they are much less concerned with Malraux the individual (one learns very little about his private life) than with people and events he encountered in the course of his life in which he discerns an important human significance. Ranging over a variety of subjects, they include occasions of an ‘official’ kind such as his meetings, as a Minister of the French Government, with figures such as Nehru and Mao Tse-Tung, as well as episodes of a more personal

nature such as incidents during the Resistance, and his close encounter with death in the course of a serious illness in 1972. Five volumes in all, *Le Miroir des limbes* is a body of work comparable in size with the novels and the books on art, and forms a major component of Malraux’s overall work as a writer.

Returning, then, to the books on art, why might Malraux have been so dissatisfied with the quality of his critics’ responses? As we have indicated, the central aim of the following chapters will be to examine the theory of art these works contain, and this analysis will reveal some likely answers to that question – and argue that Malraux’s dissatisfaction was amply justified. As a preliminary step, however, we will begin with some general observations about the works in question and the critical reception they have received over the years since their publication.

In the opening chapter of the first volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux*, Malraux explains that he is offering neither an aesthetic (‘une esthétique’) nor a history of art.\(^4\) One does not need to read far into the work to see what he means by the comment – which is equally applicable to his other works on art such as *Les Voix du silence* – or to guess why he saw the need to make it. First, the term ‘aesthetic’. Malraux is certainly interested in the question ‘What is art?’ but not in the sense in which that question might be (as it often is) understood as a search for preconceived criteria purporting to distinguish art from non-art, which is what he means here by ‘an aesthetic’.\(^5\) Malraux offers a theory of art – an answer to the question ‘What is art?’ – in a different sense: his aim is to provide a general explanation of the nature and significance of art – that is, a theory that seeks to understand the function art performs in human life and, indeed, why this form of human endeavour should exist at all. We shall have more to say about this issue at a later stage and we will see

---


\(^5\) In his English translation of *La Métamorphose des dieux*, Stuart Gilbert renders ‘esthétique’ here as ‘aesthetics’. He translates: ‘My aim is neither to write a history of art … nor a study of aesthetics.’ (André Malraux, *The Metamorphosis of the Gods* trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960), 35.) While this translation is certainly based on a possible meaning of the word ‘esthétique’, it is not appropriate in this context. Malraux is not suggesting that he has no interest in aesthetics in the sense of a philosophy, or theory, of art. On the contrary, as we shall see, that is precisely the central purpose of *La Métamorphose des dieux, Les Voix du silence* and his other works on art. Here, as is often the case elsewhere, Malraux uses the term ‘esthétique’ to signify preconceived criteria for what is, and what is not, art – such as a conformity with an established idea of beauty. For other examples of the same usage, see André Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 207,08,10,70. Further comments on Stuart Gilbert’s translation, and on the present study’s general policy with respect to translating French texts, are provided below. See page 19.
eventually why, from Malraux's standpoint, the search for 'an aesthetic' in the sense indicated is ultimately futile. For the present, it is perhaps enough to say as a first approximation that, in effect, Malraux regards the existence of art — as represented, for example, by outstanding works such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Picasso's *Guernica*, or Monteverdi's *Orfeo* — as a self-evident fact of human life; and his attention focuses not on developing a set of rules that might validate particular judgements such as these (assuming such rules could be formulated) but on understanding what *kinds of objects* works generally regarded as works of art *are*, and their significance in human life. The point needs to be made clear from the outset because many writers in the modern discipline of the philosophy of art (or 'aesthetics') do in fact approach the question 'What is art?' in the terms Malraux is rejecting — that is, as the search for a list of observable features that an object might need to display in order to 'count as art' (to employ the terminology often used in the contemporary, Anglo-American school of 'analytic' aesthetics). Malraux's comment implicitly distinguishes his work from writing of that kind. He is certainly offering a theory of art; but he is not in search of a taxonomy — a theory designed to classify objects into categories of art and not-art. 8

Malraux's caution against treating his books on art as histories of art is equally understandable. A casual reader leafing quickly through the pages of *La Métamorphose des dieux* or *Les Voix du silence* might perhaps be forgiven for thinking that he or she has picked up a history of art rather than a work concerned with the philosophical question 'What is art?' The first volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux*, for instance, begins with discussions of Sumerian, Egyptian, Asian, and Greek art and ends with European art of the fifteenth century. The second volume, *L'Irréel*, concerns Renaissance and post-Renaissance art; and the third, *L'Intemporel*, focuses on the nineteenth and twentieth century, principally from the period from Manet onwards. In addition, like many histories of art, each volume is generously

6 In general, these two terms are used interchangeably in the present study because in practice they tend to designate the same field of study.
7 The pursuit of an aesthetic in the sense described is a frequent preoccupation of this school. A number of arguments advanced by 'analytic' aestheticians are discussed in the course of the following chapters.
8 In *L'Homme précaire et la littérature* Malraux writes that 'the arts distinguish themselves by their poles, not by their frontiers', implying that while the precise line of demarcation between works of artistic value and those of lesser importance may be indistinct, one does not confuse, say, *Crime and Punishment* with a Perry Mason story, or Mozart's *The Magic Flute* with a pop song. André Malraux, *L'Homme précaire et la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 280.
illustrated with reproductions of the artworks mentioned in the text. Our casual reader would, however, be mistaken. Malraux’s aim, as we have said, is to address the basic, theoretical – or philosophical – questions ‘What is the purpose of art? What is its function in human life?’, and his prime concern is art’s raison d’être, not its history. For reasons we shall examine, however, those questions, in Malraux’s eyes, can never be entirely divorced from a consideration of what art has been in the past, and is now – that is, from its history. His thinking about art tends therefore to place as much emphasis on particular works, styles, and periods as it does on the more general ideas he is seeking to elucidate. His interest does not lie in the history of art per se; but that history is, nonetheless, crucial, because his theory of art is ultimately inseparable from the particular ways in which art has manifested itself across the centuries and millennia.

How have critics reacted to Malraux’s writings on art? Les Voix du silence and La Métamorphose des dieux, like most of Malraux’s books and essays on art, are intended for a general readership not just an academic audience, but as one might expect, they have elicited comment from a range of writers in academic fields such as the history of art and aesthetics. The reactions have, to say the least of it, been mixed, and, as a background to the more detailed examination of critical comments in later chapters, it may be useful here to give some general idea of the reception these works have received both in France and in English-speaking countries.

In France, where Malraux’s name is generally well-known, particularly as a novelist and as a Minister in de Gaulle’s governments, his writings on art have, as one might expect, attracted considerable attention and continue to be the subject of fairly regular critical commentary. In addition to academics working in fields such as aesthetics and the history of art, commentators have included such well-known names as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Maurice Blanchot, and more recently Jean-François Lyotard, whose book The Soundproof Room: Malraux’s Anti-Aesthetics was

---

9 Geoffrey Harris noted in 1996 that ‘a recent opinion-poll among high-school teachers of French literature in France placed Malraux eighth in a list of twenty-one authors they most frequently recommend to their students.’ Geoffrey Harris, André Malraux: A Reassessment (London: Macmillan, 1996), 23,24. Marking thirty years since Malraux’s death, a recent article in Le Nouvel Observateur expressed the view that although Malraux is not currently fashionable, he ‘remains more inspired than Gide, more open to the world than Mauriac, more lyrical than Aron, more trustworthy than Aragon, more profound than Camus, and more artistic than Sartre.’ Philippe Sollers, "Malraux, le revenant," Le Nouvel Observateur 16 November 2006, no. 2193: 124.
published in 2001. Some of the initial reactions were very favourable, one early response to *La Psychologie de l'art* claiming, for example, that the work ‘is one of Malraux’s greatest books, and one of the greatest books in all modern literature.’

Before long, however, there were a number of less friendly voices. The fiercest opposition, perhaps, came from the field of art history, and most notably from the art historian George Duthuit who, in mocking reference to Malraux’s notion of ‘le musée imaginaire’, entitled his lengthy attack *Le Musée inimaginable*. Generally speaking, writers in the field of aesthetics have been similarly unenthusiastic, although in this case the reaction has more often been to ignore Malraux rather than analyse his thinking – one observer of the French scene commenting rather acidly that ‘academics occupying chairs in aesthetics exclude [Malraux] from their circle: a style too dazzling to be honest – and not enough diplomas.’ In general, it is true to say that while Malraux certainly has his admirers, and while the recent publication by Gallimard of his collected writings on art testifies to their continuing importance, he is nonetheless treated as something of a fringe-dweller in those fields of study in which one would expect interest to be at its strongest, such as the philosophy and history of art. Malraux the novelist – especially the author of *La Condition humaine* – continues to be much more widely read than Malraux the author of *Les Voix du silence."

The situation in English-speaking countries is broadly similar. In the initial stages, as in France, Malraux’s writings on art seem to have generated strong interest. In 1963, commenting on *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux*, one writer in the American *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* described Malraux as an ‘art critic whose influence and renown in recent years is perhaps

---


13 In recent times there has been a small number of academic studies in France which adopt a more sympathetic tone. These are mentioned at relevant points in the following chapters. It is noteworthy, however, that the special issue of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* produced in 1977 to mark Malraux’s death the year before, gave only passing mention to his writings on art and included no essay devoted to the topic. See "Hommage à André Malraux (1901 - 1976)," *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, no. 295 (1977).
matched only by that of Sir Herbert Read; and in 1968, the Australian academic Denis Boak spoke of the ‘extravagant praise from some quarters’ for Malraux’s ‘art philosophy’ and of its ‘wide popularity’. Since then, however, the tide seems to have turned. The two leading academic journals in aesthetics – the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism and the British Journal of Aesthetics – have carried no significant piece on Malraux for more than three decades and the situation in other relevant journals is much the same. There has, it is true, been a reasonably steady stream of studies on Malraux’s work as a whole, but the primary focus in these cases is usually on his novels and on the volumes making up Le Miroir des limbes, with commentary on Les Voix du silence and La Métamorphose des dieux limited to a chapter or two. At the present time, there is still 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 final two volumes of La Métamorphose des dieux and of L’Homme précaire et la littérature.

If one turns to books of a more general nature concerning aesthetics or the history of art, in France or elsewhere, interest in Malraux seems to be at a similarly low ebb. Whether aimed at specialised academic audiences or more general

14 Bertrand Davezac, "Malraux’s Ideas on Art and Method in Criticism," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 22, no. 2 (1963): 177. Davezac, one should perhaps add, did not share the enthusiasm.

15 Denis Boak, André Malraux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 196, 97. Boak himself, however, is lukewarm at best about this aspect of Malraux’s work.

16 There are some minor exceptions. One is a review in 1974 of Stefan Morawski’s work on Malraux, L’Absolu et la forme, and a brief rejoinder from Morawski in a following issue. See Liliane Welch, "L’Absolu et la Forme: L’Esthétique d’André Malraux by Stefan Morawski," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 32, no. 3 (1974). Stefan Morawski, "Malraux and Marxist Methodology," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 33, no. 1 (1974). Another is an article in 1993 by Barbara Savedoff, although this concerns Walter Benjamin and John Berger as well. See Barbara Savedoff, "Looking at Art through Photographs," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 51, no. 3 (1993). There is also a brief discussion of Malraux in a recent article by Jonathan Friday. See Jonathan Friday, "André Bazin’s Ontology of Photographic and Film Imagery," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 63, no. 4 (2005). It is worth adding that events over the decades in question included the publication of the last two volumes of La Métamorphose des dieux (L’Irréel and L’Intemporel), Malraux’s death, and the transfer of his ashes to the Panthéon amid considerable ceremony. His name, in other words, had scarcely been sunk in obscurity over the period in question.

17 In mitigation, it is perhaps worth noting that some of Malraux’s most important works on the theory of art, including L’Irréel and L’Intemporel, have not yet been translated into English. It is true, as we shall see, that the fundamental ideas underlying these two volumes are the same as those in Malraux’s earlier books on art, but many aspects of those ideas are developed in more detail in the later works. Moreover, since L’Irréel and L’Intemporel cover the period from the Renaissance to the present day, in which Malraux locates certain crucial developments in the emergence of the Western notion of art, they are vital components of the Métamorphose des dieux trilogy without which it might perhaps seem incomplete. In short, as matters stand at present, the monolingual English reader is at some disadvantage: he or she is excluded from some of the most important and powerfully written pages in Malraux’s books on art.
readerships, works of this kind seldom mention Malraux, or if they do, offer a
cursory comment only, often limited to his concept of the *musée imaginaire* which,
for many writers, seems to function as a kind of convenient, catch-all phrase for his
thinking as a whole. In this broader field, in other words, Malraux is not currently a
major focus of interest. As theorist of art, he has been relegated to the margins of
intellectual discourse and the ‘wide popularity’ of which Denis Boak spoke in 1968
appears, for the time being at least, to have evaporated.18

To give a flavour of the negative reactions, one might mention two particular
charges that have figured quite prominently. The first concerns art history. Since, as
we have indicated, Malraux, unlike most writers in aesthetics, makes frequent
reference to developments in the history of art, his books on art have, not
surprisingly, attracted interest from art historians. The tone was set at an early stage
by George Duthuit’s attack to which we have already referred, but a number of other
voices soon joined in. Malraux, it was claimed, was weak on the facts of art history
and guilty of numerous ‘errors’. Support for this verdict came from no less an
authority than E.H. Gombrich who announced in an early – and, as it turned out,
influential – review of the English translation of *Les Voix du silence* that the work is
‘nowhere imbued with that sense of responsibility that makes the scholar or the
artist’, adding somewhat disdainfully that that ‘there is no evidence that Malraux has
done a day’s consecutive reading in a library or that he has even tried to hunt up a
new fact’.19

The second criticism takes aim at the quality of Malraux’s thought. Malraux,
it is said, is not a systematic thinker and his account of art, such as it is, consists
essentially of a disorganised assortment of impressions, too often dressed up in
unnecessarily rhetorical language, rather than reasoned arguments of a kind that
merit the interest of the serious aesthetician or philosopher of art. Here again the
tone was set early in the piece. A review of *Les Voix du silence* in a 1957 issue of

---

18 There is, however, a section on Malraux in the recent Routledge volume *Key Writers on Art: The
Twentieth Century*. See Chris Murray, ed., *Key Writers on Art: The Twentieth Century* (London:
Routledge, 2003), 211-16.

19 E.H. Gombrich, "André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism," in *Meditations on a Hobby
Horse and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 1978), 78. Gombrich’s essay 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., *Key Writers on Art: The Twentieth Century*, 211.) Gombrich’s views on Malraux are
discussed at a number of points in the present study.
the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* suggested that the work is best regarded as a ‘prose poem six hundred fifty pages long’ and as ‘the personal, emotional reverie of a gifted fiction-writer’.\(^{20}\) Some years later, Denis Boak concluded that the work should be regarded as a ‘lyrical and imaginative, rather than rational’ account of the world of art,\(^ {21}\) while in a further article on Malraux published in the late 1980s, E.H. Gombrich characterised *Les Voix du silence* as a ‘dazzling piece of sophisticated double talk’.\(^ {22}\) In a fairly comprehensive broadside which echoes these criticisms, with some added extras and a tone of undisguised hostility, Pierre Bourdieu described *Les Voix du silence* as evidence of the author’s ‘tawdry pathos’, ‘arrogance’, ‘complacency’ and ‘insolence’, and as a book in which Malraux

> ‘[envelops] a cultural patchwork with Spenglerian metaphysical bric-a-brac, imperturbably associating the most contradictory intuitions, hasty borrowings from Schlosser or Worringer, rhetorically exalted platitudes, and purely incantatory litanies of proper names and insights which are called brilliant because they are not even false’.\(^ {23}\)

For readers of this persuasion – and these are by no means isolated voices – Malraux is scarcely to be taken seriously. He may, it is conceded, produce the occasional flash of insight about this or that particular work of art, and he may at times write with a certain novelistic flair, but ultimately he is little more than a gifted dilettante. Where serious work on the theory of art is concerned, he is simply out of his depth and there can be no question of treating works such as *Les Voix du silence* or *La Métamorphose des dieux* as worthy of serious philosophical attention.

Given this somewhat bleak and unpromising state of affairs, what is the aim of the present study? In a word, the aim is to refute these negative judgements, reveal their inaccuracies, show that Malraux’s works on art are most definitely


\(^{23}\) Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 329. While Bourdieu’s meaning is generally clear enough, the final clause — ‘which are called brilliant because they are not even false’ — seems somewhat puzzling.
worthy of serious philosophical attention, and argue that the theory of art they contain has been seriously underestimated and is in fact of major importance. In the process, the analysis will seek to show that Malraux’s thinking challenges key aspects of traditional aesthetics. The point might perhaps be illustrated in the following way. If one were asked to list some of the more widely accepted ideas in modern aesthetics, due allowance made for variations between one thinker and another, one might perhaps include the following propositions as examples: art is in some fundamental way a ‘representation of the world’; there is a fundamental link between art and beauty; the function of art is to satisfy a desire for ‘aesthetic pleasure’; the individual’s response to a work of art takes the form of an aesthetic ‘judgement’; the artist is, by nature, ‘more sensitive’ than other people; the history of art is in some essential way a history of artistic ‘influences’; the concept of art is a human universal, common to all cultures (so that, stylistic differences aside, it is correct to say, for example, that the ancient Egyptian sculptor saw himself as creating ‘art’ in much the same sense as a modern sculptor would today). Now, Malraux challenges, and rejects, all these propositions – and more – and the attentive reader quickly discovers that there are in fact very few such ‘widely accepted ideas’ about art that play any significant part in his thinking. Ultimately, as we shall see, the answer Malraux gives to the question ‘What is art?’ is nothing short of revolutionary, implicitly attacking the very foundations on which large areas of aesthetics have been built.

Crucially, also – and here again there is a contrast with much that is written in modern aesthetics – Malraux 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.’24 It would be premature to attempt an explanation of this point at the present stage, but a central aim of the analysis in the following chapters will be to show that the answer Malraux gives to the question ‘What is art?’ is very closely connected to his view of the significance of man – or, in his terminology, of the ‘human adventure’. For Malraux, the function of art at its deepest level is linked to something more profound than ideas such as aesthetic pleasure, representation, expression, or communication. Art is fundamentally a response to a metaphysical need – a need as deep as that met by

the sense of the sacred found in the great religions of the past. Ultimately, the
question ‘What is art?’ is not simply a question about art alone; it is also a question
about man.

Substantiating these claims will call for a close study of Malraux’s works,
and this point merits some comment. The French novelist and critic, André
Brincourt, has written that one sometimes has the impression that Malraux’s works
on art have been ‘skimmed a lot but very little read’. The point is well taken. Too
frequently, Malraux’s critics tend to proffer assessments, whether favourable or not,
that are accompanied by very little evidence – or in some cases, such as Bourdieu’s
comment above, by no evidence at all. One example may illustrate the point. In the
course of a study of the relationship between art and time (a crucial topic for
Malraux, as we shall see later) one aesthetician 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 personally is the gradual change that comes over such work ... Every
work of art, in fact, tends to develop into myth.”

Now, setting aside the question of whether the quoted words are sufficient to
substantiate the writer’s claim (which is by no means obvious), the comment is
dubious on at least four counts. Although attributed to Malraux, the statement is in
fact made by one of the characters in his second novel, La Voie royale. As in all
such cases, one cannot automatically assume that it necessarily gives a full and
accurate reflection of Malraux’s own views on the matter. Second, the statement as
quoted is incomplete. In the novel, the character in question goes on to add that he is
also interested in the process whereby works that have developed into myths, and ‘lie
sleeping’ in museums, are later recalled to life. This question of a ‘re-awakening’,
and the reason why it occurs, is, as we shall see, central to Malraux’s thinking about

25 Brincourt, Malraux, le malentendu, 120. Cf. the similar remark by another contemporary French
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

1982), 268. The quote is in fact only an approximate translation of the original and deletes some
important phrases. As we shall see in later discussion, the same statement figures prominently in E.H.

27 André Malraux, La Voie royale, Œuvres complètes (I), ed. Pierre Brunel, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard,
1989), 398.
the relationship between art and time in its later, more developed form, but the quotation as presented omits all reference to it. Third, the novel in question was published in 1930 and, as we shall also see later, there are very strong grounds for believing that it was not until 1934, following a decisive event which profoundly influenced Malraux’s thinking about art, that he was in a position to expound the fully developed theory that finds expression in works such as *La Psychologie de l’art, Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux.* Fourth, and most important of all, the writer offers his conclusion *without any reference whatsoever,* here or elsewhere in his discussion, to any of those later works (all of which predate his comment by many years, even in English translation) *even though it is precisely in those works that Malraux sets out his theory of art in detail and at length* – and where, incidentally, the proposition that every work of art ‘tends to develop into myth’ plays no part at all.

It would of course be misleading to suggest that all criticisms of Malraux’s theory of art are as cavalier – one is tempted to use the term ‘lackadaisical’ – in their approach as this. Nevertheless, the tendency to base conclusions on patchy evidence, and to content oneself with perfunctory, impressionistic readings of his key texts, 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’.²⁸ The temptation has perhaps been to treat such phrases (the frequently quoted *musée imaginaire* is a prime example²⁹) 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 closely and in their entirety. The present study aims to avoid this pitfall. Given the sheer volume of Malraux’s writings on art, it will not of course be possible to provide a detailed examination of every issue he discusses. A central objective, however, will be to provide a step by step exposition of the principal elements of his theory, supported by evidence from the texts themselves. The study will not of course be limited to this. It will also include discussion of critical responses and, where space permits, comparisons between

Malraux’s arguments and those of other theorists. A close study of what he has actually written will, however, be a major element in the analysis.

A word should be said about how the analysis is organised. As mentioned earlier, the question ‘What is art?’ for Malraux, can never be entirely divorced from the history of art – from what art has been in the past and has now become. ‘There is no such thing as art in itself’, Malraux writes in *Les Voix du silence*, implying that art as a purely abstract concept, separable from its specific manifestations, is an intellectual fantasy. The reasoning behind this claim will be examined in subsequent chapters and must be deferred for the present. The consequence, however, is that Malraux’s exposition is often closely linked to specific historical developments, and follows imperatives that are not always the same as those that might obtain if one were outlining the steps in a purely abstract argument. This in turn has consequences for an analysis of the kind being attempted here, an important part of which will be, precisely, to identify the separate steps in Malraux’s thinking, beginning with his fundamental propositions. To achieve this end, one is obliged to ‘dismantle’ Malraux’s account to some extent, and to treat as discrete elements ideas that he himself, following different imperatives, often strove to keep together. In general, 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 it has meant that ideas are not always considered in the same order as they appear in Malraux’s works. Thus, for example, the explanation of his view of the relationship between art and time – the idea that ‘metamorphosis is the life of art’ – is delayed until Chapter Seven, whereas in *Les Voix du silence* it is arguably implicit from the earliest pages; and the idea of the *musée imaginaire* is not discussed here until Chapter Eight although in *La Métamorphose des dieux*, for example, it occurs in the introductory chapter. There is of course 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. Whenever possible, attempts have been made to minimise this danger by highlighting the interconnections between the different elements. In considering the following analysis, the reader is, nonetheless, urged to bear this methodological issue in mind.

---

30 Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l’art (I)*, 880. (The *Écrits sur l’art* form the last two volumes of the *Œuvres Complètes*. For brevity, all references to works in the *Écrits sur l’art* will omit mention of their placement within the *Œuvres Complètes.*
and to have regard not only to the separate steps in the argument but also to their *cumulative* effect and to their significance within the account as a whole.

One further methodological point deserves mention. Malraux, it is fair to say, is not an aesthetician's aesthetician. That is, his account of the nature and significance of art does not derive solely — or even mainly — from the works of the series of thinkers who are conventionally regarded as the major representatives of the Western tradition of aesthetics. He is certainly familiar with that tradition, as a reading of his works quickly reveals, but his thinking ranges more widely, taking in fields as diverse as anthropology, literature, philosophy, the history of art, and history more generally. The result places the critic in something of a dilemma. To omit references to relevant writers in these various fields would clearly be unsatisfactory; but, equally, to undertake extended comparisons with their works, given the range of areas on which Malraux's thinking impinges, would quickly distract from the main task at hand and render the analysis cumbersome and very lengthy. Here again, the present study has tried to steer a middle course. Where relevant, other thinkers or streams of thought have been mentioned, but except in special cases — for example when they provide an enlightening contrast with Malraux's position — such references have usually been kept fairly brief. In practice, this policy has still allowed for the examination of a substantial number of alternative positions, including some from representatives of what might be termed mainstream aesthetics, especially of the Anglo-American tradition.

Some comment should be made about the scope of the term 'art' in the chapters that follow. In the main, this study will concentrate on visual art, as Malraux himself does in most of the works to be examined. It should not be assumed, however, that the theory of art developed in works such as *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* 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 unmistakeable. Secondly, as he makes clear early
in *Les Voix du silence*, he regarded twentieth century advances in the technologies of reproduction as a decisive development in the history of visual art (With photography, he wrote, ‘the plastic arts have invented their printing-press.’) and part of his aim in his books on art was undoubtedly to take advantage of the new possibilities this offered by illustrating aspects of his theory of art with relevant reproductions. Thirdly, aspects of Malraux’s thinking about art are, as mentioned, closely linked to a sense of art’s history – of its specific manifestations now and in the past – and it just happens to be the case that visual art lends itself well to the exposition of a theory of this nature because, compared with music and literature, there is much more ‘history’ still extant – that is, more available historical evidence, stretching over longer periods of time.

In short, to some extent Malraux probably chose to focus on visual art for what might be termed practical reasons: it was a field which interested him deeply and about which he was well informed; it lent itself well to exposition in book form (in contrast with music, for example); and it provided a comparatively rich supply of examples stretching back over long periods of human history. Nevertheless, while *Les Voix du silence*, *La Métamorphose des dieux* and most (though not all) of the works to be discussed here are concerned principally with visual art, it would be a mistake, as we have suggested, to assume that the theory of art they present is applicable to visual art only. It is true that there are some aspects of Malraux’s account – most notably the detail of the historical developments discussed in Chapter Six – that could not simply be transposed without modification into the fields of literature or music. In its essentials, however, the theory considered here is clearly intended as a general theory of art, applicable to art in all its forms. We shall have more to say about this question at relevant points in later discussion, and from time to time the analysis will note similarities between propositions advanced in the works

---

31 Ibid., 206.
32 In the case of literature, as Malraux points out, there are also, in many cases, the obstacles posed by the process of 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.’ Malraux, *L’Homme précaire et la littérature* 234. Malraux’s emphasis.
33 Similar reasons are suggested by William Righter. See Righter, *The Rhetorical Hero*, 27.
34 Cf. Malraux’s reply to an interviewer on television in Bombay in 1974. When asked why he had written so much about Indian sculpture and architecture and so little about Indian music and dance, he answered: ‘To talk about music one needs to use radio. To talk about dance one needs television. But painting or sculpture can be discussed through books.’ Jean-Claude Perrier, ed., *André Malraux et la tentation de l’Inde* (Paris: Gallimard/Ambassade de France en Inde, 2004), 244.
on visual art and those found in *L'Homme précaire et la littérature*. The issue is raised here, however, to forestall any conclusion either that Malraux regarded visual art as inherently more important than other art forms (a conclusion for which there is no evidence) or that his theory of art has no relevance beyond visual art. Neither view would be correct.\(^{35}\)

Some brief remarks should also be made 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 to his or her study, or to a Left Bank café. His extremely eventful life included an ill-starred expedition to Indochina in his early twenties in search of bas-reliefs from ruined Khmer temples, active involvement in the anti-Fascist Popular Front in the 1930s and then in the Spanish Civil War, military service in the French army at the outbreak of World War II, participation in the French Resistance ending in his 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 eventful life story has attracted a number of writers whose interest in Malraux lies rather more in what he did than in what he wrote, and biographies of Malraux have become something of a minor industry in themselves.\(^{36}\) Not surprisingly perhaps, this has occasionally had flow-on effects to commentaries on Malraux’s thought, some critics even suggesting that what he wrote cannot be understood if separated from his life—one claiming, for example, that ‘it is impossible to divorce Malraux’s thought from the concrete situations in which it emerged without running the risk of betraying it.’\(^{37}\)

---

\(^{35}\) 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’. The same could be said about music, although Malraux has less to say about this art form. Henri Godard, *L’Autre face de la littérature: essai sur André Malraux et la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 11.


\(^{37}\) André Marissel, *La Pensée créatrice d’André Malraux* (Toulouse: Eduoard Privat, 1979), 7. For some commentators, Malraux’s works seem in fact to run a poor second to accounts of his life. John Sturrock writes of Olivier Todd’s recent biography of Malraux that it ‘has persuaded me for one that there’s more to be got nowadays from reading about Malraux’s remarkable life than there is from
Although agreeing that, as with most writers, biographical events can sometimes be enlightening, the present study does not endorse this claim and will have little to say about Malraux's 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; it seems even more so where the issues in question are of a theoretical or philosophical nature as they are here. Second, the approach seems particularly 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 life and his political commitments. 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 unofficial Catholic'\(^{38}\) – and this list, one might add, by no means exhausts the descriptions applied to him. As one might expect, it has now become quite difficult in many instances to separate fact from opinion – and sometimes from pure invention – and much of what purports to be accurate biographical information about Malraux is of very questionable 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 perhaps likely to remain so for quite some time. Clearly, these are treacherous waters for the critic who would seek 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 Malraux thought and what he did. There is every reason to believe, for instance, that his pre-war participation in the Popular Front, his involvement with the Republicans 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. With one important exception, for which the justification will become obvious, the present study will have little to say about Malraux's life from either point of view. The focus here will be 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 life will be very sparing.

In summary form, the topics addressed in the following chapters are as follows: Chapter Two discusses some of the principal features of Malraux's thought in the years prior to 1934. This period is an important prelude to the developments that follow because it reveals the general trend of Malraux's early thinking, the key problems he identified, and the solutions he proposed at that stage. The year 1934 has been chosen because it was in that year - or so this study will argue - that an event occurred that had a decisive effect on Malraux's thinking. This event is analysed in Chapter Three. In essence, the chapter is an examination of Malraux's concept of the 'human adventure' which played a major role in his intellectual development from then on, and which, among other things, had a profound effect on his thinking about art. Chapter Four moves from these broader, background issues to the topic of art itself. The discussion begins with an examination of the concept of 'reality' or 'the world' in the context of art, pointing out that while this idea has traditionally played a major role in discussions about the nature and significance of art, the important conceptual problems it raises have often been overlooked. The chapter goes on to explore Malraux's own position in this regard, arguing that his thinking was decisively influenced by the event in 1934, which allowed him to see the 'reality' to which art is addressed in fundamentally metaphysical terms - and thus to see art as the creation of a 'rival world' that affirms the human adventure as against the ephemeral world of appearances (ideas that the chapter explains in some detail). Chapter Five explores the implications of these basic propositions as they relate to the notion of creation in art. This discussion, which relates to one of the major sections of Les Voix du silence (which critics have often neglected) explores Malraux's argument that the artist's creative urge stems fundamentally from the art of his or her predecessors, not from responses to the world of people, things and events. The chapter goes on to argue that art, in Malraux's eyes, is (contra what is often argued in modern aesthetics) fundamentally a process of transformation, not
representation. Chapter Six moves to historical issues and in particular to Malraux’s account of the emergence of the Western concept of art from the Renaissance onwards, and the subsequent transformation of this concept towards the end of the nineteenth century. The issues discussed here have an important bearing on those explored later in Chapter Eight, but to establish the link between the two it is first necessary to examine Malraux’s understanding of the relationship between art and time, a vital aspect of his thinking which is the focus of Chapter Seven. Chapter Eight then examines Malraux’s claim that the process of metamorphosis, which is central to his explanation of the relationship between art and time, has led, in the course of the last century, to the emergence of what he terms the ‘first universal world of art’, an unprecedented development to which the philosophy of art has as yet paid only passing attention. Chapter Nine considers certain aspects of the relationship between art and history not covered in previous chapters, and also includes a brief discussion of the emergence during the nineteenth century of what Malraux terms the ‘anti-arts’, a development which, he argues, remains very much a part of our contemporary cultural landscape. The final chapter draws together the principal threads of the analysis, summarises a number of the major misunderstandings of Malraux’s theory of art discussed in the course of the study, and offers a general assessment of that theory – an assessment which, as can no doubt be inferred from what has now been said, is strongly favourable.

All quotations from Malraux are given in English translation and a brief word should be said about the policy adopted in this respect. Four of Malraux’s major works on art – *La Psychologie de l’art*, *Les Voix du silence*, the first version of his essay on Goya, 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 an English-speaking audience and have done so in a very readable English which, generally speaking, captures the sense and spirit of Malraux’s original. The translations are, however, not without their blemishes. There are cases 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

---

39 This first version, entitled *Saturne*, was published in 1950. Malraux published a revised version in 1978 which he entitled *Saturne: le destin, l’art et Goya*. 
occasional clear mistake (one, for example, involving the omission of a sentence\textsuperscript{40}).
Thus, while I have often consulted Gilbert’s versions, and have in many instances 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 somewhat different from those given by Gilbert. In a few instances, where I have considered the original French particularly important or difficult to translate well, I have provided it in brackets. As noted earlier,\textsuperscript{41} the final two volumes of \textit{La Métamorphose des dieux} have not yet appeared in English and all translations from these texts, together with those from Malraux’s other works (such as his novels), are entirely my own.\textsuperscript{42} As indicated earlier, Malraux’s major writings on art have recently been re-published by Gallimard as part of the series of volumes making up his \textit{Œuvres Complètes}. 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 on a number of occasions to illustrate points made in the course of the discussion. In many cases the works selected are the same as those used by Malraux himself. The selection is not, it should be said, intended to be definitive in any way. As Malraux himself readily acknowledged,\textsuperscript{43} 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 in some cases be able to think of other works that illustrate the points being made quite as well, or better, than those chosen here.

\textsuperscript{40} The sentence in Part III, which concerns artistic creation, beginning ‘Imagine-t-on le dessin …’ Fortunately the sense of the paragraph remains reasonably clear despite the omission. See Malraux, \textit{Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l’art (I)}, 534.

\textsuperscript{41} See above, note 17.

\textsuperscript{42} This is also the case for quotations from other writers where a text in French is the source.

\textsuperscript{43} See below, page 221.
Chapter Two

Background: The years before 1934

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 will not of course be that Malraux had not thought or written about art before then. His published work prior to 1934 includes 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.2 The claim will be, however, that it was not until 1934 that Malraux first felt in a position to go beyond the relatively specialized topics addressed in these early writings to offer a fully-fledged general theory of art, thus beginning 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 other words, the year 1934, it will be argued, was 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.

An analysis of the event in 1934 and its implications will be the central topic of the next chapter. Before embarking on that phase of the discussion, however, it will be useful to give brief consideration to Malraux's thinking prior to that time and to some of the main preoccupations of his earlier years. On the one hand, this will help reveal certain elements of continuity since, despite the transformation that took place in 1934, that development, as we shall see, was more akin to a broadening and deepening of previous thinking than to a major rupture or an entirely new beginning. On the other hand, however, the differences between the earlier and later positions

---

1 ‘... l'homme est mort, après Dieu.' Malraux's emphasis.
are real and substantial, and an understanding of Malraux’s thinking prior to 1934 is helpful in gaining a clearer view of the change that took place.

In the present chapter and the next, the analysis will not focus solely, or even principally, on issues relating to art, and the reasons for this should be briefly explained. As we shall see, the repercussions of the event in 1934 were not limited to art alone. They affected Malraux’s thinking across a broad spectrum, including, importantly, his view of ‘man’ – or ‘the human adventure’, to use the terminology he sometimes employed from that time onwards. This being so, it would be difficult to understand the full significance of that event if discussion of his pre-1934 thinking were limited to art alone, ignoring his thinking in relation to the idea of ‘man’ at this earlier period. In addition, as we have already noted, Malraux saw a close connection between the questions ‘What is man?’ and ‘What is art?’.

The nature of that connection has yet to be examined, but as subsequent chapters will reveal, it plays a vital part in his thinking about art, and an understanding of his theory of art would be hindered, not helped, by keeping the two questions separate. While focusing on the pre-1934 period, the present chapter will therefore range over a number of issues whose link with the nature and significance of art may not at this stage seem obvious, but which, as we shall see later, form an important part of the background out of which Malraux’s theory of art eventually emerged. The aim of the present chapter, it should be added, is to give a general overview of Malraux’s thinking prior to 1934, not to enter into a detailed critique, which is a task beyond the scope of this study. This early stage of Malraux’s intellectual development has, moreover, been studied in some detail by a number of other commentators, and the account given here is, except where otherwise indicated, in general accord with much that has already been written on the topic.

***

In addition to his first three novels – *Les Conquérants*, *La Voie royale* and *La Condition humaine* – Malraux’s works in the pre-1934 period include two essays that analyse aspects of Western culture as he then saw it. 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 our present discussion.

A core claim of both essays is that Western civilization is in the grip of a profound cultural crisis stemming from the collapse of the fundamental beliefs on which it had previously rested. Echoing Nietzsche, Malraux takes it to be self-evident that as a genuine value, as distinct from a pious convention, God, for the West, is dead. The suggestion is not, one should perhaps add, that religious faith has necessarily become an impossibility, and Malraux does not, any more than Nietzsche, engage in philosophical arguments designed to prove the non-existence of God. The claim is, rather, that as a set of firmly held beliefs governing everyday life and one’s understanding of self and others, Christianity has ceased to count. The institutions and the rituals may live on, but merely as remnants of the past, not as an integral part of how life is lived.

The crisis is, however, deeper than this. During the nineteenth century, Malraux argues, the vacuum left by the decline of religious belief had been filled by a new faith in human progress and man’s own powers. Driven in large measure by a faith in scientific advance, this belief in the ‘Coming Man’ (‘L’Homme à naître’) as Malraux was later to term it, looked forward to a new era of peace, freedom and universal prosperity, and did so, Malraux writes, 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.

This enthusiasm has, however, received a mortal blow. Historical events, and particularly World War I, mocked expectations of a radiant new world, and the ‘Coming Man’ suddenly seemed to wear a very different face from the one that had been expected. ‘I’ve witnessed two or three displays of mass dementia in my time,’ writes 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

5 Whom Malraux seems to have read by the early 1920s. Cf. Vandegans, La Jeunesse littéraire d’André Malraux, 57,58.
6 In Les Voix du silence. (See Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 731.) The phrase ‘the Coming Man’ is Stuart Gilbert’s translation. The original French is perhaps slightly stronger, conveying as it does the idea of Man ‘yet to be born’.
well as size. Faith in science had been dealt a lethal blow because its potential to destroy as well as build had suddenly become painfully evident (a theme that remained a constant in Malraux’s thinking – see Fig. 1, page 25.) and dreams of a glorious human future had 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, since all we know are lies, 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 the kind of ironic sadness we feel on seeing faces we once loved overtaken by age?

Other corrosive forces have also been at work. In an interview in 1973, in which he referred to some of the early influences on his thinking, Malraux recalled the ‘violent sense of transience’ he experienced after the end of World War I. He commented:

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 that 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.

A key factor was that the scope of intellectual inquiry had broadened enormously, resulting in a radically new attitude towards European civilization. ‘Our predecessors had lived in a privileged civilisation, 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 History – History with a capital H – just as there is only one civilisation.’ But all that, he added, had now changed:

---

8 Malraux, *La Voie royale*, Œuvres complètes (I), 375.
Fig. 1 Extract from television program: *Dialogue imaginaire avec Picasso.*

Stills and text from an interview with Malraux in 1975 which forms part of the program.

**Malraux**: ... 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...

---

11 André Malraux, *Dialogue imaginaire avec Picasso: ‘La tête d’obsidienne’* (Television series: *Journal de Voyage avec André Malraux.*) (Paris: Interviewer: Jean-Marie Drot, 1975). Cf. also Malraux’s comment in an interview in 1974: ‘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.
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 represented an enigma.  

The idea of History as a single, intelligible development – a mainstay of the nineteenth century idea of progress – was thus being undermined not only by the disastrous course of historical events but also by strong intellectual currents. It is in this context that one should view Malraux’s well known interest at the time in Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* which was then attracting wide attention. Spengler’s reputation as an historian has diminished greatly over the years and commentators have sometimes referred to Malraux’s interest in him with a note of condescension. It was not, however, the detail of Spengler’s historical argumentation, or his theory of the inevitable decline of cultures, that counted so much for Malraux as the fact that his work represented a serious attempt to present what Malraux termed a ‘discontinuous’ history – an account of the human past that abandoned the notion of a progressive development of one ‘privileged’ civilisation for an approach that accepted a plurality of cultures and histories, each viewed as a distinct entity. Whether or not one agreed with Spengler’s prognostications about the future of the West, his book gave expression to a 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

---

12 Suarès, *Malraux, celui qui vient: entretiens entre André Malraux, Guy Suarès, José Benjamin*, 16.
14 Cf. his 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.” Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Écrits sur l’art (II)*, 34.
15 As Malraux noted in the same interview, the idea is ‘banal’ now; but it was not so then. Suarès, *Malraux, celui qui vient: entretiens entre André Malraux, Guy Suarès, José Benjamin*, 16.
16 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”.
Chapter 2 – Background: The years before 1934

what Malraux describes as the ‘vastly extended’ scope of human knowledge coming from fields such as ethnography and ethnology.\(^{17}\)

Moreover, Malraux’s interest, as the above quotation suggests, was much less in history per se than in the implications of this new outlook for what he calls ‘our understanding of man’. The sheer variety of cultural forms revealed by anthropology had – seconded by the accelerated pace of change in the West – created a ‘violent sense of transience’. Where amidst this new profusion of ‘data’ was one to discover the enduring, universal elements on which a general notion of man might be founded? If the nineteenth century ideal of the ‘Coming Man’ had been gravely wounded on the battlefields of World War I, the discovery of this bewildering variety of cultural forms was its coup de grâce. Western culture was now bereft of any fundamental value. It was not simply a question of the ‘death of God’ but also, and more immediately, of 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.\(^{18}\)

There is no mistaking the seriousness with which Malraux views this development. Western culture, he wrote at the time, has always placed a high value on lucidity: it has always sought to ‘draw up a plan’ of the universe, to ‘provide an intelligible image of the world’\(^{19}\) – a characteristic he highlights by a comparison with Chinese culture which ‘knows and feels that every human action, no matter how important, brings in its train a hidden world of ramifications without number’.\(^{20}\) The collapse of Christianity, and then of the replacement faith in Man, has left the West without any intelligible image of the world. Reality, as the European correspondent

\(^{17}\) 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), 92–93.

\(^{18}\) Malraux, La Tentation de l’Occident, Œuvres Complètes (I), 100. Emphasis in original.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 95.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 67. Malraux’s emphasis – which is intended to make it clear that he is not speaking simply of ideas but also of associated emotional states.
in *La Tentation de l'Occident* writes, has become ‘anarchic’, and Europe ‘is now dominated by the idea of being unable to grasp a reality of any kind’.\(^\text{21}\) 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. In the present case, the lack of any ‘intelligible image of the world’ means that men and women no longer have any system of beliefs that gives 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.’\(^\text{22}\) The implications of this vacuum of belief, he argues in *D'Une Jeunesse européenne* (in a comment in which one is tempted to see a certain prescience) are essentially destructive. ‘What do we see,’ he writes,

> 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.\(^\text{23}\)

Thus far, our account of Malraux’s early thinking has been in general accord with those offered by most commentators who have written on the topic.\(^\text{24}\) There are minor differences in emphasis, and the notion of Man is not always explicated in

\(^\text{21}\) Ibid., 108.
\(^\text{24}\) It is interesting to note that the account of Malraux’s thinking given here is also similar to that provided by the novelist Roger Martin du Gard who met him at a conference at Pontigny in the late 1920s. Martin du Gard gives a description of Malraux in his journal 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 civilisation is based on the idea of human permanence," he replied: “That remains to be seen.”’

Henri Godard, ed., *L’Amitié André Malraux* (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 now considers defunct. The significance of Malraux’s reply ‘That remains to be seen’ will emerge in the course of the present study.
Chapter 2 – Background: The years before 1934

quite the way it has been here; there is, however, broad agreement that the essays we are examining 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.\(^{25}\) Our attention will now turn to the closing sections of *D’Une Jeunesse europäéenne* (the second of the two early essays) and to certain aspects of the first three novels, all of which were written in the years preceding 1934. From this point onwards, critical accounts tend to vary more noticeably, and the following explanation will itself diverge in important respects from much that has been written about the works to be discussed. Following the methodology outlined in the Introduction, the analysis will, however, continue to stay as close as possible to Malraux’s texts and show that the interpretation to be offered here finds strong support in the works themselves.

Commentators have often suggested that *La Tentation de l’Occident* and *D’Une Jeunesse europäéenne* are essentially negative works that do no more than offer a diagnosis of the intellectual anarchy afflicting Western civilisation without providing any alternative – any possible way forward.\(^{26}\) 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 important remarks near the conclusion (which critics appear to have overlooked), Malraux begins, for the first time, to sketch in 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

\(^{25}\) Some critics rightly draw attention to the collapse of the belief in individualism that Malraux also stresses. Essentially, however, he sees this as a late manifestation of the same belief in Man we have been discussing. (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 here for the sake of brevity.

\(^{26}\) 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 seems scant. It is also worth noting Malraux’s comment at the time, after returning 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.
thinking without requiring him to conform to an idea formulated a priori. The world, he 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.’ In response to this development, he contends, a new spirit seems to be emerging in Western civilization. One cannot yet predict where it 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 the idea, 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...

Brief and abstract though they are, these remarks are vital clues to the next stage of Malraux’s intellectual development. Two general observations should be made at the outset. First, Malraux’s remarks clearly involve a strong emphasis on the notion of change, just as there was, we recall, in the comment quoted earlier in which he spoke of the ‘violent sense of transience’ he experienced after World War I. Here, in these statements from the conclusion of D’Une Jeunesse européenne, he appears to be asserting that, in the face of a world of constant change, Western civilization’s means of achieving a grasp on things and events (its ‘metaphysic’) will itself need to be free to change constantly – free of any ‘fixed point.’ Second, the tenor of his remarks suggests that Malraux is not speaking solely about the realm of ideas – for example of philosophical or political thought. His ‘metaphysic in which there is no longer any fixed point’ also encompasses man’s psychological life – his ‘mental and emotional outlook’ – which, no less than his abstract thought, will be

27 Malraux, "D’Une Jeunesse européenne," 150.
28 Ibid., 152,53.
29 See above, page 24.
30 If he were, one might perhaps be tempted to compare his comments 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, encompassing 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.
31 The French text reads: ‘un domaine de l’esprit et de la sensibilité’.
‘constantly moving, changing, establishing new relationships and being born anew’. This explains why Malraux’s next step is to express his thinking in terms of the novel. He is in pursuit of a new ‘intelligible image of the world’ but this cannot simply be a set of abstractions; it also calls for a human psychology – an emotional life – that can accommodate itself to a world of constant change. Malraux is, in short, foreshadowing the features of what one might term a new ‘human type’ – a form of mental and emotional experience no longer based on a fixed ideal (such as the now-shattered dream of the ‘Coming Man’) but one 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 disappeared.

How is this to be achieved? The answer is contained in the remarks we have been considering. This 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 abstract, and its implications are not spelt out. The general intent, however, is clear enough. Meaning and intelligibility will derive exclusively from the transitory perspectives of the practical act. The new reality for the West – the antidote to a state of mind that Malraux had described as ‘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, the year after the appearance of D’Une Jeunesse européeenne, Malraux’s first novel, Les Conquérants, was published. In an article in Partisan Review in 1948, which still remains one of the best 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’. Accurately reflecting the disenchantment with the nineteenth century ideal of Man described above, Garine will have no truck with optimistic dreams of a glorious

32 See above, page 28.
human future or, indeed, with a fixed ideal of any kind. He insists, nevertheless, on lucidity – an intelligible image of the world – and he 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 often been a source of controversy among critics and it is not difficult to see why. Although deeply involved in a revolutionary struggle, he has no ‘theory of history’ and is as indifferent to Marxist ‘scientific socialism’ as he is to more moderate democratic socialist ideals. He is, on the other hand, as Chiaromonte aptly observes, the quintessential man of 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 might well be tomorrow’s enemies if their policies obstruct the continuing success of the insurrection. It is nevertheless, as Malraux required, an intelligible world because as long as the struggle continues (defeat, of course, will bring Garine’s world to an end), the changing practical situations necessarily have an immediate and concrete significance, for good or ill, which only 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 those of Malraux quoted above), Garine has resolved ‘to reject any proposition which cannot be directly translated into a force, an act, or a series of acts’. Or as Malraux himself explained when addressing a public meeting of writers and intellectuals who had gathered to discuss Les Conquérants shortly after its publication, Garine’s perception of events is not shaped by a fixed ideal but solely by pragmatic considerations. ‘Garine does not place himself in the service of an ideal (“une image”),’ he insisted,

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

35 As indeed occurs, for example, when Garine decides to oppose his former ally, the Social Democrat leader, Tcheng-Dai, when he decides that the latter’s policies have begun to harm the progress of the revolutionary movement. André Malraux, Les Conquérants, Œuvres Complètes (I), ed. Pierre Brunel, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 203-06.
36 Which is why he says to the narrator, during a period of sickness that hospitalises him, ‘When I lose contact with action, when I am separated from it, it’s my lifeblood seeping away.’ Ibid., 250. Chiaromonte aptly comments: ‘In Malraux, when defeat comes, darkness is complete.’ Chiaromonte, "Malraux and the Demons of Action," 106.
Chapter 2 - Background: The years before 1934

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. 38

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 who prefigured existentialism, particularly Nietzsche, for whom the link between truth and the act is a prominent theme. 39 As we have indicated, however, Malraux’s concern in Les Conquérants is not philosophical argumentation. His aim is to build on the sketchy formulations offered in the concluding section of D’Une Jeunesse européenne and to reveal, through the characters in a novel, what a life based solely on the test of the act would, or at least could, look like. Garine is the embodiment of a human type who can thrive in a world deprived of any ‘fixed point’ (such as the ‘earthly Paradise’ of a socialist ideal). He is Malraux’s answer – or at least his answer at this time – to a world without God, and one which has also lost its substitute faith in a ‘Coming Man’. 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 that, as Malraux wrote in D’Une Jeunesse européenne, ‘cannot be directly translated into concrete action’. In Chiaromonte’s apt words, Garine is the embodiment of ‘that

38 André Malraux, “La Question des ‘Conquérants’,” Variétés, no. 15 October 1929 (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 preconceived ideals.
39 There are also affinities between this early period of Malraux’s thought and Sartre’s existentialism (which of course emerged somewhat later) – particularly between Malraux’s aim, mentioned above, 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 give 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, to explore 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), 37. There is no space in the present study for an extended comparison of Malraux’s writings with existentialism.
40 See above, page 27.
modern pragmatic impulse which tends to see in the world of action the only reality”.

There is no space in the present study for a lengthy examination of Malraux’s early novels and still less for a discussion of the different critical reactions they have elicited. To give a more complete picture of Malraux’s intellectual position prior to 1934, it will, however, be useful to say a little more about the next two works, *La Voie royale* and *La Condition humaine*. Fundamentally, 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 it selects and ‘values’ what is important (and disvalues what is unimportant), and thus gives shape and meaning to an otherwise chaotic and unintelligible world. In these next two novels, however, Malraux begins to offer a more comprehensive picture of the value in question by exploring more deeply what one might term its ‘negative’ aspects. The sense in which this word is being used requires a little explanation. There is no suggestion in any of the novels under discussion that Malraux somehow reaches the conclusion that action ‘fails’ as a value and should be replaced with something else. In each case, as we have said, he is seeking to delineate the features of a life based solely on the test of the act, and he does not resile from that. He is aware, however, that while the pragmatic impulse in question can certainly make sense of an otherwise senseless world, it can do so

---

41 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 would obviously be difficult to square with the account offered in the present analysis. (Boak, *André Malraux*, 142.) Yet even setting aside the points made here, such interpretations overlook the 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): 176-77. Apart from Chiaromonte, one of the few critics to grasp the point at issue here was Malraux’s friend, Bernard Groethuysens, 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): 559-60. Like Garine and Kyo, Malraux himself, as he said on a number of 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.

42 I have discussed a number of critical viewpoints in my articles on Malraux’s first three novels listed in the bibliography to this study.
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, particularly in *La Voie royale* and *La Condition humaine*, provide vehicles through which the limitations and vulnerabilities of this intensely pragmatic view of life can also be revealed. To repeat, Malraux is not repudiating the source of meaning he is exploring; but, equally, he is not interested in a one-sided apologia. He therefore presents a number of characters – Perken in *La Voie royale*, the terrorist, Tchen, and the ‘baron’ de Clappique in *La Condition humaine* are prominent examples – who mark out the *limitations* of action, the kinds of expectations it *cannot* fulfil without radically distorting the meaning it provides. Such characters portray Malraux’s new metaphysic of action ‘in reverse’, so to speak, by exposing its potential to falsify and negate.  

One of these limitations is of particular relevance to the present study because it helps to reveal the significance of the change that took place in Malraux’s thinking after 1934. As we have suggested above, the meaning action confers on things and events is *particular and transient*. Action gives shape and form to the practical ‘here-and-now’ – to the circumstances brought about, for example, by the imminent threat of an attack by a hostile army (one of the situations in *Les Conquérants*) or by the looming prospect of a repression at the hands of former allies (an important event in *La Condition humaine*). Action can reveal such truths (truths that, as we have said, only the impractical dreamer would deny) but – and this is the vital point – they are only ‘practical’ truths, truths ‘for the present moment’, lasting only as long as 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.  

... 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

---

43 This issue is explored in some detail in my articles on Malraux’s early novels listed in the bibliography.

44 Malraux’s early novels were an important influence on this section of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Cf. Albert Camus, *Essais, Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 1410,45.
on. That is why you can build nothing on me. Nothing of the conqueror endures...\(^{45}\)

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 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’, the world of specific situations; it has nothing to say about the universal or the eternal – the world ‘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, his 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 here and now, and compel it to speak of ‘life as a whole’ – of what is true at all times and of all places. Presented – significantly – as someone who received a religious education but who subsequently lost his faith,\(^{46}\) Tchen is unable to rest content with a reality bounded by the limits of the collective action of which he is a part, thirsting instead for the meaning of human life as a whole, as an all-embracing unity. Action is no longer called on simply to provide the meaning 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, as I have argued in some detail elsewhere,\(^{47}\) is a profound distortion of the truth that action provides, leading in Tchen’s case to an extremely violent form of fanaticism, and ending, by a strange but inescapable logic, to his death as a suicide terrorist.

There is no space here to examine Tchen’s character in detail, but his importance for present purposes is clear. The ‘man of action’ may certainly harness the modern pragmatic impulse to build order out of chaos within the context of a particular enterprise such as a revolutionary movement, but the meaning he discovers will never extend beyond that context. The only truths ‘the Conqueror’ knows, as Camus writes, are those that he can ‘reach out and touch with his hand’; he knows nothing of human life as whole. Collective action may give him a sense of belonging to a

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 167.


particular collective movement, but it will never unite him with all men and women at all times – with a larger entity called humanity, or ‘man’.

The importance of this point for the present study is that, as we shall see in the next chapter, one of the consequences of the pivotal event in 1934 to which we have referred was precisely that thereafter Malraux was in a position to formulate a concept of man, of human life as a whole – or ‘the human adventure’ to use his phrase, whose precise meaning we shall explore in the next chapter. (And the significance of that development, to anticipate a little further, was that for Malraux, as we have mentioned, the question ‘What is man?’ is closely linked to the question ‘What is art?’) None of the fundamentals we have described earlier in this chapter were to alter: there was no question for Malraux of returning to nineteenth century teleologies – to the various notions of the ‘Coming Man’. And there was to be no denial of the new data revealed by anthropology which had, as we have seen, deepened ‘the enigma’ of man rather than reveal any set of permanent human characteristics. There was no question, in other words, of repudiating the basic proposition outlined in *D’Une Jeunesse européenne* that a viable ‘metaphysic’ must henceforth be free of any fixed point. The vital change that occurred in 1934, however, was that Malraux was to discover, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, a notion of man that fully accepted these limitations – a notion of man that succeeds precisely where Tchen’s aspiration had failed because it is compatible with meaning that is wholly transient.

This, one should stress, is not to belittle Malraux’s achievement in the years prior to 1934. Action had provided him with an answer to an urgent problem. In the face of the intellectual anarchy – the sense of ‘the impossibility of grasping any reality’ – diagnosed in *La Tentation de l’Occident* and *D’Une Jeunesse européenne*, he had created an impressive gallery of characters who converted the abstract formulae in the concluding stages of *D’Une Jeunesse européenne* (‘forms of human experience in which anything that cannot be directly translated into concrete action … no longer plays any part’) into vivid, living portraits. He had, in effect, charted the boundaries of a new value – ‘value’ in the sense of a source of meaning – suited

---

49 It is interesting in this context to recall the conversation reported by Roger Martin du Gard in which Malraux responded ‘That remains to be seen’ to the proposition that ‘every civilisation is based on the idea of human permanence.’ See above, note 24.
to a new world henceforth in a constant state of change; and by 1933 he had written
three novels based on this value, the last of which, *La Condition humaine*, is widely
regarded as one of his best works. Nowhere in all of this, however, had he answered
– or even sought to answer – the question ‘What is man?’ That question was simply
outside the boundaries of his endeavours at that time and he made no attempt to
pretend otherwise. Indeed, as the case of Tchen shows, he was keenly aware that to
indulge in such a pretence would result in a major distortion of the value he was
exploring. For the Malraux of 1933 – the year in which *La Condition humaine* was
published and received the Prix Goncourt – ‘man’ remained an enigma, and there
was no sign in anything he had written that this situation was about to change.

***

Before moving to the next phase in Malraux’s intellectual development, it
will be useful to say a brief word about his writings on art in the period we have been
considering. In one sense, he had written quite extensively on the subject. Malraux
was always a very productive writer and, apart from the works we have discussed,
his publications over the pre-1934 period 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, Keyserling’s *Journal de
voyage d’un philosophe*, D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, an exhibition of
the paintings of Fautrier (whose works Malraux admired throughout his life),
William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*, an exhibition of Buddhist sculpture, and more
besides. In another sense, however, despite all this activity, Malraux had written
very little about art. The articles and reviews in question have been studied in detail
by a number of Malraux’s commentators. And it is certainly true, as some suggest,
that one can discern a number of recurring preoccupations and preferences in
Malraux’s reactions to the works he discusses. Nowhere in this quite significant
body of work, however, is there anything that could seriously be regarded as a
comprehensive and systematic theory of art, or even an attempt to formulate one.
This is an issue to which we will return at a later stage when the theory of art
presented in *Les Voix du silence* and other later works has been examined and we are

---

50 For example: Pascal Sabourin, *La Réflexion sur l’art d’André Malraux: origines et évolution* (Paris:
de la littérature, 1921-1951*. 38
in a position to appreciate the range and depth of Malraux’s later thinking.\textsuperscript{51} As those remarks will suggest, Malraux’s writings on art at this early stage were much more limited in their ambitions. Certainly, they are always carefully considered, and 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?’\textsuperscript{52} 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 \textit{La Voie royale}, mentioned in the Introduction\textsuperscript{53} in which one of the characters states \textit{inter alia} 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, as we shall see later\textsuperscript{54}). Despite the attention it has attracted from certain commentators, the passage could not conceivably be regarded as a serious attempt to present a comprehensive theory of art.

The limits of Malraux’s pre-1934 thinking in relation to art become even clearer if one takes a glimpse – necessarily a very preliminary glimpse at this stage – at subsequent developments. Quite suddenly from late 1934 onwards,\textsuperscript{55} Malraux 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).\textsuperscript{56} The tenor of all these pieces is markedly different from anything Malraux had written before. It is no longer a question of discussing particular works with the occasional comment on art in general. The position is

\textsuperscript{51} See below, page 273.
\textsuperscript{52} This is also true of the occasional reference to art in \textit{La Tentation de l’Occident} and \textit{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.
\textsuperscript{53} See above, page 11.
\textsuperscript{54} See above, esp. page 204 et seq.
\textsuperscript{55} The event that brought about the change in Malraux’s thinking took place in March 1934. See below, page 44.
reversed. Malraux is now explicitly addressing the general question 'What is art?' with occasional comments about particular works. Even more significantly, one now encounters, for the first time, the propositions that will be major, recurring 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', 57 that 'A work of art is an object, but it is also an encounter with time', 58 and that 'Art lives for us through its capacity to enable men to escape from the human condition, not through flight, but through possession'. 59 The precise meaning of these statements will emerge in later chapters; the important point for present purposes is that the ideas they express do not appear before 1934, but do occur afterwards, again and again. There is, in short, a sudden and 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 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. Some of Malraux’s critics have tended to give the impression that it was only after World War II that he began to develop the ideas he presented in *La Psychologie de l’art* and *Les Voix du silence*, a claim often linked to the observation that he wrote no more novels from then on – an idea which, in turn, is sometimes linked to the claim that he thenceforth turned his back on political activity and, in the words of one recent critic, 'abandoned the theatre of collective praxis for the domain of art'. 60 Whatever one may think of the two secondary points – and there is good reason to think that both, in different ways, are misleading 61 – the initial proposition is quite

---

58 Malraux, "Préfaces, articles, allocutions: 'L'Œuvre d'art'," 1190.
61 See below, page 65 where it is suggested that the volumes making up *Le Miroir des Limbes* are in reality more like novels than autobiography. The suggestion that Malraux turned his back on political activity is, of course, difficult to square with his very active post-war involvement in cultural affairs under de Gaulle and in a number of other causes. For a useful recent source of commentary on
mistaken. 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* 62 (at about the same time, incidentally, as his involvement in the Spanish Civil War, a detail that fits rather badly with claims about an abandonment of ‘the theatre of collective praxis’). If further evidence were required, one need only consult the dates of composition that Malraux appended at the end of both *La Psychologie de l'art* and *Les Voix du silence* which read: ‘1935 – 1951’.63 The point of this analysis, it should be stressed, is not simply to correct a biographical mistake, biography being only an incidental concern in the present study.64 We have indicated that a central claim of this study will be that the year 1934 was a crucial turning-point in Malraux’s intellectual development, and that as a consequence he was in a position to formulate an understanding of man in general – and, as a result, to develop a general theory of the nature and significance of art. The fact that the nature of his writing about art altered in the way we have indicated from late 1934 onwards, and that early drafts of material contained in his major works on art date from the late 1930s, is important evidence in favour of this thesis.

***

The present chapter has traced the trajectory of Malraux’s thought from the mid-1920s to late 1933, after the publication of *La Condition humaine*. He had


63 Critics have seldom commented on these dates. One of the few to do so makes an error and writes ‘[The Voices of Silence], which [Malraux] claims was begun in 1939...’ See Claude Imbert, “The Blue of the Sea: Merleau-Ponty, Malraux, and Modern Painting,” *Modern Language Notes* 115 (2000): 612.

64 See Introduction, page 18
obviously moved a considerable distance over the period. *La Tentation de l'Occident* had described a Western culture confronted with ‘the impossibility of grasping a reality of any kind’ following the death of God and the disintegration of the nineteenth century faith in Man. *D'Une Jeunesse européenne*, a year later, had added to this analysis and briefly sketched the outlines of a new, intensely pragmatic value that Malraux believed to be emerging. The three novels that followed explored this value in depth, in terms of both its potentialities and its limitations, one of these limitations being that it was unable to answer the question: ‘What is man?’ During this period, Malraux had written a number of short pieces on literary works and visual art, but at no point had he offered anything resembling a general theory of art. All this, as we have said, was to change in very important ways after 1934. The next chapter will examine the event that triggered that change.
Chapter Three

The Human Adventure

‘Tout cela aurait pu ne pas être, ne pas être ainsi.’
Berger, Les Noyers de l’Altenburg.

In the light of the issues discussed in the previous chapter, 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 present chapter will address the first of these questions, reserving the second, which will in effect describe the foundations of Malraux’s theory of art, for the next chapter. The substance of the present chapter will be a description of the event that brought about the change in question, and an analysis of its principal implications. The discussion will show that, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, 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 recognised as early as D’Une Jeunesse européenne – that the new Western ‘metaphysic’ be compatible with a world of continual change, that it be free from any ‘fixed point’. As we saw in the previous chapter, action had provided Malraux with a value, in the sense of a source of meaning, that met this criterion, because the meaning thus provided was wholly transient. The present chapter will show that Malraux’s response to the question ‘What is man?’ is of the same nature: it is a revelation of man’s significance 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. One can, with little difficulty, think of a number of writers whose lives include one particular incident which, more than any other, seems to have exerted a profound and lasting influence.

1 ‘All this might not have been, might not have been as it is.’
on their thought—an experience so powerful in its effects and so fertile in its implications that it appears almost to have the quality of a revelation. For Rousseau, as he relates in his *Confessions*, such an experience occurred one hot day in 1749 as he was walking to the prison at Vincennes to visit his friend 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.’

For Dostoevsky, the years of exile in Siberia seem to have had consequences which, while more gradual, were no less far-reaching.

For Kant, a pivotal event, albeit of a less dramatic kind, was his encounter with Hume’s writings which, he writes, ‘first interrupted my dogmatic slumber’ and gave him his ‘first spark of light’.

In André Malraux’s case, an experience with similarly profound effects occurred one day in early 1934 after a flight over the Yemen where he and his aviator friend, Corniglion-Molinier, had been conducting an aerial search in a light aircraft for the ruins of the palace of the Queen of Sheba. On the return flight, as they crossed Tunisia, Malraux and his companion were caught in a violent electrical storm over mountainous terrain and only narrowly escaped crashing. Shortly afterwards, following a safe landing at Bône (now Annaba) in Algeria, Malraux found himself once again amidst the ordinary scenes of everyday life and suddenly encountered, for the first time, an experience he subsequently called ‘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 role in my life, and that I have tried to express a number of times.’

---


5 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.*’ André Malraux, *Antimémoires, Œuvres Complètes (III)*, ed. Marius-François Guyard, Jean-Claude-Larrat, and François Trécourt (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 72. In the final volume of *Le Miroir des Limbes, (Lazare)*, Malraux describes the encounter with the storm, and certain similar events, including the tank-trap episode to be discussed below, as experiences that played the role of ‘épiphadies’ in his life. André Malraux, *Lazare. Œuvres*
adds, 'transposed directly' into *Le Temps du mépris*, his fourth novel, which was published in 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 *Antimémoires* themselves.

Before proceeding to a closer analysis, one further preliminary comment is in order. One of the consequences of the experience in question, we have suggested, was that it enabled Malraux to answer the question: 'What is art?' Precisely why this is so is 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? The answer to that question can only be provided once the event and its implications have been carefully examined (a task which, as we shall see, critics have often neglected\(^6\)) but one general observation can be made here. In Malraux's eyes, as later discussion will reveal, art is not simply a response to the physical world of objects and events, or even to the psychological or social dimensions of human experience. Art for Malraux responds fundamentally to a *metaphysical* reality – stated very broadly, to man's sense of his significance, or more accurately, his *insignificance*, in the 'scheme of things'. The importance of the experience in 1934 was, in essence, that it revealed this metaphysical reality in a particularly clear and forceful way; and it was this revelation – or so the present study will argue – that enabled Malraux, first, to answer the question 'What is man?' and then, as a consequence, to respond to the question 'What is art?' These are very general remarks which obviously call for detailed explanation and justification. The important point at the present stage is that, improbable though it may seem as a point of departure for a theory of art, the experience of the return to the earth merits the closest attention because its consequences for Malraux's thinking about art were profound and far-reaching.

***

In its fictional guise in *Le Temps du mépris*, the 'return to the earth' takes place when the novel's central character, Kassner, is flown to safety in Prague after

---

\(^{5}\) See below, page 57.

\(^{6}\) See below, page 57.
escaping from a Nazi prison in Germany. In a slightly revised form, the episode reappears in the *Antimémoires*, 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, rain and hail. Malraux seems to enter a world apart – a world of unremitting 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. ⁷

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, quite suddenly, he finds himself amidst the ordinary scenes of city life. The rapid transition from one context to the other is an important element in 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 commonplace objects and activities, strikes him as somehow strange and inexplicable. Walking down 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...’ ⁸ The same sense of wonder and incomprehension encompasses everything he sees about him. Malraux explains:

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

---

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’.  

In these circumstances, objects and events no longer appear as the world, the world one simply 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, there seems to be no more ‘naturalness’ or definitiveness in the way things are than in any other way they might be. The familiar, everyday world – the banal world of shirts, hot irons, people and dogs – appears simply as a 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’. No longer part of a natural, taken-for-granted ‘scheme of things’, the world 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 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’. Before examining its implications more closely, it will be useful to consider one further example.

On this occasion, 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. Again, the episode reappears in the Antimémoires where Malraux narrates it in the first person. 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 a tank’s escape, which is wired to guns already trained on it. Acutely aware of the danger, Berger

---

10 Malraux, Le Temps du mépris, Œuvres Complètes (1), 826.
11 Ibid., 827.
and the other crew members make frantic efforts to free the tank. Shells begin to explode close by. The sound of the guns seems to Berger like ‘the very voice of death’. Finally the tank is freed and continues its advance. The German positions are reached soon afterwards but they have now gone. 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’. 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’.

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.

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

---

13 Ibid., 763.
In fact, nothing seems to have any reason for being at all. Just as Kassner had seen human life welling up ‘as condensation and droplets of water appear on a frozen glass’, 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’. 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 hope to discover a hidden, enduring reality (the way things ‘really’ are), but appearance behind which nothing can be known: appearance per se, or as Malraux sometimes termed it later, ‘appearance in the metaphysical sense’.

***

This, then, is the experience of the ‘return to the earth’ to which Malraux (who rarely made autobiographical comments of the kind) assigned ‘a major role’ in his life. It is an experience found nowhere in his writings prior to 1934 but one which appears several times in different forms after that date (a circumstance to which critics have rarely drawn attention). We will now 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, as merely an idiosyncratic reaction on Malraux’s part. Certainly, the circumstances Malraux describes are unusual, and the contrast between the two ‘worlds’ – in these 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 in much less dramatic circumstances. Malraux himself alluded to this point in a speech in 1973 concerning the function of art in

---

15 Malraux, Les Noyers de l’Altenburg, Œuvres Complètes (II), 766.
16 Ibid.
17 Especially in his books on art. See, for example, Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 29. Also the more extended explanation at Ibid 17-19. See also: André Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Intemporel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), ed. Henri Godard (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 725,28.
which he briefly mentions the experience in question. The human response in such moments, he contended, is 'the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life, beginning with his own.' That emotion, he argued, is closely bound up with the questions ‘Why does something exist rather than nothing?’ and ‘Why has life taken this form?’ He then 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.18

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 life after an event that has caused a separation from it – such as the moment of a traveller’s first encounter with the sights and sounds of another culture (which is in fact one of the contexts in which the experience occurs in Les Noyers de l’Altenburg19). The experience itself, in other words, is not necessarily uncommon, Malraux is suggesting, and certainly not idiosyncratic on his 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 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 example, 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.

18 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), 885. 19 In the 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, Œuvres Complètes (II), 652-55. 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 civilisation after having been involved in another, that of the hero of l’Altenburg after his return from Afghanistan...’ Malraux, Antimémoires, Œuvres Complètes (III), 72. This episode is itself repeated in the Antimémoires. See Malraux, Antimémoires, Œuvres Complètes (III), 35-36.
It is important to note, also, that Malraux speaks of an *emotion* and not simply of idea – a response of the feelings and not simply of the understanding. The reason for this is 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 formulation above, ‘Why does something exist rather than nothing?’ and ‘Why has life taken this form?’ – is not merely the identification of a philosophical problem (though it has been that at times for other writers\(^{20}\)); it is a response to a world *to which Berger is himself 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 astonishment, as the episodes discussed above indicate, but it is wonder and astonishment of a particular kind, evoked not by some particular object or event but by *existence as a whole*. It is an emotion springing from a bewildered 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 dealing with 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. The ‘metaphysical’ and ‘human’ compass of the emotion results, not surprisingly, 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.\(^{21}\) Malraux’s choice of the novel is nonetheless significant: 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 intended to portray individual human beings, the emotion they experience in the ‘return to the earth’ is not one that concerns their

\(^{20}\) The first question at least, as Julian Young points out, can be found in philosophers as various as Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer, and Aristotle. See: Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109,10. 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 literature as well, particularly in the twentieth century. The important point, however, is to determine the *particular significance* the questions assume in any given system of thought. For Malraux, we are arguing here, they assume a central significance, and not simply in neutral, ‘philosophical’ terms.

\(^{21}\) A contrast to which Malraux drew attention in a preface to *Le Temps du Mépris*. Malraux, *Le Temps du mépris, Œuvres Complètes (I)*, 776-77.
exclusively as individuals – that is, in virtue of those aspects of their lives that relate to themselves alone. This emerges clearly in the episodes discussed. As we have seen, 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 crucial 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) but rather to ‘life in general’, to human existence. In this sense – although in this sense only – the experience might well be described as exceptional. As long as it lasts, the state of mind it involves is quite unlike 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 is describing (although at times, as we have noted, in less dramatic situations as well), all 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, but solely in terms of what connects him to human life as a whole. The ‘return to the earth’, however it may occur, is a brief glimpse 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 the analysis given above. 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.

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 immediately after landing is not itself one in which his personal 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.
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 is poised, as it were, on the brink of chaos and is inseparable from a sense of incipient insignificance – a sense that, lacking all explanation, it belongs to a realm of utter meaninglessness, of the void. The ‘return to the earth’ thus provides an awareness of ‘man’ – in the sense of human life and all it involves – but an awareness of man 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. In the sense in which religion or a philosophy might be said to confer a ‘meaning’ on human life, Kassner’s and Berger’s experience might therefore be described as *pre*-religious or *pre*-philosophical. It is a fleeting 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 sense of precariousness (to borrow one of Malraux’s own terms23), a sense that the human world – ‘all this’ – is potentially mere arbitrariness and contingency and that, unless somehow affirmed, is as insignificant as the chaos of which it seems to be a part.

Given this, 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 the term ‘definition’ here may be extended to cover the portrayal of an experience and not limited simply to the emergence of an idea. It 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 experience24) – the moment in which it suddenly becomes aware that it might possibly be more than the chaos in which it seems engulfed. In slightly different terms, it is a sudden awareness of the possibility of ‘lasting’, of enduring – even 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 considering 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 why he can also assert that ‘Humanism does not consist in saying:

---

23 Most notably in the title of *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*.
“No animal could have done what I have done,” but in declaring: “We have refused what the beast within us willed to do, and we seek to reclaim man wherever we find that which crushes him.” 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 can now see, he views 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 faltering, to a universe of blind chaos: man’s sudden glimpse of an alternative, however precarious, to ‘that which crushes him’.

In another experience 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’. The phrase recurs a number of times in Malraux’s writings from the mid 1930s onwards, and one can now begin to see why. 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 as we have also seen, human life thus perceived is without any underlying ‘explanation’: it is apprehended solely in

---

26 Malraux, *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg, Œuvres Complètes (II)*, 660,61. 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 make him aware of a 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.)
terms of appearance – not appearance behind which one might hope to discover the true 'nature of things', but behind which nothing can be known. To the extent that human life (and not chaos) can be affirmed – 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, and a number of Malraux’s commentators have in fact adopted such terminology. Tempting as they are, however, such terms are subtly 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’ here is an agnostic in the fullest 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 – that one might be an 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 – 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 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 from 1934 onwards, 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

---

27 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, *Essais, Le Mythe de Sisyphes* 112. In Sartre’s case, the idea of ‘alienation’ often includes a social or political dimension, 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.

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, wheelbarrows ...[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!29

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 man’s presence. The objects are not significant in themselves, or proof of (for example) ‘man’s timeless industry and ingenuity’ (Malraux is not seeking to identify a permanent human essence based, for example, on a faculty for productiveness and technical inventiveness.) The objects simply evoke an awareness of the persistent, if precarious, 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’30 and these passages illustrate what he has in mind. It is not a question of the past as a series of specific events – as history: the human adventure is a metaphysical, not an historical, concept. It is, rather, 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

29 Malraux, Antimémoires, Œuvres Complètes (III), 237,38.
30 Ibid., 72.
(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, and 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 persistent presence. 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 nothingness and 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 show 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 response of some of Malraux’s critics to the aspect of his work we have just considered.

As intimated earlier, Malraux’s critics have seldom examined the experience of the ‘return to the earth’ in detail and this state of affairs merits brief comment in itself. The neglect is, to say the least, puzzling. The experience, as we have said, occurs nowhere in Malraux’s pre-1934 writings but becomes almost a kind of leitmotiv in his works after that time. The storm scene and its aftermath discussed above is one of the principal episodes in *Le Temps du mépris*, occupying a major portion of this relatively short novel. Variants occur in Malraux’s next novel, *L’Espoir*, while his final novel, *Les Noyers de l’Altenburg*, (itself a relatively short work as well) contains three substantial episodes centred on the same experience.

---

31 An interesting adaptation in *L’Espoir* is the scene in which a farmer is taken on a bombing flight to 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 the film, *Sierra de Teruel*, which he based on sections of the novel. See André Malraux, *L’Espoir, Œuvres Complètes* (II), ed. Marius-François Guyard, Maurice Larès, and François Trécourt (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 382-93.

32 Berger’s father’s return to Europe (see above, 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 above note 26); and the tank trap episode.
Chapter 3 – The Human Adventure

one of which – the tank trap incident and its aftermath – occupies a major part of the concluding section. In addition, as indicated earlier, 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 that figures in Les Noyers de l’Altenburg. Also important in this context is Malraux’s comment in his major speech on art in 1973, mentioned above, which clearly ascribes a special importance to the experience. And then there is, as we have seen, his own, unambiguous statement in the Antimémoires that the event played ‘a major role’ in his life.33 Given all this, it would seem reasonable at least to acknowledge the possibility that the experience played an important part in Malraux’s intellectual development, and to see a need to examine it in some detail. The first has occurred only occasionally, the second scarcely at all.

Critics who do offer comment sometimes suggest that the experience led Malraux to formulate an image of man founded on certain timeless human values. One 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’,34 while another writes that the episode contributes ‘to the overall affirmative answer [to the question]: is there a permanent, eternal notion of mankind?’35 There has even been an attempt to give the experience a teleological twist, one commentator 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.’36

33 There is also his reference to these experiences as ‘epiphanies’. See note 5 above.
34 Boak, André Malraux, 178. In a somewhat similar vein, another critic suggests that Berger finds ‘the true face of Man’ in the ‘stubborn patience of the peasant profoundly in harmony with the inexhaustible fruitfulness of the Earth’. Joseph Hoffmann, L’Humanisme de Malraux (Paris: Klincksieck, 1963), 280.
36 Violet M. Horvath, André Malraux: The Human Adventure (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 279-81. 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, Malraux, A Biography, 154. Jean Lacouture’s biography makes the strangely conflicting claims that the ‘coming back to earth’ episodes ‘left a particularly deep impression’ on Malraux and ‘mark the threshold of a second life’, but that the event was perhaps included in Le Temps du mépris ‘as if to add a little warmth to this somewhat dry account’. Lacouture, André Malraux 158. Jean-François Lyotard makes the puzzling suggestion that the terror of the storm would somehow ‘authenticate’ the archaeological discovery in the Yemen. Lyotard, Signed, Malraux, 97. Anissa Chami notes the importance of the experience and Malraux’s ‘repeated attempts to grasp its quintessence’ but takes the issue no further Chami, André Malraux: une passion,
If the analysis offered here is accurate, 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, in the terms used earlier, could be more than the chaos of which it is a part but which, in order to be so, stands in need of affirmation. If affirmed (and, as we have said, the means by which this might be achieved have yet to be discussed) he endures only ‘in time’, as irruption and adventure, not timelessly as part of a suddenly revealed, underlying 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 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 paint 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 Malraux’s term, not just those 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 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 adventure — man without eternity who lives and dies in time.

The notion of a teleological framework is equally implausible. As we saw earlier, Malraux had rejected notions of an ideal future as early as La Tentation de l’Occident and there is no more trace of this in his post-1934 writing than in his early novels where, as we saw, action revealed truths of a specific and transient...


37 See above, page 50.
38 See above, page 23.
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. 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 since, as we have seen, they perceive life as an irruption into being – a 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 we shall see in subsequent discussion, 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 would herald a definitive victory.

This discussion can be usefully linked to the comments in the previous chapter 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’, to use his phrase, 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 a unilinear History was no longer tenable. A number of commentators have suggested that in view of the importance Malraux placed on these developments, his view of man must be of a similar kind, and in particular that it must closely resemble Spengler’s. Jean-François Lyotard, for example, writes that ‘in no way does Malraux amend Spengler’ and, as mentioned earlier, Pierre Bourdieu claims that Malraux offers

---

39 See above, page 30.
40 Of whom, as we 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 (Malraux, Les Noyers de l’Altenerburg, Œuvres Complètes (II), 767); but this is a resurrection in the sense of a ‘return’ from what Kassner describes as ‘the kingdom of the blind’, not a resurrection in the teleological sense suggested by the critic in question.
41 See above, page 24.
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, but if they are implying that Malraux simply adopts and restates the German writer’s well-known ideas about the plurality of cultures, both comments are very questionable. It is certainly true, as we have seen, that Malraux recognised the importance of anthropology and of the challenge represented by the idea of a ‘discontinuous’ history espoused by Spengler. The findings 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 civilisation.’ 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 Spenglerian thinking. 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, 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. As we have seen, however, Malraux’s view 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 that he or she is necessarily 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

43 See above, page 9.
44 Presumably they cannot be suggesting that Malraux accepts Spengler’s theory about the cyclic rise and fall of cultures since there is no evidence anywhere in Malraux’s writings that this aspect of Spengler’s thought impressed him. This belief would, moreover, imply adherence to a theory of history, which, as we have seen already, is not a feature of Malraux’s thinking. (This issue is discussed in more detail below. See esp. page 256 et seq.) Bourdieu’s reference to ‘Spenglerian metaphysical bric-a-brac’ is particularly puzzling given that Spengler’s theories, such as they are, are historical rather than metaphysical in nature.
45 See above, page 24
47 Cf. Spengler’s statement in Chapter Two, note 16.
defined by a metaphysical situation in which he appears as an unexplained irruption into 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’. One of the principal participants, the anthropologist, Möllberg, who is a Spenglerian in the sense mentioned above (but one who has also carried out extensive anthropological research in Africa),\(^{48}\) 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’. Suddenly a voice interrupts him: ‘Or on the fundamental?’ The text then continues:

> It was my father 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.\(^{49}\)

The exchange neatly encapsulates the difference between the terms of Möllberg’s (Spenglerian) thinking and the sense 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 arguments) because if man is always on the brink of ‘nothingness’, as Möllberg argues, he exists as a distinct presence only to the extent that he resists this nothingness and affirms himself against it. Suggestions by writers such as Lyotard and Bourdieu that Malraux remains somehow enmeshed in a Spenglerian view of man are thus misleading. Malraux certainly recognised the force of arguments that suggest, in Möllberg’s 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 account, but it was not an answer. Interestingly, as the passage quoted above illustrates, the more determinedly one insists on the Spenglerian thesis, as Möllberg does, the more vivid and insistent the image of the ‘human adventure’

---

\(^{48}\) As indicated earlier, Möllberg was modelled on the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius (see above, Chapter Two, note 17), but, in relation to the idea of the discontinuity of cultures (as distinct from their necessary ‘decline’) Frobenius reflected a Spenglerian point of view.

becomes (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) out of which the notion of the human adventure emerges.

***

The previous chapter suggested that despite the transformation that took place in Malraux’s thinking after 1934, the development was more akin to a broadening and deepening of previous thinking than a rupture. We are now in a position to revisit this claim. The important element of continuity, as we can now see, 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.’ Post-1934, Malraux continues to reject all solutions that require adherence to a predetermined ideal, remaining conscious of the need for ‘a metaphysic in which there is no longer any fixed point’. Yet the nature of that metaphysic has changed. 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, though wholly transient, perspectives revealed by action. After 1934, ‘metaphysic’ signifies something more. There continues to be a rejection of any ‘fixed point’ but the focus now is not simply on achieving lucidity but on revealing what, as we saw, action was unable to provide: an image of *man*. 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 the metaphysic – 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 example. Action confers meaning on given *situations* but never on life as a whole, and any attempt to compel it to do so, as the character of Tchen in *La Condition humaine* illustrates, radically

---

50 See above, page 55.
51 See above, page 21.
53 See above, page 30.
54 See above, page 35
Chapter 3 - The Human Adventure

distorts the meaning it provides. The major shift in Malraux's thinking 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.

The change, one should stress, does not imply a repudiation of previous positions. There is nothing in the 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 different issues are being addressed. 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, if there is to be one, is not to be found in the pursuit of fixed ideals, such as the nineteenth century notion of Man 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 revealed to him for the first time; and this, as we shall see, 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 is one more preliminary issue that merits brief discussion.

As mentioned earlier, a number of commentators have advanced the view that the important turning-point in Malraux's intellectual development 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, Malraux, it is said, must have abandoned the novel in favour of the philosophy of art. Moreover, since the novels had often concerned

---

55 See above, page 36.
revolutionary action, one could also conclude, in the words of the critic quoted earlier, that he had 'abandoned the theatre of collective praxis for the domain of art'. Some comment has already been made on these propositions but a little more needs to be said.

To begin with, there are the obvious chronological problems. As we saw earlier, Malraux effectively began writing La Psychologie de l'art (which later became Les Voix du silence) 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 – that is, while he was writing material that was to become part of La Psychologie de l'art – there are obvious 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 notion 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 there are good reasons for thinking that the series of volumes that go to make up Le Miroir des lilnbes, beginning 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 much of the material. As we have now seen, for example, a major episode in Le Temps du mépris was transposed into the Antimémoires with only minor changes. Similarly, the tank trap episode and other material from Les Noyers de l'Altenburg reappear in the Antimémoires. One might argue, in other words, that even though

57 Albera, "Que faire des 'Ecrits sur l'art' de Malraux?," 50. Although, 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 suggested below, this second comment is much closer to the truth.
58 See above, page 40.
59 See above, page 41.
60 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.
Malraux chose *Antimémoires* as the title of the first volume of *Le Miroir des limbes* — thus indicating that he was not suddenly beginning a career as a memorialist — some critics have, nevertheless, assumed that there was a more significant break in the nature of his writing than was in fact the case.

The importance of these points is not just biographical. The next chapter will argue that art, in Malraux’s view, is one of the ways in which art affirms the significance of man in the sense indicated in the foregoing analysis, a claim that will be explained in detail in that and subsequent chapters. It is important to stress here, however — since there will be no opportunity to return to the point later — that, for Malraux, art was *not the only way* this could be achieved. The major works he wrote after 1934 which 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 affiliates — though, also, sometimes denies — his significance. These issues would take us well beyond the scope of the present study, which is concerned specifically with Malraux’s theory of art, and it is not possible to pursue them further here. If the point is overlooked, however, there is a risk that the discussion in the following chapters, which concentrate almost exclusively on art, will create the impression that art for Malraux was somehow ‘the only way out’ or, as one recent essay in *Le Monde* claimed, ‘a refuge’.61 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.’62 As always, Malraux chooses his words 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 well-known episode in *L’Espoir* describing the descent from the Sierra de Teruel — as well as scenes of a very 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 for Malraux 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

---

61 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 very recent comment reveals the persistence of the myths that (a) Malraux’s interest in art dated after World War II, and that (b) it somehow implied a retreat from the world of practical endeavour.

62 In French: ‘le musée est un des lieux qui donnent la plus haute idée de l’homme’. Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l'art* (I), 205. Gilbert translates: ‘one of the places which show man at his noblest’, which is certainly more idiomatic English but perhaps a little more rhetorical than Malraux intends.
man 'denies his nothingness' to borrow one of his own phrases. The remainder of this study will be devoted to his thinking about 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.

63 '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, Œuvres Complètes (II)*, 664,65. 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 Four

Art: A Rival World

"L'art est un anti-destin."
Malraux, Les Voix du silence.

The previous chapter argued that a crucial event in 1934 ushered in a new phase in Malraux’s thinking, giving birth to a concept of man as ‘human adventure’. The chapter analysed that concept and indicated that, as one consequence of this development, Malraux was, for the first time, in a position to formulate a response to the general question ‘What is art?’ The present chapter will take the analysis a stage further and examine the fundamental elements of the response Malraux gave to that question. In effect, the chapter will outline the basic propositions on which Malraux’s theory of art rests, paving the way for an examination, in later chapters, of the principal implications flowing from those propositions.

Before moving to this issue, however, it will be useful to consider a preliminary matter of a broader nature. One of the valuable features of André Malraux’s thinking about art is that it encourages the reader to reflect on fundamental questions about theories of art generally, including the nature of the individual components that go to make them up. One issue in particular that he encourages us to examine is the meaning, in the context of art, of the idea often signified by terms such as ‘reality’, ‘the world’, ‘life’, or ‘human experience’. These everyday terms, which occur frequently in theories of art, but whose very ordinariness often seems to shield them from close inspection, merit careful consideration before we embark on Malraux’s theory of art because they are, as we shall see, of crucial importance to an understanding of his position.

The frequency with which these terms are employed in discussions about art is illustrated by the following selection of brief quotations from a range of theorists

1 ‘Art is an anti-destiny.’
of different persuasions over a period of some six decades. (The terms in question, or equivalents, are italicised.)

Clive Bell:

... to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. 2

Monroe Beardsley:

To decide with what attitudes and expectations aesthetic objects are best approached, we have to ask ... whether or in what way they connect with reality, that is with the rest of the world in which they exist. 3

Theodore Adorno in his Aesthetic Theory:

Tied to the real world, art adopts the principle of self-preservation of that world, turning it into the ideal of a self-identical art ... It is by virtue of its separation from empirical reality that the work of art can become a being of a higher order... 4

Paul de Man in his essay, 'The Resistance to Theory':

Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge ‘reality’, but because it is not a priori certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world. 5

Jonathan Culler:

Literature takes as its subject all human experience, and particularly the ordering, interpreting, and articulating of experience ... 6

The analytic aesthetician, Peter Kivy:

... philosophers of art and literary theorists have, from Plato and Aristotle onward, seen literature as a way some people – people we admire very much – have of telling us how things are with us, them, and our world. 7

---

4 T.W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, trans. C Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 6. The statement occurs in a section entitled ‘On the relation between art and society’ which suggests, as do other parts of the work, that Adorno is thinking principally in terms of a social reality. If so, the remarks made below from pages 73 to 76 have particular relevance in his case.
7 Peter Kivy, Philosophies of Arts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179.
The aesthetician, Berys Gaut, in a recent collection of essays:

I am going to argue for a cognitivist view of the value of art... Art on the cognitivist view teaches us nontrivially about the world.\(^8\)

Though representing a variety of different theoretical standpoints, these statements, which have been chosen more or less at random from a wealth of similar examples, have two important features in common. First, they all make use of the notion of 'reality', 'the world', or an equivalent, to name something that art is seen as standing over against: there is art on the one hand, and reality on the other. Second, the notion of reality, as employed in these contexts, is either not defined at all, or given a very cursory explanation – such as Beardsley’s ‘the rest of the world in which [aesthetic objects] exist’, Adorno’s qualifier ‘empirical’, or de Man’s ‘phenomenal’ (and in each instance the remainder of the works in question offers no other definition that is more precise). Such cases are by no means uncommon.

Whether the topic is visual art, literature or music, there is a widespread tendency in the philosophy of art to employ the notion of ‘reality’, or equivalents, as one component of fundamental theoretical claims, but to leave it largely undefined. The tendency is common to a range of different theoretical approaches. If, for example, art is viewed as a form of representation, it is usually ‘reality’, ‘the world’ or ‘human experience’ that is said to be represented. If, as some theorists argue, art is a source of ‘knowledge’, it is, again, usually ‘reality’, or some equivalent, that it is said to provide knowledge about. If art is seen as a form of ‘expression’, it is usually ‘human experience’ it is said to express. And even if, as theorists such as Paul de Man suggest, art is somehow trapped in its own web of language, it is still ‘reality’ or ‘the world’ that language prevents it from fully grasping. Typically, in such cases, theorists tend to focus strongly on the meaning of concepts such as ‘representation’, ‘expression’ or ‘knowledge’, but a similar level of attention is rarely paid to the other element in the equation – ‘reality’. The issue to which we are drawing attention here

is not, one should stress, the long-standing philosophical question of whether and in what way reality exists. The issue is, rather, that if one makes use of the notion of reality, or an equivalent, in the context of a theory of art — even if one argues, like de Man, that reality is never fully grasped, or, like Bell, that reality (or ‘life’) can be safely ignored — how is the notion of reality conceptualised? What precisely does the idea mean in the context of art? And is it sufficient, as theorists such as those quoted above appear to believe, to regard it as largely self-explanatory? The following section will briefly consider two major problems revealed by these questions, both of which, as we shall see, are of crucial importance to an understanding of Malraux’s theory of art.

***

Like many words, abstract terms such as ‘reality’, ‘world’, or ‘experience’ can take on significantly different shades of meaning according to the context in which they are used — a propensity of particular interest to philosophy, of course, given its concern to use words with precision. To appreciate the point at issue, one need only consider the different meanings taken on by the term ‘reality’ in the following two statements:

*Out of this chaos and destruction, there emerged a new reality.*

*His schemes always foundered when they came into contact with reality.*

In the first statement, the word ‘reality’ suggests something specific and identifiable — a discrete set of circumstances, different from those that preceded it, that one might, presumably, isolate and delineate. In the second, that implication has faded, and the word signifies something far more amorphous — something one might roughly describe as the unpredictable, uncontrollable, ‘brute facts of life’, or to borrow Shakespeare’s apt phrase, ‘the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.’

In the context of the theory of art, this distinction is far from a semantic quibble. If one wishes to argue, as many theorists do, that part of the function of art is to achieve a ‘grasp’ on, or ‘give order’ to, reality, it clearly matters whether or not one understands the term ‘reality’ as signifying something that has already been

---

9 Other pairs of sentences can readily be found to illustrate similar contrasting meanings for words such as ‘world’, ‘experience’, ‘life’, etc.
grasped or ordered in some way (the meaning suggested by the usage in the first sentence above). If this is the implication, the function of art, however described (whether as representation, expression, etc), begins to look supplementary, or secondary, in some way – a form of additional understanding superimposed on pre-existing knowledge formulated by some other means. If, on the other hand, ‘reality’ signifies something closer to the ‘unpredictable, uncontrollable “brute facts of life”’, art then appears to have been assigned a much weightier task – that of conferring the primary shape and form on something that would otherwise lack all ‘order’ and be nothing but chaos and confusion. Suddenly, in short, one discovers that terms such as ‘reality’, ‘the world’ and ‘experience’, despite their apparent straightforwardness, pose a serious conceptual problem; and when Jonathan Culler, for instance, argues in the statement quoted above that ‘literature takes as its subject ... the ordering, interpreting, and articulating of [human] experience’, the problem rears its head immediately. Does such a comment imply that literature (or art generally) confers meaning on something that previously lacked all ‘order’? Or does it assume that human experience already possesses some degree of order and that art somehow simply adds to it – and, if so, what is the relative importance of each, and how might they relate to each other?

One might perhaps attempt to circumvent the problem with an argument of the following kind: Art deals with a world, or reality, that initially possesses limited order only – a world that is only partly understood. The function of art is to bring this world into sharper focus – to clarify its meaning and enable one to understand it more fully. In practice, something very like this view seems to be reflected in those familiar accounts of art that suggest that the role of literature, visual art or music is to ‘sharpen’ or ‘refine’ perceptions, or to ‘deepen awareness’ – a view reflected, for example, in the comment by one recent writer that ‘standardly, art seeks to deepen our pre-existent understandings by drawing out the implications of some already-held presumptions.’

Yet, ultimately, this argument gives rise to the same questions we have highlighted above. If the world has already been partly understood, what is the significance of the further understanding contributed by art? Is it important, or merely of marginal significance – perhaps a kind of dispensable embellishment?

---

And what is the nature and source of the initial, ‘pre-existent’ understanding? Is it a form of meaning different from that contributed by art and, if so, different in what way, and how do the two relate? The proposition, in short, simply leads one back to the questions identified above. The troublesome ambiguity of the notion of ‘reality’ has not been removed but simply obscured.

The second problem relates to art in a more specific way and has been nicely described by the Italian critic, Nicola Chiaromonte, in a discussion of the encounter between literature and history. In the course of the commentary on Malraux’s novels mentioned earlier, Chiaromonte offers some general reflections (to which Malraux’s works are relevant but not essential) on the relationship between an individual consciousness and a large-scale, collective event such as a major battle or a revolution. Highlighting certain passages in Stendhal’s *La Chartreuse de Parme* and Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* which describe episodes in the Napoleonic campaigns, Chiaromonte comments in particular on an incident early in the former novel that takes place on the battlefield of Waterloo. The young Fabrizio del Dongo, an ardent admirer of Napoleon, has made his way onto the battlefield to witness the clash of mighty armies, and perhaps even to fight for his heroic Emperor. Hostilities have already begun, but strangely, the prodigious event Fabrizio has come to see never materialises. Instead, everything around him seems strangely random and confused, his attention constantly being caught by what seem minor and irrelevant details – like the dirtiness of the bare feet of the first corpse he sees, 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), or the surprising shortness of stature of the advancing redcoats who ‘seemed no higher than hedges’.  

The scene, as Chiaromonte points out, is a masterly depiction of the *elusiveness*, from the point of view of the individual, of what one might conventionally call an ‘historical event’. Like similar episodes in *War and Peace*, it exposes the radical discontinuity between the perspectives of individual experience and the categories that confer meaning on any such major collective enterprise.

---

11 Stendhal, *La Chartreuse de Parme*, Stendhal, *Romans et Nouvelles* (2) (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 59-65. Fabrizio says to one of the French sergeants, ‘Sir, this is the first time I have been present at a battle. But is this a real one?’ (p.65)
‘When he describes Fabrizio searching for the battle of Waterloo and not being able to find it’, Chiaromonte writes,

Stendhal was expressing, in his own nimble way, one of the great insights of nineteenth century sensibility. It was a flash of pure wonder at the utterly paradoxical relation between an individual destiny and whatever general significance might be attached to a ‘historical event’. In fact, it was the splendid illustration of a myth which no historical venture, and no amount of sophistry, has thereafter been able to obliterate from our consciousness. The ‘epic’ moments of War and Peace: Prince André lying on the battlefield of Austerlitz; Alapatych at Smolensk; Pierre among the prisoners, comprise a most vigorous apprehension of the same meaning, and of the same myth. The myth is about man and history: the more naively, and genuinely, man experiences a historical event, the more the event disappears and something else takes its place: the starry sky, the other man, or the utterly ironical detail. That is, the unhistorical: Karataiev and his footgear appear infinitely more significant than Napoleon or Mother Russia.¹²

The point Chiaromonte is making might be restated in the following way: In a broad and not very informative sense, both literature and history can be said to be concerned with something one might call ‘reality’, ‘the world’ or ‘human experience’. But history’s focus is collective reality – the collective experience of men and women. Like kindred areas such as political or social theory, history’s concern is not an individual’s thoughts and feelings in themselves but only as they are seen as having consequences and can form part of a world in which people act upon, and react to, one another. As a conceptual possibility, that is, history cannot be confined within the perspectives of an individual life: it rests on an intellectual schema that one cannot even begin to draw up without the initial resolve to transcend the individual and his or her ‘private’ world of joys and sorrows, so as to posit the existence of a collective world which is presumed to exist ‘among’ men and women when they act upon one another. To state the matter in a paradoxical but nevertheless quite precise form, history concerns everyone, and for that very reason concerns no-one. This is not of course to imply that the events history records affect no one. That would be contrary to common sense – grotesquely so in the face of the often disastrous effects of historical events in the modern world. The point is simply that the categories of historical explanation – the concepts that seek to impose meaning and intelligibility on the otherwise formless multiplicity of a collective event – are, by their very nature, designed to illuminate something quite different

from the world as perceived and understood by the single individual. Thus, to return to Chiaromonte’s example, Fabrizio is unable to ‘find’ the battle of Waterloo, which is in fact raging all around him; and Tolstoy’s characters, similarly, focus on some seeming irrelevancy while a page of what we, and they, might quite reasonably call ‘history’ is being written before their very eyes. There is an apparently unbridgeable gulf – an ‘irretrievable disproportion’ as Chiaromonte terms it – between the forms of thought that confer meaning on a collective event and the categories that shape the individual’s own experience. In Chiaromonte’s words, ‘the more naively, and genuinely, man experiences a historical event, the more the event disappears...’

The scope of these remarks should not be misunderstood. They by no means amount to a full account of the differences between history and literature. They do, however, imply a dividing line between their fields of operation, and suggest an important difference between the ‘realities’ with which each is concerned. The ‘reality’ – the ‘world’, or ‘human experience’ – that counts for literature, the analysis suggests, is that of the individual consciousness, while the reality of history necessarily transcends that domain. Hence the second problem posed by loose, undefined usages of these terms of the kind instanced earlier. Such usages fail to acknowledge that terms such as ‘reality’, the ‘world’, or ‘human experience’ have a much broader field of operation than literature and other forms of art, a problem that is not resolved – or even addressed – by formulations such as Kivy’s ‘us, them, and our world’, de Man’s enigmatic qualifier ‘phenomenal’, Adorno’s ‘empirical’, or by suggestions such as Beardsley’s that the reality in question is ‘the rest of the world in which [aesthetic objects] exist’. All such formulations fail to provide any grounds on which the particular nature of the ‘reality’ with which literature (or art generally) is concerned might be characterised: each would apply just as readily to

\[13\] Ibid., 99.

\[14\] Cf. the pertinent comment of Bernard Groethuysen who writes in a similar vein that ‘one might even say that the novel in itself is opposed to history since it takes the part of man to whom, in a sense, it restores his own life.’ Groethuysen, "Le Roman: Les Conquérants; Royaume farfelu," 559.

\[15\] This does not imply that literature should necessarily be concerned with individual differences (in the sense of Rousseau’s remark in his Confessions that Nature ‘broke the mould’ in which he was made). The enormous range of human types found in literary works suggests on the contrary that the categories that shape the individual’s own experience’, to use the terminology employed here, can take an immense variety of forms and need not revolve around a special value attached to an individual’s distinctive characteristics.

\[16\] Literature has been chosen as the example in this discussion because there are other forms of intellectual endeavour in the same medium, such as history, with which it can be readily compared, which is not so obviously the case for visual art or music.
the objects of historical, social or political thought. The unfortunate consequences of such conceptual imprecision can sometimes become very obvious when theorists discuss the relationship between literature and history and assume that any possibility of a radical discontinuity between the two can safely be ignored. In his well known and influential book, *Literary Theory, An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton writes, for example, that

... literary theory is less an object of intellectual inquiry in its own right than a particular perspective in which to view the history of our times. Nor should this be in the least cause for surprise. For any body of theory concerned with human meaning, value, language, feeling and experience will inevitably engage with broader, deeper beliefs about the nature of human individuals and societies, problems of power and sexuality, interpretations of past history, versions of the present and hopes for the future.17

Eagleton’s immediate topic here is literary theory, but his remarks have obvious implications for literature itself. His confident assertion that there is an ‘inevitable engagement’ between the concerns of literature and those of history achieves a degree of plausibility through the very broad and imprecise descriptions he gives of both (so imprecise, in fact, that some items, such as ‘human meaning’ or ‘value’, could be placed in either of his lists without materially affecting his meaning). Underlying his proposition, however, is the unexamined assumption that there is an unproblematic continuity between the ‘perspectives’ of history and those of literature. The two worlds, he assumes, ‘inevitably engage’. As we have seen, this is by no means certain. Even when, in cases such as those discussed by Chiaromonte, the individual is brought *face to face* with historical events, it seems arguable that, far from inevitably ‘engaging’, the two worlds operate on quite different planes. Contrary to Eagleton’s assertion, it would perhaps be more a ‘cause for surprise’ in a literary work if the two planes genuinely met than if they did not.18

These remarks, it should be stressed, are of a preliminary nature only. Their purpose has not been to formulate a definition of the term ‘reality’ or its equivalents

---

18 One might perhaps try to resolve the problem discussed here by arguing that art and history both deal with the same reality but simply provide ‘different perspectives’ on it. One can still ask, however, if there is a fundamental conceptual difference between the perspectives. The ‘different perspectives’ response, in other words, simply shifts the locus of the problem; it does not resolve it. (The issue at stake here could be pursued further through a comparison between literature and other fields of intellectual endeavour such as science. I have extended the discussion to cover science in my article: Derek Allan, "Literature and Reality," *Journal of European Studies* Vol 31, Part 2., no. 122 (2001): 143-56.)
in the context of art, or, alternatively, to imply that such terms cannot legitimately be employed in discussing the theory of art. (Indeed, they will be used frequently in the course of the present study.) The analysis, nevertheless, identifies two distinct problems – one of a general nature, one of a more specific kind – which such terms pose if they are not accompanied by a clear explanation, a condition which is clearly not met by cursory phrases of the kind listed in the examples given earlier. For everyday purposes, this is no doubt of little importance. Once, however, the theory of art (or, indeed, the theory of history or science, for example) is in question, loose, undefined usages turn such terms into blunt instruments incapable of coming to grips with conceptual issues of the kind examined above. In discussing the relationship between art and reality, in short, it is not sufficient to focus simply on the nature of the putative relationship (representation, expression, provision of knowledge, etc.) It is vital also to examine the second term in the equation and to have a clear conception of what ‘reality’, or its equivalents, signifies. As we have indicated, this point is of major importance in understanding Malraux’s theory of art, the subject to which we now return.

***

To grasp the basic propositions underlying Malraux’s theory of art (as distinct from the more detailed implications, which will be considered in subsequent chapters) one needs first to recall the discussion in the previous chapter concerning ‘the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life, beginning with his own’. That discussion argued that the apprehension of ‘life as a whole’ revealed in that emotion is inseparable from an equally powerful sense of the arbitrariness and

---

19 One variant that has generated considerable debate in Anglo-American analytic aesthetics is the idea that art ‘denotes’ reality. This debate has, once again, however, focused on the relationship between art and reality, and has overlooked the prior question of how the notion of reality (or its equivalent) is to be conceptualised. Cf. for example Peter Lamarque, "Fiction," in The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 377-91. As Lamarque’s bibliography indicates, the topic of how art ‘denotes’ reality has attracted a range of leading writers in the analytic school. The kinds of conceptual vagueness we have discussed here can also be found in Arthur Danto’s works such as The Transfiguration of the Commonplace in which concepts such as ‘reality’ and ‘the world’ figure prominently. Central to Danto’s concerns is an attempt to distinguish facsimile works of art such as Warhol’s Brillo Box from ‘mere real things’ such as an ordinary Brillo box. Nowhere, however, in his quite lengthy discussion of ‘reality’, ‘the world’ and ‘real things’ does Danto address the questions raised in the present analysis. His focus essentially lies, as so often elsewhere in aesthetics, on the relationship between art and reality, with the notion of reality itself, in the specific context of art, left unexamined. See, for example: Arthur Danto, The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), esp. 28,29,80-83.
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 might hope to discover an underlying, enduring reality, but appearance behind which nothing can be known – appearance per se. The awareness of life in question thus consists, as we said, of two opposing elements. At the very moment of its apprehension, human life seems to be sunk in a boundless chaos – the ‘chaos of appearances’ as Malraux sometimes terms it for brevity.20 The individual is aware of being part of life but also, simultaneously, of a sense of precariousness, a sense that ‘all this’ is grounded in nothing and that, unless somehow affirmed, is as meaningless as the chaos in which it seems engulfed.21

Now, linking this to the analysis we have just undertaken, the ‘reality’ or ‘world’ to which art is addressed is, for Malraux, precisely the sense of incipient chaos and insignificance inherent in the ‘fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life’; and art, as he stated in his speech to the Maeght Foundation in 1973, is one of the ways in which man combats this incipient sense of insignificance – one of the ways man affirms himself as against the chaos of appearances.22 Art, in other words, is one of the ways in which the precarious opposition between man and ‘that which crushes him’ – the opposition, we have suggested, that is sensed in the primary movement of human consciousness23 – is tipped in favour of the former. To quote one of Malraux’s well known formulations, it is one of the ways in which man ‘denies his nothingness’.24

How is this achieved? Malraux’s response is unequivocal. Art combats the chaos of appearances 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’.25 Different in what way? Different because, in the same sense – the same

20 See, for example, Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 35.
21 Cf. above, page 53.
22 Malraux, "Discours prononcé à la Fondation Maeght," 885. Malraux describes it as the ‘struggle against death’ but ‘death’ in this context, as he immediately makes clear, does not mean the mere fact of dying but the menacing sense of insignificance and nothingness in question here. Malraux quite frequently uses the term ‘death’ in this sense.
23 See above, page 53.
24 See above, Chapter Three, note 63.
metaphysical sense – that the reality to which art is addressed is poised on the brink of chaos, the world created by art is unified. There is nothing arcane or mysterious about this explanation as long as one keeps its frame of reference well in mind. As we saw, 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 – a rival, unified world. Art, Malraux writes, expressing the same point a slightly different way, creates a world ‘scaled down to man’s measure’.26 It ‘wrests forms from the real world to which man is subject, and makes them enter a world in which he is ruler.’27

This initial explanation is obviously very abstract. We can begin to make it less so, however, by contrasting Malraux’s 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 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 lodestar, 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 find 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 theoretical schema entirely and we can now begin to see why. Where art is concerned,28 bare reality, ‘the world’, or ‘nature’, whether seen with a perceptive eye or not, is, Malraux is claiming, merely the chaos of appearances – the teeming, ephemeral multiplicity of ‘all this’ which seems to lack any reason for being the way it is, or for being at all. Thus, far from being a reference point or guide, ‘reality’ for Malraux is that against which art seeks to

27 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 539.
28 Remembering that it is specifically the theory of art that is in question here, not some broader definition of reality, or one applying to some other field of endeavour.
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.  

This being so, art for Malraux has nothing to do with the representation of reality even when the representation of particular objects happens to be one of the techniques it employs. Where art is concerned, 'reality', 'the world', or 'nature', is, at most, Malraux argues, a 'dictionary' – an assemblage of disparate elements individually capable of being invested with meaning but combined in a manner that renders them incoherent. 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.

Fundamentally, therefore, art for Malraux, like the reality it addresses, has a metaphysical significance. This is not, of course, to suggest that each individual artist addresses himself or herself to questions of a metaphysical nature: the art of Dostoyevsky often seems to do so, we might argue, but hardly the art of Jane Austen or Dickens. Nevertheless, as an activity, as a form of human endeavour, Malraux is claiming, art exists as a response to a metaphysical reality – to the primordial sense of arbitrariness and contingency we have discussed. At this fundamental level, he argues, all art – whether it be that of Dickens or Dostoyevsky, Fragonard or Goya, Telemann or Beethoven – shares the same metaphysical purpose. It exists not for perceptual, psychological, or ideological purposes – such as representing the world, affording an avenue for self-expression, communicating feelings, instantiating

---

29 Even if proffered by artists themselves. ‘Whatever the artist may say on the matter,’ he 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.’ Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l’art (I)*, 541. Emphasis in original. The ‘something else’, as we have seen, is a rival, unified world.

30 This question is explored in more detail in the next chapter. See especially page 109 et seq.

31 Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l’art (I)*, 570. Malraux is borrowing the term ‘dictionary’ in this context from Delacroix, as he acknowledges.

32 Ibid., 544. Cf. the comment in *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, 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’.) Malraux, *L’Homme précaire et la littérature* 289.
‘beauty’, providing ‘aesthetic pleasure’, 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 manifestations, its fundamental achievement as a form of human endeavour – as a specific kind of ‘creative act’ as Malraux sometimes calls it33 – is to ‘deny man’s nothingness’.

One can now see the importance of the preliminary theoretical discussion earlier in this chapter. A ‘commonsense’ – and superficial – objection to the propositions we have just outlined might take the following form: ‘Art is plainly not a response to anything as abstruse as “the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life”. Self-evidently, particularly in the case of painting and literature, art concerns itself with people, objects and events. It is an artist’s response to the reality we see around us, to human experience, to the actual world in which we live – to life. Malraux’s attempt to suggest that art has a metaphysical significance of some kind is simply an exercise in mystification.’

In the light of the earlier analysis, the defects in such a response should now be apparent. Whatever one might ultimately conclude about Malraux’s account of art – and much remains to be said about it – to criticise it in the name of such question-begging notions as ‘the reality we see around us’, ‘human experience’, ‘the actual world in which we live’, or ‘life’ would, as we can now appreciate, be very dubious indeed.

Moreover, in Malraux’s case, as we can now see, the questions begged by such bland formulae are not left unanswered. If art is, as he argues, a response to ‘the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life, beginning with his own’, it is clear from our earlier discussion, firstly, that art is addressed to a reality that emerges in and through individual experience.34 Certainly, as we noted in that analysis, the emotion is not one that concerns the individual alone but encompasses human life as a whole.35 One is, nonetheless, dealing with a ‘reality’ – a ‘human experience’ – which, in the terms used in the discussion earlier in this chapter, is ‘perceived and

33 See for example Malraux, ”Préfaces, articles, allocutions: ‘Sur l’héritage culturel’,” 1193.
34 See above, page 51.
35 See above, page 52.
understood by the single individual" as distinct, for example, from a reality understood through the categories of historical or social thought, or indeed through ideas – impersonal propositions – of any kind. The full significance of this will become clearer in subsequent chapters, but the important point for the present is that the conceptual vagueness associated with this issue, which was identified in the earlier analysis, has been removed. Art, for Malraux, is fundamentally a response to an emotion – an experience in which the individual feels directly implicated. There is a specificity in this conceptualisation which the breezy generality of phrases such as ‘the reality we see around us’, or (to quote one of the formulations mentioned earlier) ‘us, them and our world’, is quite unable to provide.

Secondly, Malraux’s position does not suffer from the ambiguity identified earlier concerning pre-existing knowledge. If, at the heart of the emotion to which art responds, there is, as Malraux argues, a sense of an ‘unknown scheme of things’ or ‘the chaos of mere, given reality’, art is evidently not addressed to something already understood, even partially. Clearly, Malraux’s conceptualisation of this anarchical state is much more fully developed than that suggested by phrases such as ‘the unpredictable, uncontrollable, “brute facts of life”’ used in the analysis earlier in this chapter. For Malraux, as we saw, it is a question of the primordial sense that ‘all this might have been otherwise, might not have been’ – the sense of the ‘chaos of appearances’ – which was explored in depth in the previous chapter. The key point again, however, is that Malraux has clarified the issue at stake. There is no longer the puzzling question of whether or not some form of pre-existing knowledge has been assumed, and no longer the possibility that art might perhaps be a mere embellishment to an image of the world already formulated in some other way. On Malraux’s account, art plays a fundamental role: it addresses ‘the unknown scheme of things’ in which man is mere possibility. The ambiguity has been removed.

***

Although we have not as yet gone beyond the general principles underlying Malraux’s theory of art, there are certain possible objections which should be considered at this point. One might, for example, take exception to Malraux’s
reliance on the notion of unity or coherence in the explanation given above.
Certainly, one might concede, there is a lengthy tradition in aesthetics and in certain
schools of literary criticism (notably the so-called ‘New Critics’ of the mid-twentieth
century) that stresses the importance of unity, or ‘order’ as it is sometimes called, as
a necessary element in a work of art. But this idea has been called into question (at
least implicitly) by writers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques
Derrida, whose thinking seeks to dissolve the boundaries of a work by highlighting
its interconnections with, and dependence on, its social, linguistic, or ‘discursive’
contexts. Foucault’s essay ‘What is an Author?’ argues, for instance, 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.’ In a not dissimilar vein,
theorists influenced by Derrida have argued that all texts (in the broad sense of the
term which is sometimes extended to visual images and musical sounds) ultimately
resist the kinds of final determinations of meaning, or ‘closure’, implied by the
notion of unity. Meaning, it is argued, is inherently unstable, ‘undecidable’ and, in
principle at least, inexhaustible.

Yet, whatever the strengths or weaknesses of these arguments (an issue
beyond the scope of the present study), they suggest a notion of unity quite different
from the one Malraux has in mind. Propositions of the kind mentioned revolve
essentially around the relationship between meaning and what are sometimes termed
‘signifying practices’, especially language. Malraux’s thinking, as we have seen, is
not based on, or tied to, any particular account of this relationship. Indeed, for
Malraux, the very notion of meaning has a resonance quite different from that
suggested by the propositions to which we have adverted because he is not concerned
with how, and 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 the ‘unknown scheme of things’. For the writers
mentioned, considerations of this kind have no significant place, and a notion such as
the ‘unknown scheme of things’ would be marginal at best. An interesting measure
of the difference between the intellectual schemas under discussion is the contrast
between 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
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 even more strongly.
Far from thinking that unity might impose a limitation on a work’s meaning,
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 – that is, the
source from which its power of endless ‘metamorphosis’, to employ his own term,
springs. The reasoning behind this claim has yet to be examined but it clearly
suggests, as we have said, that one is dealing with systems of thought operating on
quite different planes, and that to interpret Malraux’s thinking through the categories
of the writers mentioned above is at best likely to breed confusion.

Needless to add, the familiar idea that a work of art should necessarily have
‘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
somehow 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, and still less in the choice of works he admires, that he intends the
ideas of unity or coherence to be understood in that sense. Once again, it is
important 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, in Berger’s words, that ‘all this might not have been,

41 This is the central topic of Chapter Seven which examines Malraux’s account of the temporal nature
of art.
42 Which in visual art include, as we shall see later, many in which the ‘aleatory’ plays a significant
role, such as certain Oceanic and African masks.
might not have been as it is.’ As we noted earlier,43 Malraux expressly disavows any intention of developing ‘an aesthetic’ and, consistent with this, there is no trace in his theory of art of any 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 a ‘rival world’ suggests a somewhat discreditable escape from reality or ‘a refusal of life’ as one critic phrases it.44 Here, everything depends – once again – on what one understands by the troublesome term ‘reality’, or equivalents such as ‘life’. Art, for Malraux, is certainly an escape in the sense that it represents a refusal to accept a reality which is nothing but bewildermend and chaos. It is an escape in the sense that it seeks to affirm man’s significance as against an arbitrary and contingent realm in which he seems to count for nothing. It is an escape, but one achieved through a transformation that ‘scales things down to man’s measure.’ Or, in Malraux’s words, it is an escape ‘not through flight (‘évasion’), but through possession’.45

The kinds of misunderstandings that have sometimes surrounded this point are exemplified by a comment on La Psychologie de l’art by Maurice Blanchot in which he 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, insofar as they shatter the validity of the everyday world, work for art, open the way for it, summon it.46

As we are now in a position to see, this interpretation is very questionable. While Blanchot’s comment is a little unclear, he appears to be suggesting that, for Malraux, ‘the world’, or reality, to which art is addressed consists of a combination of social, political and ideological factors – which is presumably at least part of what

44 Boak, André Malraux, 198.
45 Malraux, "Préfaces, articles, allocutions: 'Sur l'héritage culturel'," 1192.
46 Maurice Blanchot, "Le Musée, l'art et le temps," in L'Amitié (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 33. Italic 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 the discussion of Malraux’s account of the temporal nature of art (Chapter Seven), that art, for Malraux, involves a form of transcendence. Nowhere, however, does he describe art simply as transcendence.
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 of Malraux were correct, one might perhaps feel entitled to infer, as Blanchot does, that he views art, rather negatively, in terms of 'its distance from the world, ... the absence of the world'. And portrayed in that light, art might presumably be viewed as a means of escape from practical realities – an escape in the sense of flight. As we have seen, however, art for Malraux is not a response to social, political or ideological factors. Its frame of reference is metaphysical and its response is to an '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 down to man's measure'. Blanchot's error, in short, is to place Malraux's theory of art in a conceptual framework in which it does not belong – to read it as a response to a 'world' quite different from the one Malraux has in mind, and thus to misinterpret his thinking at a fundamental level.

From time to time, Malraux employs the term 'destiny' ('destin') when discussing the basic ideas we have been considering, and since, as shall see, the term has at times been something of a stumbling-block for critics, it calls for some special comment here. In the closing stages of Les Voix du silence, Malraux writes, for example, that

In those dark regions that the spectator of Edipus 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.\textsuperscript{47}

Here the potentially ambiguous term ‘destiny’ – a ‘suspect word’ as Malraux himself acknowledges\textsuperscript{48} – takes on a well-defined meaning. It is not the colloquial notion of a predetermined ‘fate’, but is Malraux’s shorthand, as it were, for that element within ‘the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life’ that conveys a sense of man counting for nothing – the sense of being nothing more than flotsam in a universe of chaos. Thus, although the play \textit{Edipus} 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 to yield to despair) because, despite the bleak image of a man crushed by sorrows, its \textit{portrayal} by Sophocles – its incorporation into the realm 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 thus defined has been resisted and that, in Malraux’s words, ‘man has intruded into a realm in which he had previously been without significance.’\textsuperscript{49}

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’s comment suggested) 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 \textit{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

\textsuperscript{47} Malraux, \textit{Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I)}, 886.

\textsuperscript{48} Malraux, "De La Représentation en Occident et en Extrême Orient," 932.

\textsuperscript{49} In \textit{La Psychologie de l’art}, Malraux uses \textit{Edipus} to make the same point 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 \textit{undergone}. For the reader, despite a tendency to put herself in Anna’s place, they are \textit{mastered}. The difference between life and its representation in art is the suppression of destiny.’ André Malraux, \textit{La Psychologie de l’art: La Création Artistique} (Paris: Skira, 1948), 144. Malraux’s emphasis. An earlier version of the same passage, again referring to \textit{Edipus} and \textit{Anna Karenina}, can be found in one the articles on art Malraux wrote in 1938 (again indicating to the pre-war genesis of \textit{La Psychologie de l’Art}). See Malraux, "De La Représentation en Occident et en Extrême Orient," 931.
life is portrayed in terms of art; that things are scaled down to man’s measure; that the world loses its autonomy. 50

This is the thinking behind Malraux’s well-known claim that ‘Art is an anti-destiny’ (‘anti-destin’). 51 Such a claim would doubtless seem very dubious if the notion of ‘destiny’ were taken in the more colloquial sense mentioned above. In what way, after all, could art significantly affect the course of human destiny in that sense – assuming one accepted such a notion? 52 This, however, is not the meaning Malraux has in mind. Art is a revolt against, or escape from, destiny in the sense that, in the 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, coherent world – a ‘humanised’ world to borrow Malraux’s term. 53 Destiny, as we have said, is not simply the idea of a predetermined fate, and signifies much 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 fundamental 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 which man recognises as his own, even if, like that of ÓEdipus, 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.’ 54

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 commentators have at times dealt with it in

50 Malraux, "Articles de ‘Verve’: De la représentation en Occident et en Extrême Orient,” 931,32. Malraux’s emphasis.
51 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 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’ as we have entered for the word ‘destiny’. See André Malraux, The Voices of Silence, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 639.
52 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 would art be opposed to a reality understood in that way? As this example suggests, interpreting the term ‘reality’ in that traditional sense would quickly render Malraux’s theory of art unintelligible.
54 Malraux, L’Homme précaire et la littérature 274. In French: ‘La littérature apporte, au plus haut degré, la substitution du destin dominé au destin subi.’
ways that do little to clarify its meaning. Some critics, surprisingly enough, make no serious attempt to explain Malraux’s use of the term, despite employing it frequently in their own expositions of his thinking – a procedure that risks fostering the impression that Malraux’s own usage is equally vague. Others offer hasty definitions 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.’ A 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 to sing their praises.’ 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 number of words that Malraux ‘[repeats] in an incantatory style which produces an atmosphere of rhetorical intoxication, almost of mystery,’ and that the reader is dealing with language ‘where the obscure echoes and overtones are the most important thing about it.’

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 would be a serious misinterpretation – interpreting what is clearly a metaphysical idea as a political proposition. And Righter’s suggestion that the term is chosen largely for rhetorical effect is also inaccurate. 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, given the analysis we have provided, to think of any other single word that would convey his meaning quite as well. The emotive overtones, which presumably trigger

55 See, for example, Tannery, Malraux: The Absolute Agnostic.
58 Righter, The Rhetorical Hero, 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’ is, like the human adventure, employed in well-defined ways. Most of the other words in his list, and especially ‘metamorphosis’ and ‘the Absolute’, will be discussed later in this study. As we shall see, the suggestion that they are employed principally for rhetorical effect is quite mistaken.
Righter's comment, are fully justified because Malraux is, after all, claiming that art is a response to a fundamental emotion: the notion of destiny is not simply a neutral 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 universe which, as we have seen, is integral to that emotion. 59

Ultimately, one cannot fully explicate the issue at stake, whether one makes use of the term 'destiny' or not, without reference to the image of human existence that Malraux first encountered in 1934, which was analysed in Chapter Three. Essentially, as we indicated there, this involves an apprehension of human life minus any sense of underlying meaning – an image of human life as inexplicable ‘adventure’. This involves 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 – that which, while constituting a ‘sorry scheme of things’ in which he is enmeshed, also seems utterly indifferent to his presence, or absence. Art is an anti-destiny in the sense that it affirms the human adventure and thus denies destiny: it creates a rival world in which everything has a reason – not, as we have said, in the sense that everything is explained, but in the sense that, whether portraying the dark, remorseless regions of Œdipus or (for example) the quiet stillness of Vermeer’s interiors, 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 add that in describing art as an anti-destiny, Malraux is speaking of all art (in all art forms) irrespective of style or subject matter. The point deserves mention because although Malraux nowhere

59 In a listing of key terms employed by Malraux, Jean-Pierre Zarader, suggests that destiny for Malraux ‘is, in the final analysis, time,’ and that although it ‘also signifies everything that crushes man,’ Malraux, ‘in an unquestionably philosophical way, reduces destiny to time: it alone subjugates man absolutely, whatever he does.’ This is undoubtedly closer to Malraux’s meaning, but two reservations are in order. Time, in the sense of the transience of things, is certainly, as we have seen, an important aspect of what he has in mind; but the sense of arbitrariness – of chaos – is, as we have also discussed, no less significant. There is also a danger in suggesting that the notion is purely ‘philosophical’ since, as we have said, one is dealing fundamentally with an emotion not simply a philosophical concept. Jean-Pierre Zarader, Le Vocabulaire de Malraux (Paris: Ellipses, 2001), 23.
suggests the contrary, a number of critics have interpreted his claim as an attempt to argue that any work of art worthy of the name must somehow 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’, 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.’ Such claims are misleading. Many of the works Malraux regards as great art might certainly be taken to signify a form of revolt – Goya is an obvious example – but as a reading of Les Voix du silence or La Métamorphose des dieux quickly reveals, he also has immense admiration for painters of a quite different stamp such as Vermeer (cf. Fig. 2 and Fig. 3, next page), not to mention non-European examples such as Buddhist sculpture. Equally groundless is the claim by Stefan Morawksi that ‘Malraux has taken from Nietzsche the idea of two fundamental artistic orientations: Apollonian and Dionysian.’ The idea that there is a Dionysian art, or an art of ‘intoxication’, as against an Apollonian category of ‘measured restraint, free from the wilder impulses’ (to borrow Nietzsche’s description) is quite foreign 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.

61 Boak, André Malraux, 195.
The reader who has reached this point might perhaps be forgiven for concluding that Malraux’s theory of art, like much that is written about art in modern aesthetics, is 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 (the first sentence alone of the former work contains three specific references to works of art.65) As indicated in the Introduction, however, the present study examines Malraux’s theory of art in a step by step fashion, beginning from the foundations on which it rests; and this process calls for a certain ‘dismantling’ of his thinking, presenting his ideas in a sequence somewhat different from that found in his works themselves.66 Thus, Chapter Two outlined certain key elements in Malraux’s thinking prior to 1934 before he

64 The fact that Malraux wrote a separate work on Goya cannot be taken as demonstrating a preference for his works over those of other painters. Malraux clearly regarded Goya as an important figure in Western art but he wrote essays on a number of other artists and artistic styles, including Sumerian art, African art, the Galerie François l at Fontainebleau, Michelangelo, Chagall, and the novelist Choderlos de Laclos. *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* themselves sometimes devote several pages to a single artist – El Greco and Donatello are examples.  
65 ‘A Romanesque crucifix was not regarded by its contemporaries as a work of sculpture, nor Cimabue’s *Madonna* as a picture, and even Phidias’ *Pallas Athena* was not originally regarded as a statue.’ Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art* (I), 203.  
embarked on a general theory of art. Chapter Three examined Malraux's encounter in 1934 with what he termed the 'fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life', and the implications of that experience, including his discovery of an understanding of man as 'human adventure'. The present chapter has taken the analysis a step further, first by considering the crucial, if widely neglected, general problem of what one might mean by the notion of 'reality' in the context of art, and then by arguing that, in Malraux's eyes, the reality to which art responds is the fundamental emotion in question, art providing one of the means by which the human adventure can be affirmed as against the primordial sense of chaos and contingency at the heart of that emotion.

Having considered these matters, we are now in a position to go beyond the foundational ideas of Malraux's theory of art and explore their implications for our understanding of the world of art itself. In a sense, therefore, we come to the acid test. Does Malraux's account help make sense of the world of art, or does it not? Does it, as claimed in the Introduction to this study, have a major explanatory value, or does it not? The issue at stake is not so much the interpretation of this or that particular work, though that question does arise from time to time. More important are broader questions such as the nature of artistic creation, the different purposes to which art has been put across the millennia, the relationship between art and religious belief, the neglected question of the temporal nature of art, the unprecedented range of works that go to make up the world of art today, the fact that much of what we today term 'art' was created in cultures in which the notion of art was non-existent, and the vexed question of the relationship between art and history. These are the more concrete issues which the following chapters will address, taking care in each case to observe how the positions Malraux adopts emerge as direct implications of the fundamental principles we have now considered.

The first question to be considered is one that occupies one of the three volumes of La Psychologie de l'art and one of the four sections of Les Voix du silence (but which, nonetheless, commentators have seldom discussed in any detail) – Malraux's account of artistic creation.
Chapter Five

Art and Creation

'... le peintre ne peut que copier un autre peintre – ou découvrir.'

In the Introduction to a recent volume entitled *The Creation of Art*, which consists of a series of essays mostly written from the perspective of Anglo-American analytic aesthetics, 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 this topic, the editors continue, ‘can only impoverish aesthetics’, and their collection thus seeks to demonstrate that ‘issues surrounding the creation of art deserve far more sustained attention than they have generally earned within the field of contemporary aesthetics’. We shall have occasion later in this chapter to examine some of the arguments advanced in these essays. For the present, however, they are worth noting partly for drawing attention – correctly – to the neglect of the topic of artistic creation in the philosophy of art, but partly also as an interesting example of an issue mentioned in the Introduction to the present study – the widespread neglect of André Malraux’s writings on art in the Anglo-American context. 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 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 gives to the subject of

---

1 ‘The painter can only copy another painter – or make discoveries.’
artistic creation – to judge at least by the space he devotes to it – nowhere in the
critical literature, in French or in English, is there a reasonably comprehensive
account of what he has to say on the issue, or a serious attempt to explain how it
links up with other elements of his theory of art. There are of course occasional,
passing references in various books and articles, but in general it is fair to say that
this component of his theory of art remains one of the most widely neglected.3

The present chapter will seek to remedy this situation, not simply because so
little has been said about Malraux’s account but also because this is a crucial aspect
of his theory of art, and one that begins to reveal how stimulating and challenging –
not so say revolutionary – his thinking about art can be. The aim will not be to
provide a comprehensive coverage of everything Malraux has to say on the subject
(his account being quite lengthy, as we have indicated), but to outline the key
elements of his argument, indicating why they flow naturally from the fundamental
propositions we have now examined. In doing so, we will also consider some of the
critical responses to this aspect of his theory of art, infrequent though they have been,
supplementing this with discussion of other possible criticisms that might be made,
and brief consideration of certain alternative accounts of artistic creation.

***

One way of approaching Malraux’s account of artistic creation is to compare
it with more conventional modes of thinking about the subject. According to one
familiar view, the impulse to be an artist – the desire to paint, write or compose –
springs initially from a response to some aspect of ‘life’, ‘reality’, or ‘human
experience’, 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.4 Viewed in this light, the artist is, first and foremost, someone who reacts

3 Some essays whose titles suggest they concern this aspect of Malraux’s thought are in fact of a 1nore
general nature and have little to say on the topic. See for example: Jean Leymarie, "Malraux and the
Malraux. Despite its title, Andre Marissel’s study focuses mainly on Malraux’s technique as a
novelist.

4 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
to ‘the world around him’ in an unusually sensitive way, and who is then fired with an urge to respond through some form of artistic expression. Biographers might disagree about which experiences were the decisive ones, but the basic assumption is that the urge to be an artist, whether one succeeds or fails, springs essentially from a response to people, objects or incidents – to ‘human experience’, ‘reality’, or ‘life’. As Peter Kivy claims in relation to writers, literature is ‘a way some people – people we admire very much – have of telling us how things are with us, them, and our world’.

As one might expect, given the ideas outlined in the previous chapter, Malraux firmly rejects explanations of this kind. For Malraux, as we saw earlier, ‘life’ or ‘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 ‘the world’ – the fundamentally 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 objects 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 the 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.

The argument, as one can readily see, flows directly from the basic propositions outlined earlier. 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, and if great art, such as that of Cimabue, is a world – a rival world – in which that

---

5 See above, page 69.
6 See above, page 80.
8 There is no implied attempt here to draw a distinction between art and great art. The phrase is being used merely to indicate that we are discussing art that is widely regarded as such.
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 sees ample evidence for his claim in the history of art. He writes:

It is a revealing fact 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.9

Not surprisingly then, Malraux rejects the familiar view, often associated with Romanticism,10 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 has, 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.’11

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’12 – 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. He writes:

10 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 course of discussion.
12 Ibid., 531.
Goya’s path led through Bayeu,\textsuperscript{13} the Impressionists’ path led through traditional painting or Manet; Michelangelo’s through Donatello, Rembrandt’s through Lastmann and Elsheimer (cf. Fig. 4 and Fig. 5); El Greco’s through Bassano’s studio – and precocity simply means the ability to copy at an early age.\textsuperscript{14}

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’.\textsuperscript{15} Gradually glimpsing the possibility of a different ‘coherent world’ that 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

\textit{Fig. 4} Pieter Lastmann, \textit{The Prophet Balaam} (1622)

Malraux: ‘In his \textit{Prophet Balaam} of 1626, Rembrandt did not set out to represent life, but to speak the language of his master, Lastmann…’ \textit{Les Voix du silence}, 532.

\textit{Fig. 5} Rembrandt, \textit{The Prophet Balaam} (1626)

\textsuperscript{13} Francisco Bayeu (1734-1795), one of Goya’s early teachers and mentors.
\textsuperscript{14} Malraux, \textit{Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art} (I), 526. In a similar vein, Malraux writes in \textit{L’Homme précaire et la littérature}: ‘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.’ Malraux, \textit{L’Homme précaire et la littérature} 155.
\textsuperscript{15} Malraux, \textit{Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art} (I), 155.
ordered landscapes' (for example) ‘did not stem from a conflict with trees and foliage, but from a conflict with painting as he knew it.’

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 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 argues

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.

This claim, initially puzzling though it might seem, also flows naturally from the basic propositions outlined earlier. If, for the artist, ‘reality’ or ‘the world’ 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 make discoveries’: to follow an existing path or to blaze new trails.

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. There is no middle way, so to speak, no neutral path, such as a ‘styleless’ representation of the world, or ‘copying nature in

---


18 Ibid., 537.

19 The idea can, however, be exaggerated. One critic argues 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, "Malraux and the Destruction of Aesthetics," 108. This distorts Malraux’s point.
her own style in which the artist might take temporary refuge. The options are simply, as Malraux argues, 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 to the points that have been made so far.

One objection might be that in placing such a strong emphasis on the impact of existing art, Malraux is giving the impression that the artist somehow works in a vacuum, oblivious to the objects, shapes and colours in the world around him. Surely, it might be said, the world of objects and events must play some part in the creative process? This objection would oversimplify Malraux’s argument. While rejecting the conventional account that sees art as a response to ‘life’, he fully accepts, as we have seen, that ‘life’ – the world of fleeting appearances – can serve as a resource, a ‘dictionary’ of forms, that may on occasion be an important source of suggestions and intimations. The issue, however, is one of priorities. ‘The outside world,’ he writes,

\[\text{can be rich in suggestions – of colour, of line, and of the form the artist ‘is after’ – for the artist who is looking for them, and on condition that he is not looking for them as for a pre-synthesised whole but in the sense that great wellsprings, their levels having built up, look for a watercourse to follow as a river. Under these conditions, the part played by living forms can be immense; a vast Delacroix’s ‘dictionary’ will emerge out of limbo.}\]

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.\(^22\)

---

\(^{20}\) One of Malraux phrases for this idea. See Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 539.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 570. As indicated earlier (See Chapter Four, note 31) Malraux borrows the term ‘dictionary’ in this sense from Delacroix. As the discussion in the present chapter has implied, the account of artistic creation in question here is not limited to visual art. Thus, in *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*, Malraux uses the same concept of a ‘Delacroix’s dictionary’ in the context of an analysis of literary creation. See Malraux, *L’Homme précaire et la littérature* 157.

What the artist rejects, in other words, and what the art that impresses him incites him to reject, is not ‘the world’ *per se* but the *relationships* within that world, or more accurately the *absence* of relationships – their fundamentally 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 as master. The *sine qua non* if it is to serve, 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.’

It is interesting in this context to consider certain comments on *La Psychologie de l’art* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In the course of a lengthy essay, 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*.’ For, in reality, Merleau-Ponty argues, the work ‘is not brought to fulfilment far from things and in some intimate laboratory to which 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.

In part, these comments appear to reflect Merleau-Ponty’s own phenomenological approach to 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

---

*style from Greek models in post-Alexandrian cultures in regions such as Bactria and Gandhara.
Aspects of his discussion are considered in another context in Chapter Six. See below, page 170 et seq.*


pastiche), and this is most certainly his 'end';\textsuperscript{25} but he 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 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 appearances; 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 of appearances, might, on occasion, spring from his 'mediocre experiences', whatever precisely that phrase might mean. Broadly speaking, Merleau-Ponty, not unlike Blanchot,\textsuperscript{26} seems intent on interpreting Malraux as depicting the artist as someone who has turned his back on the world, or on what Merleau-Ponty terms 'empirical life'. The assessment, however, is misleading, and once again so much depends on what one means by 'the world' or 'empirical life' (a concept that Merleau-Ponty does not define). To the extent that the artist is in pursuit of 'another world' - a world that in Malraux's words 'stands for unity as against the chaos of mere, given reality'\textsuperscript{27} - he or she is certainly not, in Malraux's eyes, content with 'empirical life'; but 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.'

Even if these points were granted, one might, however, object that Malraux's account of the creative process dramatises it unnecessarily. Surely, it might be argued, terms such as 'struggle', 'break free', and 'destroy' are excessively emotive in the context, and Malraux is simply indulging in the kind of overblown rhetoric of which critics such as Bourdieu and Righter accuse him.\textsuperscript{28} This, however, would be to forget the foundations on which Malraux's theory of art rests. Art for Malraux, as

\textsuperscript{25} 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 the artist's 'end'. See above, page 80.
\textsuperscript{26} See above, page 86.
\textsuperscript{27} See above, page 80.
\textsuperscript{28} See above, pages 9 and 89.
we have seen, is a response to the ‘fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life’; it is not the mere solving of an impersonal 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 a merely an intellectual, experience. The style or styles from which the artist is seeking to free himself had, after all, created a deep impression and evoked strong admiration – strong enough to fire the creative impulse in the first place – and the process of eliminating them, Malraux is suggesting, is no less charged with feeling. Viewed in that 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 critics have claimed, that great art will 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. Similarly, in the present context, Malraux 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 the following terms:

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 Massacio’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 a view would be mistaken, this critic continues, 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.’

These comments are misconceived. Certainly, the artist, in Malraux’s view, is ‘rebelling’ 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

---

29 See above, page 91.
30 Davezac, "Malraux’s Ideas on Art and Method in Criticism," 182,83.
metaphysical nature – an attempt to discover a new ‘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 at best to obscure this point. Nor, one should add, need the revolt in question 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 by 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.’

Nothing in Malraux’s account, in short, suggests that the personality or general attitudes of the artist must necessarily be ‘aggressive’, or that he should be intent on ‘destroying the social order’, if that is what the above criticism 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 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, for example: ‘He does not necessarily want to change the world, or man’s relationship with God; he wants to challenge existing pictures with pictures that do not yet exist. His efforts are focused in a specific domain…’32) 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.33

Perhaps, however, one might object that Malraux is ignoring the artist’s freedom to choose the artist or artists he will adopt as his models. Surely, one might argue, 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 is always free to select. Malraux deals with this point quite directly. In this context, he argues, 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,

32 Ibid., 568.
33 Cf. below, page 136.
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, often antagonistic, spirits.34

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 awareness of life of which, as discussed earlier, the person in whom it arises knows he or she is a part. The artist’s relationship with art, which is a response to this emotion, is necessarily of the same order. It is not a detached ‘weighing-up of comparable significances and qualities’ but a response that manifests 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.’35

Elsewhere, Malraux makes the same point with regard to the viewer. Speaking, in the introduction to Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale, of the reasons why he has selected 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?36

Chapter 5 - Art and Creation

It was suggested in the Introduction to this study that Malraux’s theory of art represents a radical challenge to much traditional thinking in the philosophy of art and here we begin to see one of the ways in which this is so. Since the eighteenth century – especially since Kant – one of the widely held, firmly entrenched notions of Western aesthetics has been that the individual’s response to a work of art involves a judgement, often characterized as a ‘disinterested’ judgement. The precise meanings of these terms, even in their original Kantian context, have often been matters of debate, and some recent writers have been uncomfortable with the idea that a response to art needs to be ‘disinterested’. Broadly speaking, however, one of the central tenets – one is tempted to say one of the central assumptions – of much that has been written in Western aesthetics over the past three centuries, and certainly over recent decades in the Anglo-American context, is that in some essential way the response to a work of art takes the form of a judgement, 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’. In addition, as indicated, many have argued that the judgment should be understood as ‘disinterested’.

As we are now in a position to see, Malraux’s theory of art represents a direct challenge to these views. At the fundamental level, he is saying, our response to works of art is not a judgement at all, if, to borrow his words, that idea implies a ‘weighing-up of comparable significances and qualities’ – 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 essentially a question of ‘enthusiasms’ (or the lack of them) – that is, a response of an emotional nature. And since, as we have seen, the emotion in question is ‘the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life beginning with his own,’ the response is one in which, far from being ‘disinterested’,

37 See for example Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 148-62
38 A seminal article in this context was: George Dickie, "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1964).
39 See for example the First Moment of the ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’ in *Critique of the Power of Judgment* where Kant writes: ‘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 judgement 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 notion of judgement itself.
40 Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, 7.
the individual has a profound interest. 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, one should add, is he excluding the possibility that one might wish to express a judgement post facto about a work – to decide to see Puccini’s Madama 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 has over 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 that ‘hold’ – that fascination, to employ the term he used in the remarks quoted earlier in relation to OEdipus – is always fundamentally the same. Essentially, it is of an emotional kind, not one that depends on a disinterested, reflective judgement, because at bottom the fascination it exerts on the viewer, as on the artist himself, is due to the response it represents to the fundamental emotion to which all art is addressed – a sense, even if only obscurely felt, that ‘another world’ has been brought into being, and, as Malraux phrased it in that earlier discussion, ‘that consciousness has intruded into the realm of destiny.’42 ‘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 judgement but from a revelation.’43 One may certainly make judgements after the event, but fundamentally, Malraux is saying, the psychology of the individual’s response to art is not dependent on detached judgements and reasoned choices 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 yet drawn attention to the sharp contrast between his thinking on this matter and the time-honoured, post-Kantian approach (which may in part be due to the general neglect of his account of artistic creation alluded to earlier), but it is clear that in this respect – as in several others, as we shall see later – Malraux’s theory of art

41 See above, page 86.
42 See above, page 87.
43 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 532.
represents a direct challenge to one of the most frequent and strongly-held claims of Western aesthetics.44

***

None of the objections to Malraux’s arguments considered so far has directly challenged 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 and that in bringing a new coherent world into being, 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.45

In response to this claim, 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 respond, 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 himself has discovered? Surely, there is some ‘extra-stylistic’ option – a ‘neutral’ position, so to speak, that can, at least temporarily, provide another path? Malraux addresses this point directly and his response throws interesting 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.46

44 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, as indicated in the Introduction, Malraux is not interested in attempting to establish rules by which such distinctions might be made (assuming this was possible). His quite specific 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 in terms of a ‘reflective judgement’, it does not necessarily follow that in any given case the judgement will be a sound one.

45 See above, page 99.
If the objection in question were well founded – if there were a ‘styleless’, intermediate position – different styles would, Malraux argues, need to be understood as ‘successive varieties of ornament added to an immutable substratum’ – a kind of ‘surplus’ which, in theory at least, could be jettisoned altogether if the artist so desired. This view 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 fact, 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 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, Malraux 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.

The reasoning here follows directly from the account of art we have been examining. If, for the artist, bare reality (the ‘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, creation 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’, 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. This popular idea, which

---

47 Ibid., 534.
48 See above, page 79 where Malraux’s position on this matter was introduced in a more abstract way.
encounters obvious difficulties in the case of music, but which, in various forms, is often invoked in the case of visual art and literature\(^49\) can readily foster the belief that the artist is essentially involved in 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 could, of course, be said to involve ‘stylistic effects’ but which might, nonetheless, still be conceptualised 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 even none at all, might be a real possibility. Malraux’s analysis implies that these ideas rest on a fundamental 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 perhaps 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.\(^50\) The artist, Malraux is arguing, is not involved in transcribing anything, but in *transforming*.\(^51\) Certainly, representation, in the simple sense of including in a picture forms resembling real objects, is one of the tools or

\(^{49}\) 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 following comment by another writer in 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 Melver Lopes, "The Domain of Depiction," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 160. A substantial proportion of contemporary aesthetics, particularly in the Anglo-American arena, revolves around the idea of representation.

\(^{50}\) As this analysis suggests, Malraux’s theory of art provides no support for the claim advanced in certain ‘semitic’ theories – of which there are several variants – that art is essentially a system of signs. Malraux agrees that art occasionally makes use of signs, but in itself the sign is, on his account, only an embryonic form of art. (See: Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l’art (I)*, 534,43,44.)

\(^{51}\) 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.
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 – 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.’52) Art is the creation of a rival world, a world which depends for its very existence on a process of transformation of the ‘real world’. As we saw earlier, Malraux defines an artist’s style as his or her means of creating this rival, unified world,53 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.’54 ‘Great artists,’ he writes, summing up this view, ‘are not transcribers of the world; they are its rivals.’55

This is why Malraux insists that art always involves a process of reduction, and that ‘this reduction is the beginning of art.’56 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, reordering, 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 a possibility, and is almost, one might say, a ‘happy accident’ of human existence which offers the painter the means through which a transformed world – and, if possible, a unified world – can be brought into being. One might perhaps object that the argument does not hold 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

52 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 538.
53 See above, page 80.
54 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 553.
55 Ibid., 698. Emphasis in original. Malraux uses this same statement as the epigraph to 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.’ Malraux, L’Homme précaire et la littérature 152.
56 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 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.
rarely imitate those of 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.\(^{57}\) Transformation – and not representation – is thus no less essential in the case of sculpture.\(^{58}\) 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 fact, 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 demanded by art, ‘no less necessary’, he writes, ‘when the artist is aiming at unlikeness than when he aims at life-likeness’.\(^{59}\)

***

Malraux’s theory of art, as we will begin to see more clearly in the next chapter (and as foreshadowed in the Introduction) is closely tied to the history of art – to the ways in which art has manifested itself in the past – and his account of artistic creation might perhaps give rise to certain objections relating to the history of art.

One might object, for instance, that while Malraux’s account might seem to apply well enough to the history of European art since the Renaissance, when changes in style have been relatively rapid and often quite pronounced, it seems much less appropriate in cases such as ancient Egypt or Byzantium where the dominant styles appear to have remained almost static over long periods of time.

\(^{57}\) 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).\(^{58}\) It is not difficult 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, similarly, 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.\(^{59}\) Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art* (I), 491.
Could it be that 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 the discussion of historical issues in later chapters, but one pertinent point can be made here. Even in cultures such as Egypt in which the reigning style appears to have remained unchanged over long periods, there is, nonetheless, Malraux argues, an important difference between works that simply follow the conventional formulae and those which, while not necessarily making conspicuous breaks with convention, nevertheless manifest a true creative achievement. 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' illustrated by a statue of Sesostris II, and 'creation' by a statue of Queen Nefert (Fig. 6 and Fig. 760). 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.'61 The phenomenon of an art of ‘production’, he argues, is by no means limited to Egyptian art, or even just to ancient civilizations (one of his illustrations juxtaposes Michelangelo’s *Day* and of a copy of this work in the Bargello Museum in Florence attributed to Vincenzo Danti62). Nor does it necessarily occur only in periods of artistic decadence. It seems to arise, Malraux argues, as a ‘corrosive’ accompaniment to every major artistic style, dragging it back to the conventional formula (essentially to pastiches of existing works) or to the sign, or simply to the copy.63 As indicated above, there is more to say on the issue in question here. Later, we will factor in Malraux’s 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 marked at certain periods than at

---

60 Malraux provides other photographic illustrations of the point, including a statue of Tuthmosis III in the Egyptian Museum of Turin (convention) and a statue of Akhenaton in the Cairo Museum (creation). Malraux, *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale: La statuaire, Ecrits sur l’Art (I)* 980-89.

61 Ibid., 976-83.

62 Ibid., 989.

63 ‘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.’ Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 541.
The essential point for present purposes is that Malraux is alive to the objection we have raised, and part of his response is to argue that major artistic styles quite frequently foster the emergence of imitative works—products of an ‘academism’—produced in their shadow.

A further history-related objection might be that Malraux 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 Malraux’s account of the Giotto legend, how was the first ‘Giotto’ inspired if there were no ‘Cimabue’? Malraux considers the objection but does not see it as compelling. On the one hand, he points out, ‘problems of first causes are not peculiar to art’. He does not elaborate, but the point seems well enough taken since it is not difficult to think of other examples: there is, for instance, no consensus among paleoanthropologists or linguists about how or when language began; and the origins of human consciousness are equally obscure. In reality, Malraux writes, ‘we have no means of knowing how a great

---

64 See below, page 262 et seq.
artist who had never seen a work of art but only living forms, would proceed;\textsuperscript{66} 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.\textsuperscript{67} (Fig. 8.)

In short, Malraux is arguing, the origins of art are simply lost in the mists of time, and no matter how far back we manage to go, we do not find a kind of ‘proto-art’\textsuperscript{68} but simply other styles which, as Malraux writes, often seem ‘well-developed’

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 501,02.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} We do of course find signs, such as hand prints and ‘stick’ figures (which are still made today). But unless one is prepared to argue 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 of art, even with an accuracy of tens, or perhaps hundreds, of thousands of years, is 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 in the field points out, there is evidence that the Achuleans, between about 400,000 and 300,000 years ago, were making use of ochres they brought back to their habitats, and even that they transformed them by firing – although
\end{itemize}
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. None of these comments, of course, explain how art began: they do not solve the problem of the 'first Giotto' – and nor are they intended to. But they do at least place the issue in a broader context, and also remind us that the problem of origins is by no means limited to art alone.

It is worth adding that convincing solutions to this problem are few and far between. In the Anglo-American sphere, the strongly ahistorical approach of much aesthetics over recent decades has tended to sideline such questions and, effectively, to treat art as a 'given' whose history and origins can be more or less ignored. One exception, however – Ellen Dissanayake’s book Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why – merits brief comment. Dissanayake attempts 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’.

The argument poses obvious problems. Even within the field of Western art, there are many widely admired works, such as the crucified Christ in the Isenheim Altarpiece (Fig. 9), that scarcely seem to be exemplars of the ‘wholesome and good’.

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.


70 Especially analytic aesthetics, of which one commentator aptly writes: ‘The analytic philosopher of art, like his fellow analytic philosophers, practised his art with resolute ahistoricism – slicing into the conceptual scheme of art criticism at a certain moment in its history...’ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "After Analysis and Romanticism," in Analytic Aesthetics, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 38. The ahistorical nature of analytic aesthetics is mentioned at a number of points in later discussion. Certain recent philosophers of the school have sought to modify the approach somewhat, though with questionable success, as we shall see. See below, page 206 et seq.

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. In addition, one would need to know what, precisely, is meant by the notion of ‘selected-for’. If intended in a 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 inclination to create and appreciate ‘aesthetically special’ objects would, like bipedal motion, be present in equal measure in all humans, and, presumably, be a kind of routine, quasi-automatic activity – a claim which, even leaving aside the vagueness of ‘aesthetically special’, seems, to say the least, controversial. If, on the other hand, ‘selected-for’ is intended metaphorically, and refers to cultural changes, Dissanayake would seem to be assuming 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, not surprisingly, she does not provide.\(^72\) The claim would no doubt also be hampered by the fact that there seems to have been no culture which has not engaged in artistic creation of some kind, which removes all possibility of a ‘control’ case that might serve as a basis of comparison.

\(^72\) 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 modified 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,\(^{73}\) the thesis is not without a surface plausibility. 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 weak at these key points. Like her previous volume, which suggests that art should be understood principally as making something ‘aesthetically special’ (an obviously question-begging notion\(^{74}\)), this later work tends to content itself with elusive propositions of the kind that ‘the arts …are ways of treating the inner life seriously’,\(^{75}\) 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’.\(^{76}\) Furnished with such hazy definitions, it is of course not difficult 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.

One should add, finally, that the problem of first causes in art does not become any the less puzzling if one rejects Malraux’s position and espouses one of the more traditional aesthetic 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

---

\(^{73}\) A claim often advanced in connection with prehistoric art. Walter Torbrügge, for example, suggests there is evidence that ‘the purpose of most early art was magical.’ Walter Torbrügge, *Prehistoric European Art* (New York: Harry N. Adams Inc, 1968), 18. The claim persists in some of the most recent writing on the subject. See for example Lorblanchet, *Les Origines de l’art*, passim.

\(^{74}\) On occasion, Dissanayake simply uses the formula ‘making special’ (deleting the ‘aesthetically’) to define the ‘core of art’. (See e.g. Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus* - *Where Art Comes From and Why*, 58.) Yet there are clearly many ways of making something ‘special’ that do not involve creating a work of art. Someone who keeps an apparently worthless object for sentimental reasons would appear to be making it ‘special’. The addition of the term ‘aesthetically’ hardly assists, since Dissanayake’s definition of ‘esthetic’ (‘sensorily and emotionally gratifying and more than strictly necessary’) would cover many activities and objects beyond those generally regarded as art; and in any case she herself comments that ‘not all aesthetic making special is art’. Ibid., 56.


\(^{76}\) Ibid., 131. Dissanayake further blurs the definition by adding that the ‘elaborative behavior’ in question is what she had termed ‘making special’ in the previous work. Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* 134.
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 not self-evident. The same question arises if one holds the view that art is essentially 'expression'. Why, at a certain point in time, did humankind choose to 'express' itself through the two dimensional medium of painting or, for example, in music? The question of first causes is thus not peculiar to Malraux’s theory of art and nor, as he reminds us, is it limited to art alone. He readily concedes that the problem is a mystery, and, given the complete absence of reliable evidence, he (unlike Dissanayake, for example) resists the temptation to speculate. Precisely because one is dealing with an area of pure conjecture – and one likely to remain so – it is, however, scarcely a compelling objection to his theory of art to say that he does not explain it.\textsuperscript{77}

***

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 recent volume \textit{The Creation of Art} mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. There is no space here for an analysis of all the essays presented in the collection but a brief discussion of two of them, both by prominent writers in the field of analytic aesthetics, will be instructive.

In one contribution, the aesthetician Berys Gaut sets out to investigate 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 methodologies of analytic aesthetics, Gaut relies heavily on an examination of the ways in which terms are employed in ordinary English usage

\textsuperscript{77} 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 \textit{explanation} of the origin of art: it is at best simply a 'place-holder' in the words of one writer who employs the concept. (See Jerrold Levinson, "Defining Art Historically," in \textit{Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition} ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 35-46 esp. 42.).
Chapter 5 – Art and Creation

(how ‘we use’ terms78) and an analysis of the various implications of these usages. Using this approach, Gaut arrives at 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 ‘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.79

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.80

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 indicates, turns out to be essentially a discussion of the idea of creativity in general, and ultimately has nothing to say about creation in art specifically. Not surprisingly then, there is nothing in his argument that establishes that creativity is a necessary ingredient of

78 This approach was employed earlier in the present study as part of the examination of the notion of ‘reality’, ‘world’ etc. (See above, page 71.) In that case, however, it was used simply to highlight the ambiguity of the words in question, not, as in the cases under discussion here, to establish a substantive philosophical position.
art. The necessity is simply assumed, not established. Carroll’s account, though 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 – as, moreover, in the other essays in the volume – 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 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, 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 frequently quoted statement by Roland Barthes in his well-known essay ‘The Death of the Author’ exemplifies this view. Barthes writes that

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...

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 offer a critique of Barthes, or even to adjudicate between his views and those of writers such as Gaut and Carroll. His statement,

81 Gaut and Livingstone, eds., The Creation of Art, 1-5.
however, highlights the fact that the link between art and creativity has been
seriously challenged in recent decades and cannot, as Carroll, and more particularly
Gaut, seem to assume, be taken for granted. One of the signal advantages 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 of thing art is – which is the crucial element lacking in
accounts such as those by Gaut and Carroll (and, one might argue, in Barthes’
account as well83). If one accepts the basic propositions outlined in the previous
chapter of the present study – that art addresses itself to the chaos of appearances as
there defined, and that it replaces this with a rival, coherent world – it follows
necessarily that art must be creative – that is, invent a new coherent world – or fail to
be art and remain simply at the level of the pastiche. This, as we have seen, 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 postmodernism who
suggest that art today is necessarily pastiche.84 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 originality. 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

83 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 a ‘text’. See Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in Image,
84 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.
being. Seen in this light, art cannot possibly just be pastiche or, in Barthes’ phrase, the ‘[imitation of] a gesture that is always anterior’. To be art it must be creative.85

It is important to note in this context that Malraux’s account of the creative process confers on the work of art the quality of a creation in the fullest 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, as we have seen, 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’.86 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 other ‘intermediate position’ to occupy. It is for this reason that Malraux has so little enthusiasm for accounts of the history of art that are, to use his words, ‘only chronologies of influences’.87 For Malraux, art, as 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 works such as La 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’.88 Such terms are Malraux’s acknowledgment that the intrinsic nature of

85 Remembering, of course, that Malraux is not, as indicated earlier, attempting to establish rules for the purpose of judging particular works. His argument here concerns the nature of art in general, as an activity, not a ‘rule of thumb’ to separate art from non-art. 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 judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work.’ As we have seen, Malraux does not think in terms of ‘judgements’ and ‘rules’ (an approach that Lyotard appears to borrow from Kant). And 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 ‘avant-gardes.’ See: Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, 74,81.
86 See above, page 104.
87 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 879. Cf. also: ‘The history of art is the history of forms invented in place of (‘contre’) those inherited.’ Ibid., 582.
88 Malraux uses the terms ‘invention’ and ‘discovery’ in the same sense. That is, ‘discovery’ is not used in the sense of the revelation of something pre-existing. This equivalence is assumed throughout the present study.
the work of art – the kind of thing it is – is creation in the fullest sense: it is a world (whether realised in painting, literature or music) that emerges ‘as if from nowhere’. A history of art that speaks of artistic creation solely in terms of influences – either on, or by, the art it describes – would, for Malraux, speak of everything except the essential. As we shall see at a later stage, this point has important implications for Malraux’s understanding of the relationship between art and history.\textsuperscript{89}

This analysis also allows us to see more clearly how Malraux’s account of art links up with the notion of the human adventure. Lacking any underlying meaning (such as Man, the eventual inheritor of a golden future), the human adventure, as we saw in Chapter Three, is a perception of man as ‘addition to’, not part of, the scheme of things. It is human life as inexplicable irruption into being – ‘an apparition, an inexplicable gift’, in Berger’s words\textsuperscript{90} – which stands in need of affirmation if it is to be more than mere possibility. Chapter Four explained that, in Malraux’s eyes, the work of art is, precisely, an affirmation of man because it creates a rival world in which man, not chaos, is ruler – a world ‘scaled down to man’s measure.’ We have now seen, in the present chapter, that the creation of that rival world takes the form of an irruption into being – of 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,\textsuperscript{91} 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 suddenly perceive that ‘all this might have been otherwise.’ Yet while not unravelling the mystery, art nonetheless affirms man because it creates a rival world in which he is ruler; and it affirms man as human adventure – as ‘addition to’, not part of, the scheme of things. This point, which has a number of important consequences – above all, in relation to the temporal nature of art – will become clearer in following chapters where we shall consider Malraux’s notion of the ‘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

\textsuperscript{89} See below page 128.
\textsuperscript{90} See above, page 49.
\textsuperscript{91} Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l’art (I), 562.
reveals that, like the human adventure, art is a world no more tied to an underlying reality — to fundamental Truth — than the inexplicable ‘all this’ that Kassner and Berger discover in the return to the earth. 92

***

The discussion in this chapter 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. 93 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 judgement — disinterested or not — as traditionally argued, but of 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.’ 94 The analysis has also explained 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.

92 Here, as elsewhere, it is important to stress these links between Malraux’s more specific arguments (in this case, those relating to artistic creation) and the foundations of his thinking. In a recent study, Henri Godard offers one of the few reasonably extended discussions of Malraux’s thinking on the question of artistic creation, but his account lacks an explanation of how Malraux’s position links to, and is inseparable from, the basic propositions on which his theory of art rests. See Godard, L’Autre face de la littérature: essai sur André Malraux et la littérature, 35-39.

93 The section of Les Voix du silence in question also discusses the relationship between art and history. This is examined in later chapters, especially Chapters Six, Eight and Nine.

94 See above, page 111.
This discussion has begun to draw out some of the concrete implications of the basic propositions outlined in previous chapters, and, with these ideas in mind, it is now possible to turn to an issue of an even more tangible kind. 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 relationship between art and history and it is now time to examine the matter in more detail. The next chapter will consider some key elements of this aspect of Malraux’s thinking.
Chapter Six

The Emergence and Transformation of ‘Art’

As mentioned in the Introduction, 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 relevant reproductions. The same concern with history is evident in Malraux’s other works on art such as Les Voix du silence and Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale, and even – though the time span here is much shorter – in his study of literature, L’Homme précaire et la littérature. As indicated in that earlier discussion, however, our casual reader would be mistaken. Malraux is not writing a history of art and, as we noted there, he expressly denies any intention of doing so. His aim is to address the basic theoretical question: what is the function of art in human life? That is, his prime concern is art’s purpose not its history.

Why, then, does Malraux place so much importance on the various phases art has traversed in the past? Why do ancient Egyptian and Buddhist sculpture, Byzantine mosaics, or Giotto’s frescos seem to matter so much to him – as much, for example, as Cézanne or Picasso. Why does he not, like most writers on the philosophy of art, focus on the general concept of art, leaving the history to specialists in the field? The question is a large one and it would be premature to attempt a complete answer at this stage; but since a substantial part of the present

1 ‘... la nature même de la création artistique [me contraint] souvent à suivre l’histoire [de l’art] pas à pas.’
Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel.

2 See above, page 3.
Chapter 6 – The Emergence and Transformation of ‘Art’

chapter will be taken up with discussion of historical developments crucial to Malraux’s thinking, it is appropriate to offer some preliminary comment here.

The first point to make is that, as we have already intimated, Malraux is not interested in the history of art simply as an account of artistic influences – that is, in terms of explanations that seek to account for painter A in terms of the influence exerted on him or her by painter B and/or C. As we saw in the previous chapter, 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 fullest sense of the term, and begins precisely where influences cease. The ‘history’ of art that matters for Malraux is an account of a series of creations, which implies that it is essentially a ‘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 aesthetics so often does, simply on the general idea of art? The answer is implied in what has just been said. 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 manifestation of the same fundamental creative impulse: it is always, as we have explained, 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 saw, 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, and in the form in which, 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.’ Hence the importance – indeed 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, or ‘inventions’. Hence also the superficial resemblance to a history of art for the casual reader. For, since these discoveries have occurred in historical sequence, ‘the very

3 Cf. above, page 123.
4 See above, Chapters 3, 4 and 5, esp. pages 53, 78, and 124.
5 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 880.
6 As indicated earlier Malraux uses these terms interchangeably. See Chapter 5, note 88.
nature of artistic creation,' Malraux writes, 'often obliges me to follow [the history of art] step by step'. Thus, while he has no interest in writing a history of art for its own sake - and certainly not simply in terms of artistic influences - art, for Malraux, is inseparable from its history. In the same sense that an adventure is defined by the region it traverses - while the rest remains unknown - so art is defined by its discoveries, its 'history' in that specific sense.

***

Shortly, we will consider certain key developments in Malraux's account of the history of artistic creation. In particular, we will focus on the emergence, and the subsequent transformation, of the notion of art in Western culture. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to introduce one further idea that plays a vital role in the events to be discussed and in Malraux's thinking generally. This is the idea 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 - of the void. Art, we have said, 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 down to man's measure'. It affirms man, as against chaos, by creating another world, in which man is ruler.

Art, however, is not the only possible response to the sense of chaos at the heart of the fundamental emotion in question. From the earliest times, Malraux argues, man has also possessed another form of defence against his fundamental sense of bewilderment and insignificance: the 'absolute' - the term he employs for belief systems such as the major religions of the past that see through the chaos of

7 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l'art (II), 37.
8 It should be borne in mind, however, that the terms 'discoveries' and 'inventions' in this context do not imply an accumulation of knowledge - a progressive growth of skill. For Malraux, as we have seen, each artist destroys the style or styles on which he builds. There is no question of an accumulation, or of a teleology. Malraux always speaks in terms of an adventure, never a quest.
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 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 example, 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 inevitable unfolding of an historical Idea. 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 – 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 beliefs 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 same 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 civilisation,’ 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.

---

9 For example, the ideal of the ‘Coming Man’ discussed earlier.
Similarly, he argues, ‘Christian civilisation at its height established strong links between man and the Christian cosmos’, links 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.10

The Angelus is not merely a time of day like any other; it is also the Angel of the Annunciation. Christmas Day is not a day like any other in an endless succession of days; it is a reliving of the birth of Christ. An absolute puts an end to the void – the sense of incipient nothingness – intrinsic to a world of mere appearances because everything now has a reason for being, and 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, ‘have been otherwise’.

The idea is a powerful one. In particular, it is quite clear that 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 (like art) responds – the awareness Malraux first encountered in 1934 in his experience of ‘the return to the earth’ – is one in which, as we 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 could have been otherwise’. 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 we have 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

10 Suarès, Malraux, celui qui vient: entretiens entre André Malraux, Guy Suarès, José Benjamin, 18.
arbitrariness and contingency inherent in the fundamental emotion man feels in the face of life, and rescue him from the menacing sense of insignificance that implies. The point deserves emphasis because it is a fundamental aspect of Malraux’s thinking and one that his critics have too often neglected. 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.* Setting art aside, it is that without which man loses out to a ‘destiny-ridden world’ in the sense defined earlier. It is that without which man’s most ambitious endeavours ultimately count for nothing – since nothing, great or small, could then be more than a random event in an indifferent universe. It is, in Malraux’s words, that without which man becomes simply ‘the most favoured denizen of a universe founded on absurdity’. 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’ was defined above), the question to which we now return.

***

Some brief preliminary remarks are in order. Although the following historical account is, for the reasons explained, an integral part of Malraux’s theory of art (and not just an ‘illustration’ of it), the version given here will be selective and abbreviated. 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, or nothing, will therefore be said about Malraux’s comments on the art of Egypt, Greece, Africa, India, China, or the Romanesque and Medieval periods – to mention just some of the omissions. Nor will it be possible to consider his comments on many individual artists such as Donatello, Titian, El Greco, Georges de la Tour, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Goya, and a number of others.

---

11 Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 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, 1949), 119. As we saw earlier, Malraux used the idea of ‘absolute reality’ as early as *La Tentation de l’Occident* (see above, page 27). 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 a philosophical proposition. Here again, one sees the effects of the pivotal event in 1934.

12 See above, page 86.

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 we will examine in the present chapter, so the omissions will not seriously affect the general line of argument to be considered. Second, 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 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, and taking account of certain major historical developments along the way. Aspects of what is said are, as we shall see, 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 merits a brief preliminary word. It is quite clear that Malraux regards the main ideas we have 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 history of the different art forms is concerned, however, his position is a little more complex, and while he appears to see broad similarities between the course of historical events across all the 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.14 The present discussion will focus on visual art because this is the area in which Malraux has had the most to say and where his thinking emerges in its most fully developed and explicit form. The parameters of his account should, however, be borne in mind. Malraux is not suggesting that that the history of literature and music can simply be regarded as mirror images of developments in visual art.

14 Cf. for example the argument 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 issue in question here was foreshadowed in the Introduction. See page 15.
Finally, the sequence of events to be examined here has, as one might expect, been discussed from time to time by Malraux’s commentators, and, in certain cases, in some detail. A crucial element missing from these accounts, however, has been an explanation 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 provided here will highlight the importance of this link and seek to show how Malraux’s understanding of the history of art reflects the basic ideas we have examined so far. Following this analysis, we will consider certain critical responses, and other possible objections that might be raised to this aspect of his theory of art.

***

Byzantine art, Malraux argues, like that of numerous other civilizations, 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, which seems so much a part of the contemporary experience of art, was then quite unknown and presumably unimaginable, and Byzantine religious images were not made to consort with others of different kinds in an art museum, 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 argues, was the ‘fundamental purpose’ 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 appearances – but it was not a 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.

---

15 Examples of commentaries in which this element is missing are given below. See page 154 et seq.
16 Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Écrits sur l’art (II)*, 133, 40. Malraux’s italics. The overall argument, presented here in summary form, is taken principally from *Le Surnaturel*, 126-145. As we shall see, Byzantium, in Malraux’s view, was by no means the only civilisation that did not regard its painting and sculpture as ‘art’.
Two brief points should be made before continuing. First, Malraux is not suggesting that Byzantine works – the Virgin at Torcello (see Fig. 10 and Fig. 11), 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 issues about the relationship between art and time which will be considered in the following two chapters and which need to be held in abeyance for the present. The point at issue for the present 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 some critics, most notably E. H. Gombrich, tend to infer from his comments, that such images (or the music or literature of the time) are simply ‘expressions’ of the absolute in question. For Malraux, art is always an activity sui generis, not something that the values of a period produce ‘as apple trees produce their apples.’ 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 mere appearances for another, better world. But

17 See Gombrich, “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” passim. See also below, Chapter Nine, note 29.
they are, nevertheless, 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 that he is building up, even if he thinks little about it. His creative faculty is not merely the 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. 19

In his daily behaviour, such as his forms of worship, the painter or sculptor may well be ‘expressing’ his culture – because he is following established practices; but as creator, Malraux is arguing, he is working ‘in parallel’ with it, so to speak, animating it by discoveries, not merely reflecting something already known and familiar.

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 this change was a gradual rapprochement between man and God. The Christian faith of Byzantium had been a ‘dualism’: 20 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. 21

Hence the ‘transcendent’, ‘other worldly’ nature of Byzantine art. These works, Malraux writes,

---

19 Ibid., 648. Malraux’s italics. As mentioned earlier, Malraux sometimes stresses the fundamental creativity of art by comparing it, as he does here, with other major human discoveries such as the use of fire. See above, page 116.

20 Ibid., 707.

21 Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II)*, 133.
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.22

The decisive change came with Giotto. Giotto, for Malraux, represents the first clear break with Byzantine dualism – a first step, in the field of painting, in a reconciliation between man and God.23 The crucial issue was not, as histories of art have so often suggested, 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 – was, Malraux argues, 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’24 – events that once did take place on earth. Thus, Malraux writes,

[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.25

Giotto thus opened up a new world of what Malraux terms ‘pictorial fiction’, ‘the imaginary’, or the irréel.26 (Fig. 12 next page.) 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.’27 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, was not ‘nature imitation’ – an attempt to mimic the world of appearances. Once

22 Ibid.
23 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. Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 316,18,19.
24 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 316.
25 Ibid., 318.
26 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. Malraux uses the term frequently in his discussions of Renaissance and post-Renaissance art, and as the subtitle of the second volume of La Métamorphose des dieux, which concerns the art of those periods. In the absence of an exact equivalent, the present study sometimes uses the word untranslated. As the present context indicates, Malraux intends it to suggest an imagined, ‘nobler’ world. Its meaning will become clearer as we proceed.
27 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 320.
again, (and this is the constant, underlying theme) the aim 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 called forth veneration, but ... admiration.\(^{28}\)

Fig. 12 Giotto, *Marriage of the Virgin*, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

‘The world to which [Giotto’s] characters belong ... the world in which the Renaissance will discover its reality, is the world of fiction.’


The process took a further important step forward with Botticelli. In its exploration of the newly discovered imaginary realm, Malraux argues, painting began to call 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.\(^{29}\) For

\(^{28}\) 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 that was made by later Renaissance writers, such as Vasari). Here as elsewhere, there is no question of a notion of artistic ‘progress’. Cf. above, note 8.

Botticelli, especially in his non-religious works, it was no longer a question, as it had been with Giotto, of ‘locating without sacrilege a sacred scene in a world resembling that of everyday life’ but now of creating an earthly realm that rivalled that of the sacred. Thus, the admiration inspired by a painting such as *Spring* (Fig. 13 and Fig. 14), Malraux writes,

> 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.\(^{30}\)

---

Fig. 13 Botticelli, *Spring* (detail).

Fig. 14 Botticelli, *Spring* (detail).

‘When he finishes *Spring* [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

These developments, Malraux contends, conferred on art – and eventually 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 major religions, were forms that emerged from a sense of transcendence that

---

preceded them and that could, in principle at least, be experienced without them.\textsuperscript{31} 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 the events of the Christian story as well\textsuperscript{32}) independent of any pre-existing absolute – an exalted, imaginary world, Malraux writes, outside of which ‘man did not fully merit the name man’\textsuperscript{33} which came into being, elicited admiration, and commanded authority, solely through the power of art itself.

In short, Malraux contends, a revolutionary change had taken place which altered the very function of painting and sculpture in an unprecedented way. Source of a ‘nobler’ world – an imaginary, transfigured world, a world of ‘beauty’,\textsuperscript{34} peopled by men and women seemingly touched by a spark of the divine – the painted image or the sculptured figure was no longer an object of veneration, as it had been in Byzantium,\textsuperscript{35} but of admiration – an admiration evoked via the achievement of the artist and in no other way. 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’) that became the unspoken charter of the painting to follow.\textsuperscript{36} The creative task of the painter is henceforth ‘accomplished in a domain previously unknown to

\textsuperscript{31} 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, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 643.

\textsuperscript{32} ‘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.’ Malraux, La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire, 87.

\textsuperscript{33} Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Intemporel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 657.

\textsuperscript{34} Speaking of the Renaissance and post-Renaissance period, Malraux writes: ‘the plastic arts [were] for several centuries a special means of ascending to a realm of beauty where they were joined by the other arts.’ Malraux, 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. Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 248-93. In time, Malraux points out, the aesthetic of beauty engendered the notion of the ‘beau idéal’ as a kind of summum bonum. Ibid., 290-93.

\textsuperscript{35} And also, of course, in Romanesque and Gothic Europe. The abbreviated version of Malraux’s account being given here has omitted his extremely interesting comments on these periods.

\textsuperscript{36} Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Irréel, Ecrits sur l’Art (II), 481,83.
Christianity, because its prime objective will be the admiration it will need to evoke. 37

Thus began, in Europe, the reign of ‘art’ in the specific sense described, 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, Rubens, Watteau, (see Fig. 15, next page) 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 the mere copying of appearances but, as always, the creation of another, ‘rival’ world – but 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 beauty which art alone could conjure up. 38 Since a degree of naturalism was a necessary element, 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 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. 39

37 Ibid., 480.
38 Cf. the statement in L’Homme précaire et la littérature: ‘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.’ Malraux, L’Homme précaire et la littérature 54.
39 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l’art (I), 268. This summary, as indicated, has been greatly abbreviated and one major omission is Goya whose late works can, of course, scarcely be described as depicting ‘a harmonious imaginary world.’ Malraux, as we have mentioned, 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.
This account is open to a number of questions and possible objections, but before considering those matters it is important to complete Malraux's narrative. The episodes examined so far, which are contained 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. His narrative does not, however, end there. The third volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux*, entitled *L’Intemporel*, together with the final section of *Les Voix du silence* entitled ‘The Aftermath of the Absolute’, focus on major new developments that began in the final decades of the nineteenth century. This episode, as we shall see, 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 the responses of critics, we will therefore provide a brief summary of this further stage of his narrative.

---

40 See, for example, Ibid., 252,99.
The concept of art that emerged from the series of events we have described has, Malraux argues, left a powerful 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 emphasis placed on the idea of beauty in the discipline of aesthetics since the eighteenth century is a direct result of these events – in effect, a somewhat belated philosophical rationalisation of art conceived in terms of that idea.41) Powerful and influential though this concept of art has been, however, are we sure that it accurately captures what ‘art’ signifies today? Is art still the pursuit of ‘a harmonious imaginary world’ – a world 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, and works from other cultures such as the tribal societies of Africa (see Fig. 16 and Fig. 17, next page), the islands of the Pacific, 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, he argues, has altered in a fundamental way. There has been a profound cultural change – no less far reaching, he contends, than that brought about by Giotto and the Renaissance – 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’,42 will be the subject of the final stage of this summary.

41 See Ibid., 282.
42 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 1,25. This revolution, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, involved more than the emergence of a new notion of art. It also brought in its train the resuscitation of a wide range of art 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.
The background to this development is described in *Les Voix du silence*.43 The seeds of the aesthetic revolution in question, Malraux writes, 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’.44 For at least three centuries, Christianity had been gradually losing its hold on men’s minds, 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,

---

43 *Les Voix du silence* describes the cultural developments that lie behind much of what is said in *L’Intemporel*. Malraux does not repeat the explanation in the later work. This analysis will begin with the relevant elements from *Les Voix du silence*.

Chapter 6 - The Emergence and Transformation of 'Art'

religious feeling had changed many times. Science and Reason were not another metamorphosis of this feeling; they were its negation.45

‘What was disappearing from the Western world,’ Malraux argues, ‘was the absolute’;46 and the final disintegration, when it came, was swift and decisive. An Encyclopaedist, he writes, ‘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.’47 And despite the persistence of conventional forms of pious observance, ‘Eternity withdrew from the world,’ and ‘our civilization became as unresponsive to the voice of Christianity as to the stellar myths and Druid trees.’48

For a time, Malraux argues – echoing views which, as we have seen, he had developed as early as La Tentation de l’Occident49 – 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 ‘Coming Man’ with its powerful myths of science, progress, reason and democracy. Yet while some of these hopes still linger on, they have been gravely weakened. ‘The hope that Victor Hugo, Whitman, Renan and Berthelot placed in progress, science, enlightenment, 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.50

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.51 The claim is not, one should stress, that belief in God, or some other form

46 Ibid., 722.
47 Ibid., 707.
48 Ibid., 723.
49 See above, page 23.
50 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 784, 85.
51 See above, page 129.
of transcendence, has necessarily become an impossibility, 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.’ The unprecedented development, which is our present reality, is a culture as a whole that lacks any fundamental value, any absolute – unlike Ancient Egypt, unlike Greece, unlike Byzantium 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 absolute, gave man a sense of his place in ‘the scheme of things’, an assurance that there is something beyond the ephemeral realm of appearances – a sense of an underlying ‘explanation.’ We today, however, have only a series of unanswered questions. Having taken to heart Nietzsche’s pronouncement (issued somewhat late in the day on this account) 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’, modern Western culture is the first agnostic culture – the first civilisation 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’, the first in which men and women are born, strive, suffer, and die, without any sense of a fundamental reason for 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 –

52 As mentioned earlier, Malraux does not engage in philosophical arguments designed to prove the non-existence of God. (See above, page 23.) Similarly here, he is making an observation about the general nature of modern Western culture, not engaging in philosophical argumentation. (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.)
54 See above, page 27.
55 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 37. Malraux writes in his Antimémoires: ‘Here is the first civilization capable of conquering the world, but not of inventing its own temples or its own tombs.’ Malraux, Antimémoires, Œuvres Complètes (III), 7.
an absolute. This had clearly been the case in Byzantium where, as we saw, the very raison d'etre of the ‘episodes of the sacred’ depicted in mosaics and frescos was to evoke the mysterious presence of a transcendent God.\(^56\) 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 realisation.\(^57\) 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 appearances seemed to have been irretrievably lost?

For Malraux, the first visual artist to offer an unambiguous answer to this question was Manet, most obviously 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, which had lasted some five centuries, to a close. Gone was any attempt to conjure up an exalted fictional world – an ‘other 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* – see Fig. 18 and Fig. 19, next page). For Manet, as for many other artists who were soon to explore the new regions he opened up, such as Renoir,\(^58\) 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 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.\(^59\)

\(^{56}\) See above, page 134.

\(^{57}\) In passing, it is interesting to compare the lengths of time in question here. As Malraux writes, ‘How easy it is to imagine a history of art in which the Renaissance would be only an ephemeral humanist accident!’ Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art* (I), 389.

\(^{58}\) Malraux quotes Renoir as saying of *Olympia*: ‘With this work, a new era in painting began.’ Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Intemporel, Ecrits sur l’art* (II), 692.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 669,70. See also Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art* (I), 737.
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 claim 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.’ For Malraux, Denis’s comment is only a half-truth. It is correct in suggesting that art had ceased to be subordinate to religious or fictional aims and had become simply painting – an ‘assemblage’ of colours. But, Malraux asks, ‘To what end?’ Denis omits the purpose of this assemblage. It is not, as his formula might easily lead one to suspect, 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

60 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Intemporel, Écrits sur l’art (II), 787.
61 Ibid. Cf. also the comment in the Introduction to La Métamorphose des dieux where Malraux writes: ‘If it was just for the sake of “colours assembled in a certain order”, why would Cézanne sacrifice everything for it?’ Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Écrits sur l’art (II), 33. The same response to Denis – ‘to what end?’ – is asked as early as La Psychologie de l’art. See Malraux, La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire, 17.
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.’

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 Chapters Seven and Eight, 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 while the Renaissance had revived the works of Antiquity – ignored for a millennium by Byzantium – there has now been a ‘another Renaissance’ (to borrow his own phrase) much more extensive 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 urge to build an autonomous, rival 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 construction of a unified world that ‘stands for unity as against the chaos of mere, given reality’, to quote the formulation mentioned earlier. Left to its own devices in an agnostic culture, art post-Manet relies on its own powers and nothing more.

More will be said later about the implications of this account of the modern concept of art but a brief comment should be made here to correct two common misunderstandings. A number of critics have argued that Malraux’s argument amounts to an extreme ‘formalism’ that denies the value of representational art.

---


63 Malraux, La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire, 132.

64 See above, page 80.

65 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’, though official poetry continued wallowing for years in narratives and dramas.’ Malraux, La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire, 73.
Others contend that he is resorting to ‘subjectivism’ where nothing counts except, in one writer’s words, ‘glorifying the individual.’ We will briefly consider both claims.

A representative example of the first view is a recent comment on Malraux’s collected *Ecrits sur l’Art* in which 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.  

The comment is an interesting example of the tendency of some critics to ‘skim’ Malraux rather than read him. 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, indeed, invoked in connection with the idea of ‘formalism’) is deficient. Malraux’s claim is 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 end? The ‘end’ of art for Malraux remains, as always, the creation of ‘another world’, the important qualification in the case of modern art being that this end 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 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 any 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 subject matter might include images of recognisable objects. The

---

66 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 Malraux is said to disapprove 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 271.

67 As noted in the Introduction. See above, page 11.

68 See above, page 111.
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 Malraux is a ‘formalist’ in the sense suggested – a suggestion Guégan is not alone in making – is a misreading of his position.

No less questionable are claims that Malraux regards art post-Manet as pure ‘individualism’ or ‘subjectivism’. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, for example, 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.’

Part of this comment is based on quotations from Malraux – principally from the first volume of La Psychologie de l’art – but Merleau-Ponty places them in a context that distorts their meaning. First, it is worth noting 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 is original,’ his reference no doubt being to his claim, discussed earlier (and also contained in La Psychologie de l’art), that all art, as distinct from the pastiche,

---

69 See for example Righter, The Rhetorical Hero, 85,86. Interestingly, one critic suggests, to the contrary, that Malraux lacks enthusiasm for abstract art. See Marissel, La Pensée créatrice d’André Malraux, 174. There is, however, no more evidence for this than there is for Guégan’s view that he ‘[denies] the value of all representation.’

70 Merleau-Ponty, "Le Langage indirect et les voix du silence," 63,64. Italics in original. Another critic writes, for example: ‘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., The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting 19. (The significance of the quotation marks here 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), 271,72.

71 Malraux, La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire, 79.

72 See above, page 123.
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. Clearly, Merleau-Ponty’s argument that, in Malraux’s eyes, ‘the modern painter wants first of all to be original’ sits very uncomfortably beside 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 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.’ The basic thought here is the same as the one discussed above – 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,

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

---

73 Malraux, La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire, 83. Malraux’s emphasis.
74 See above, page 149.
75 Malraux, La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire, 83. Malraux is using the phrase ‘transfigured world’ to signify the world of the ‘irréel’ – as exemplified by Tintoretto’s paintings.
lends itself to conclusions that Malraux clearly does not intend. Essentially, as Malraux adds (in a comment that Merleau-Ponty also ignores), it is a question of styles,\textsuperscript{76} 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”\textsuperscript{77} – the key point here being that, in art post-Manet, individual styles are no longer in the service of anything beyond themselves. Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation is, in short, quite misleading. Deprived of context, Malraux’s statements, like those of any writer, can, of course, be interpreted in various different (and in this case, the gamut, as we see, runs from ‘formalism’ to ‘subjectivism’).

Given the obvious efforts he makes to provide contexts that will give his ideas as much precision as possible, such methods, however, do him little justice.

***

This summary of Malraux’s account of the emergence and subsequent transformation of ‘art’ has necessarily been quite brief, concentrating on major points and leaving out much valuable detail. Even an abbreviated explanation such as this, however, allows one to see how closely his theory of art is tied to history (of art, and in the more general sense), and how misleading it would be to marginalise the historical element and treat it as secondary and merely illustrative. Certainly, as explained earlier, the history of art, for Malraux, is not merely an account of artistic influences,\textsuperscript{78} and the summary account we have given shows how little 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 (since it ceased to be a question of the irréel\textsuperscript{79}) 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 that altered the very function of

\textsuperscript{76}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77}See above, page 80.
\textsuperscript{78}Cf. above, page 123.
something that had, by then, become known as art. The series of specific 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 example – are presented in an historical sequence. 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 not the manifestation of an underlying, unchanging ideal, such as beauty, or ‘form’, and nor is it tied to the progressive realisation of an historical Idea. Like an 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 sees both of 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 commonly overlooked. The critic, Geoffrey Harris, for example, provides a quite detailed summary of the developments we have described here – in some respects more detailed than the summary we have offered – but while he recognises that the sequence of events involves major changes after Giotto and Manet, he fails to highlight the underlying metaphysical framework within which Malraux sees these events. For Malraux, the transition from Byzantine forms to those of the Renaissance was not simply 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 one in which the absolute was 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’. It was, again, a movement from one kind of ‘rival world’ to another – from one whose absolute was brought

---

79 See above, page 128.
80 Harris, *André Malraux: A Reassessment*, 169-95. Similarly, Henri Godard, in his otherwise informative Introduction to the second volume of Malraux’s *Écrits sur l’art*, provides a quite detailed account of the developments in question but fails to link them clearly to the metaphysical framework in question. See Henri Godard, "Introduction " in *Malraux: Écrits sur l’art (II)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), esp. XXVII-LXII.
81 Harris, *André Malraux: A Reassessment*, 185.
Chapter 6 – The Emergence and Transformation of ‘Art’

into being by painting and sculpture themselves, to a world of art devoid of any absolute, in which painting and sculpture relied exclusively on their own power to create a rival world. Thus, despite the importance of history, which we have emphasised, Malraux’s argument does not reduce simply to a recounting of a series of historical developments. His argument is inseparable from history, for the reasons we have given; but art, for Malraux, always remains a form of human endeavour sui generis which is not susceptible of explanations at the historical level alone. Art is always the creation of a rival world – an ‘anti-destin’ in the sense described earlier – and any explanation that neglected this would have missed 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. 82

One might perhaps object in response to all this that Malraux seems to be using the term ‘art’ with more than one meaning. First, he uses the term with the meaning explained initially in Chapter Four 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. 83 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’ 84 Surely, one might argue, Malraux is guilty of inconsistency here, and a theory of art that employs the term with three apparently different meanings must be inherently confused.

82 See especially page 196. The crucial metaphysical component of Malraux’s account in question here 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). Benjamin’s claim that art originated in the 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.

83 See above, page 141.

84 See above, page 149.
The problem is much more apparent than real. As the above 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 here is that the description of the fundamental nature of art as outlined in Chapter Four is, as explained there, the description of a mere possibility – something that stands in 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 these 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. 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 since then 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

85 See above, page 149.
86 See above, page 128.
87 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 Seven and Eight.
disquiet among Malraux's critics since, even among those who are less than sympathetic (of whom there are many) this, at least, does not seem to have been a significant 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 emerged after Giotto' (to state Malraux's proposition very baldly and somewhat misleadingly) 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, and that while these activities may not always have been called art, this is a mere matter of terminology which should not distract us from the simple fact that throughout human history there has always been art and that it has always been a distinct human activity. In fact, arguments of this kind have been advanced quite frequently in recent times. In response to studies that approach art from an anthropological point of view, and which sometimes suggest that the Western notion of art is not universal, a number of writers in aesthetics – especially in Anglo-American aesthetics – have raised objections of just this kind, and while they have not been directed at Malraux specifically (probably because his theory of art, as mentioned earlier, has received very little attention from that quarter) they merit consideration here as possible criticisms of his argument.

Malraux's own position, one should say, 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', 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'. 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

---

90 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.
Chapter 6 – The Emergence and Transformation of ‘Art’

those of many other 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 the next two chapters.) His point is, rather, as we have seen, 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.

In a moment we will consider two counter arguments to Malraux’s position. Before doing so, however, it is worth noting briefly that he is by no means alone in his claim. 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.’ A scholarly study of the development of the ‘modern system of the arts’ in Western culture by Paul Kristeller argues 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. And of the Middle Ages Kristeller 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

91 Raymond Firth, "Art and Anthropology," in Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 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 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.

92 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), 11,13. Summarising the general argument advanced by Kristeller, a more recent commentator writes: ‘The forty years since the appearance of this essay in the Journal of the History of Ideas have produced no refutation of Kristeller’s thesis. Indeed, the essay has been frequently cited and anthologised.’ Martha Woodmansee, The Author, Art and the Market (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 2.
... 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. 93

And to give one further example from another source: the archaeologist, Gay Robins, comments that

... 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. 94

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 lend support to 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 to integrate into his thinking, but it is by no means a novelty in fields such as history, archaeology and anthropology.

What counter-arguments do we find in recent aesthetics? The first of the two we will examine essentially takes the form of the objection already mentioned, which suggests that one should not be distracted by questions of mere terminology. In a recent issue of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, the aesthetician Noël

93 Kristeller, "The modern system of the arts: a study in the history of aesthetics (I)," 16, 17. As part of his 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), 63. Interestingly, the non-universality of the concept 'art', and the explanatory problems this poses, seem now to have come to notice in the discipline of art history itself. Cf. the comment by one recent art historian: 'It is a fact that, even in Europe where the concept originated, the word 'art' was not used in the modern sense of something visual independently valued for its aesthetic qualities until at least the eighteenth century.' The writer also highlights the absence of the concept in non-European cultures, adding that this raises 'more profound issues than the particulars of our terminology'. Carolyn Dean, "The Trouble with (the Term) Art," *Art Journal* 65, no. 2 (2006): 25-33.

Carroll argues that the absence of a word equivalent in meaning to the word art in many cultures is not a very compelling consideration, since, though certain cultures do not have a word for ‘economics’ in their vocabulary, this does not encourage us to think that the pertinent societies lack economies.95

Clearly, however, this is to misconstrue the point at issue, which does not relate to what certain cultures lacked or had viewed from a twenty-first century perspective, but to how they understood what they had – that is, the ways in which they conceptualised the world and their activities within it. Once the issue is seen in this light, the superficial attraction of Carroll’s analogy quickly dissipates. The terms ‘economics’ and ‘economies’ refer to concepts derived from the modern Western discipline, initially called ‘political economy’, which had its origins in Europe in the early eighteenth century with the emergence of societies based on large-scale, mainly free enterprise, manufacturing activities. Used in a very loose sense, the word ‘economy’ is sometimes now applied to societies of a very different kind – such as small-scale, tribal communities – but the absence of a term equivalent to ‘economics’ in the language of such a community would, nonetheless, be a fact one could scarcely ignore if one were attempting to give an accurate account of the community concerned, suggesting as it plainly does that the system of ideas named by that term would be alien to its thought and experience.96

The issue does not of course depend solely on the presence or absence of a particular word such as ‘economics’ (or ‘art’).97 This is just one piece of evidence among others, such as the presence or absence of particular attitudes and patterns of

---

96 Cf. the following comment: ‘... the professionalization of economics has occurred only within the last one hundred years. Even if we take a broader view and consider economics as an intellectual discipline, it is still relatively young. Before 1500 no groups were concerned exclusively with understanding economies... A body of economic knowledge did begin to evolve ... from 1650 to 1750, when economics as a discipline emerged.’ Harry Landreth and David Colander, *History of Economic Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994). It is worth adding that one has only to replace ‘economics’ and ‘economies’ in Carroll’s statement with the word ‘science’ (or, even more starkly, ‘motor cars’ or ‘penicillin’) to see that the superficial attraction of his argument depends largely on the terms he has chosen for his analogy, especially ‘economies’ which can now be used in a very loose sense.
97 Carroll himself appears to recognize this. He advances a second argument claiming that the proposition in question is mistaken because it takes too narrow a view of the Western concept of art. The argument is too lengthy to examine here but its basic weakness is that it broadens the Western concept of art to such an extent that the point of the analysis effectively disappears. That is, it succeeds only to the extent that the very notion of a Western idea of art is effectively emptied of all meaning. See Carroll, "Art and Human Nature," 97,98.
behaviour that form part of an account of how a given culture views its activities and the world in which it lives. The attempt to play down the significance of such evidence – as Carroll does in the comment above and in the remainder of his article – must surely, in the end, call into question the very idea of a cultural anthropology, and effectively exclude the possibility that other cultures may have understood the significance of their activities in ways quite different from the ways we understand ours. Indeed a large part of the discipline of history itself, insofar as it seeks to identify different cultural outlooks in societies of the past, would seem to lose its point, since if Carroll’s view were accepted those differences could be safely ignored.98

A counter-argument of a slightly different kind is exemplified by an article by the aesthetician, Dennis Dutton.99 Like Carroll, Dutton seeks to minimise the importance of cultural differences, but he rests his argument principally on the claim that art has certain distinguishing characteristics that are present everywhere and at all times. In all human societies, large or small-scale, Dutton 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 characteristic features or practices and it is not possible to discuss all of them 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’.100

98 There is a substantial literature in the philosophy of social science devoted to the question of whether, and to what extent, different cultures can be said to live in different conceptual worlds. A seminal article, which set the scene for much subsequent debate, was: Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," American Philosophical Quarterly 1, no. 1 (1964). It is certainly not common ground in this debate, however, that such differences can simply be ignored. Issues such as this highlight the dangers for the discipline of aesthetics of limiting its purview to its traditional topics of philosophical interest and neglecting relevant areas of knowledge in other disciplines.

99 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).

100 Ibid., 233-38.
Despite a certain surface plausibility, the argument is seriously flawed. Each of the ‘features’ or ‘practices’ is 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 the desire to ‘represent or imitate real and imaginary experience of the world’ is equally problematical because it assumes 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.\(^\text{101}\)) 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 Boucher (Fig. 20, next page) or Cabanel, composers of ‘light’ or ‘pop’ music, or writers of ‘true romance’ and ‘airport’ novels, one might well question whether this accurately describes the intention of (for example) the carvers of many African or Oceanic ritual masks, of Goya in a work such as *Saturn devouring his children* (Fig. 21), of Grünewald in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, of Dostoyevsky in *The Possessed*, and of many other artists whose works seem designed to evoke feelings of a far more profound – and often more disturbing – kind than mere pleasure.

More importantly perhaps, Dutton’s list is in fact highly selective. On closer inspection, one finds that it is limited strictly to features or practices that modern Western thinking *already tends*, rightly or wrongly, to associate with art. Features or practices that one might quite reasonably associate with African masks or Egyptian sculpture (for example) in their original context include a number that are quite absent from Dutton’s list, including, importantly, the roles such objects played in religious ceremony and ritual. The evidence has, in other words, been filtered in advance. Moreover, to reverse the analysis, one can readily think of features and

\(^{101}\) See above page 111. In the light of the discussion in Chapter Four, the notion of ‘experience of the world’ could also be questioned. 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): 367-77.
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.\textsuperscript{102} 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 originated.\textsuperscript{103} In short, Dutton's argument falls well short of a convincing case that he has, as he claims, 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

\textsuperscript{102} There were of course the private collections of the nobility before this, but even these do not pre-date the Renaissance.

\textsuperscript{103} 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, \textit{Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology} (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1979), 38. Lack of interest in preserving such artefacts was by no means uncommon in tribal cultures.
conjunction with the kinds of historical and anthropological evidence mentioned earlier which tends to accord with his view.  

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, for several centuries, associated with the term ‘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 we have defined those ideas) is, in Malraux’s eyes, a form of human endeavour that stretches back to prehistoric times and is common to all cultures. But this ambition has not always manifested itself in the creation of ‘art’ in the senses in which that idea emerged in the West (specifically, in the senses discussed in 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, what’s the good of your sculpture then?’ It was sculpture in the service of the soul.

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 term 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 Ramses I 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

---

104 See above, page 158 et seq.
105 Principally in Chapter Four.
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.’\(^{107}\)

---

As indicated earlier, 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 of this study and it is perhaps timely at this point to give some consideration to the allegations mentioned in the Introduction\(^{108}\) that Malraux’s treatment of art historical material is often faulty and unreliable. In one sense, this issue might perhaps be seen as peripheral because Malraux is not, for the reasons we have given, 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 aestheticians of the ‘analytic’ school, for example, who are often content to discuss art simply as an abstract concept, with little or no reference to specific works, 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, 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 the issue, it clearly merits some consideration.

The accusation that Malraux is unreliable, and little more than an amateur dabbler in the history of art, surfaced quite early in the piece and it was not long before many commentators, whether art historians or not, were treating it as more or

---

\(^{107}\) Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 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.

\(^{108}\) See page 8.
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 we have already noted, wrote in 1954 of 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.' In like vein, though with hostility less disguised, the French art historian, George 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. In the United States, the art historian Thomas Munro, reviewing the 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.') 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.' And in 1977, the French writer 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*.' While comments of this kind seem

---

109 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 Gombrich's 'recent devastations' of Malraux. Righter, *The Rhetorical Hero*, 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 Chapter One, note 19.


111 Munro, "The Voices of Silence," 481,83.

112 Boak, *André Malraux*, 180, 85. Boak's views seem to have been substantially influenced by Gombrich and Duthuit. See, for example, Boak, *André Malraux*, 178,89, 90, 95.

to have become less frequent in more recent times,\textsuperscript{114} 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.\textsuperscript{115} Nowhere in the critical literature has there been any serious attempt to re-examine or challenge this verdict, leaving Malraux as much \textit{persona non grata} in university courses in art history as he usually is in courses in aesthetics.

There is no space here to provide a comprehensive examination of Malraux’s alleged errors, 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 of historical errors at all, confining himself principally to disagreements with Malraux’s \textit{theoretical arguments} (where, as we have already suggested and shall argue again, his interpretation is seriously awry\textsuperscript{116}) and to a defence of the role of the art historian (where again, as we shall argue shortly, he misconstrues Malraux’s position). Thomas Munro is a little more forthcoming. 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 \textit{Odyssey} paintings in the Vatican (see Fig. 24, page 169) 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’.\textsuperscript{117} Fortunately, Munro provides relevant page references, so there is no difficulty in locating the passage in which this alleged inaccuracy is to be found. Malraux writes there, in a comment that needs to be quoted at some length:

\begin{quote}
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’
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{114} Although two comments by recent French reviewers of Malraux’s collected \textit{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.’ Guegan, “La pensée sur l’art d’André Malraux: est-elle toujours utile?,” 89. Another comments: ‘Art historians in France, apart from André Chastel, have not given Malraux a good reception.’ Albera, “Que faire des ‘Ecrits sur l’art’ de Malraux?,” 51.

\textsuperscript{115} As one commentator aptly phrases it, comments such as Gombrich’s ‘were quickly elevated to the level of orthodoxy’. Thornberry, ed., \textit{A Confrontation of Metamorphoses: Essays on Malraux and the Creative Process} 12.

\textsuperscript{116} See above page 135, and below Chapter Nine, note 29.

\textsuperscript{117} Munro, "The Voices of Silence," 483.
Chapter 6 – The Emergence and Transformation of ‘Art’

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 – into 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.\(^\text{118}\)

One quickly sees that Munro’s comment is unjust, and that Malraux’s account of Leonardo’s innovation is much more substantial than he implies. 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 the 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. 22 and Fig. 23) – images of which Munro makes no mention.\(^\text{119}\) In short, Malraux has much more to say – both verbally and visually – than Munro indicates. Either Munro has not read the passage in question carefully enough, or he considers his brief reference to ‘blurring outlines’ a sufficient account of what Malraux says. For a critic whose theme is accuracy, neither alternative seems satisfactory.


\(^{119}\) Cf. Jean-Yves Tadié’s comment in his Introduction to Volume I of the recent 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)*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris Gallimard, 2004), LII.
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 a given case, that the matter is beyond reasonable doubt). If one makes a mistake about such a matter, one might reasonably 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 unfair, and whether his view of Leonardo’s innovation, or Malraux’s, is to be preferred, it is surely arguable that the point at issue here is essentially one of interpretation or opinion rather than one of fact. Issues such as the precise nature of Leonardo’s innovations can certainly give rise to disagreements, and the arguments advanced in favour of this or that point of view may be more or less persuasive; but to speak of ‘inaccuracies’ and ‘errors’ (and to make assertions such as 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 that the issue at stake here belongs in that category. 120

This is not an isolated case. There are similar shortcomings in Georges Duthuit’s attack on Les Voix du silence and La Psychologie de l’art, which he mockingly entitles 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. 121 A good, representative example, however, is his commentary on Malraux’s account of Gandharan Buddhist art, which is the second section of Les Voix du silence (and the second volume of La Psychologie de l’art) entitled ‘The Metamorphoses of Apollo.’

According to Duthuit, Malraux is seeking to show that the art of Gandhara emerged essentially 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, writes Duthuit, ‘is presented [by Malraux] as if it were a confrontation between black and white,’ and as a

120 Munro’s other examples are open to the same kinds of criticisms made here. That is, by abbreviating Malraux’s remarks, and taking them out of their context, he distorts them. In addition, they are all matters of interpretation and debate, not self-evidently matters of historical fact. See Munro, “The Voices of Silence,” 483,84.

121 The third volume, however, is largely taken up with reproductions. Duthuit, one should add, also attacks the theoretical aspects of Malraux’s works but there is no space to examine that aspect of his criticism here. For the most part, he tends to proceed 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): 281,82. Duthuit, one should perhaps add, is not alone in resorting to sarcasm where Malraux is concerned. Gombrich refers to Malraux as ‘the Pythia’ and his comments as ‘the dark words of the oracle’. Gombrich, “Malraux on Art and Myth,” 218.
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 (leading one subsequent writer, apparently influenced by Duthuit, to write that Malraux makes ‘all oriental art dependent on Western.’) 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.

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 of the Hellenistic influence has been exposed, and his explanation of the emergence of Gandharan Buddhist art stands revealed as fallacious.

There are a number of flaws in this criticism. First, it involves oversimplifications. Malraux’s characterisation of Greek culture is more complex than the term ‘humanist’ suggests (for example, he insists on the importance of the Greek religious sense) and it is quite clear that he does not view Greek art simply

---

122 Boak, André Malraux, 195.
123 Duthuit, Le Musée inimaginable, 93. Duthuit’s footnote refers to: W. Cohn, Indische Plastik, Berlin, 1922.
124 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 interpretations – that is, a debate conducted in terms of conflicting art historical interpretations.
125 Cf. for example, above, page 130.
in terms of ‘realism’—a term which, in any case, Malraux uses very sparingly and always with reservations. In addition, while he sees important differences between Greek civilisation and the civilisations of India and China, Malraux nowhere reduces this to a simple dichotomy between humanism and anti-humanism or a contrast between ‘night and day’. (And where art specifically is concerned, Malraux leaves us in no doubt about his admiration for many 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 is a serious 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, 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.

Duthuit, in short, is fencing with shadows. Apparently oblivious to Malraux’s lengthy analysis of the creative process in the works 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

---

126 See, for example, Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 85-96. Cf. also the general statement in Les Voix du silence: ‘There is no realistic style as such; only realistic orientations of existing styles.’ Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 519.

127 In this same section, Malraux speaks, for example, of the ‘humanism’ of Chinese civilization. Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 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. Malraux, La Psychologie de l’art: La Création Artistique, 38.

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—in an argument in *Les Voix du silence* that Duthuit appears to have missed—begins precisely where ‘influences’ cease, 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’ misses the mark entirely 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 which he was not alone); 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 were a conflict of 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 perhaps 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.

---

129 See above, page 123. 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.

130 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.

131 See, for example, Mario Bussagli’s comments in the next paragraph.
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.  

This is not the place to enter into the details of the 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 commentators 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 his accusations of ‘negligence, ignorance and fraud.’

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.

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 unmistakable. On the other

---


133 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.

134 Davezac, "Malraux's Ideas on Art and Method in Criticism," 179,80.
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’\(^{135}\)) 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 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, quite apart from this, the work is studded with references to Italian artists for whom Malraux obviously has a high regard – such as Giotto, whose crucifixion he describes there as one of man’s ‘noblest creations’,\(^{136}\) Michelangelo, whose *Last Judgement* he discusses at length and with obvious admiration,\(^{137}\) 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 relevant:

> 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...\(^{138}\)

If this is the school of artists Davezac is referring to – and it is not clear which other group he could have in mind\(^{139}\) – it is puzzling, to say the least, how he could reach

---


\(^{136}\) Ibid., 463.

\(^{137}\) Ibid., 547.

\(^{138}\) Ibid., 715. Cf. also: ‘All the little Dutch painters look anecdotal beside Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring.*’ Malraux, *La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 146.

\(^{139}\) 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 Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 715-17. It is quite clear that he does not regard any of them as artists of the first rank.
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 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 similar to the samples we have discussed here: they are either misreadings or misrepresentations of what he has written, and rarely, if ever, matters of fact as distinct from questions of opinion and interpretation. 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 be forgiven for thinking that, in the case of some of Malraux’s critics in 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 that has been largely shrugged off.

---

140 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.' Such apologias (somewhat questionable in any case, since why, after all, should a writer or poet not be accurate about historical details — or a historian not write well?) seem to take it for granted that art historians' criticisms of Malraux have been well founded — a conclusion certainly at variance with the samples examined here. As indicated earlier, Malraux's alleged unreliability in historical matters has become part of the folklore surrounding his works. A critical examination of this folklore seems long overdue. See Tadié, "Introduction," X.

141 See above, page 166.
It seems possible that some of the hostility towards Malraux among art historians rests on a misunderstanding about his attitude towards the discipline of art history, a misunderstanding perhaps fostered by the essays by E.H. Gombrich mentioned earlier. Gombrich 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 what Gombrich calls ‘the historian or the scholar’, thus evincing a kind of systematic indifference, if not antipathy, towards historical research. In support of this view, Gombrich quotes, in abbreviated form, a passage in *Les Voix du silence* in which Malraux writes that

> 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...\(^{142}\)

This comment, in Gombrich’s view, indicates 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, which has been quoted here – because that is Gombrich’s source – is a little misleading 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.\(^{143}\))

Malraux, Gombrich goes on, 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.’\(^{144}\)

---


\(^{143}\) 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 above, page 19.) Presumably, Gombrich did not check the translation against the original French (which is at: Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 874,75.) This, one should add, is not the only occasion when Gombrich’s reliance on the wording of Gilbert’s translation leads him astray. In this same review of *Les Voix du silence*, he upbraids Malraux for writing ‘Antigone’s immortal cry’ (‘I was not born to share in hatred but to share in love’). [‘This] is not a cry’, Gombrich comments loftily, ‘but a reasoned statement in a momentous argument’. In fact, Malraux’s original French makes no reference to a cry, his phrase being ‘l’immortelle évidence d’Antigone’. Gombrich, “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” 83. Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I)*, 893.

\(^{144}\) Gombrich, “André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism,” 78,79.
This claim – which Gombrich repeats in a later article on Malraux – rests on a misunderstanding. The passage in question occurs in the final section of *Les Voix du silence* where Malraux is revisiting some of the central themes of his work and, in 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 down man’s measure’ – a world that man can recognise as his own. This being so, Malraux is arguing, 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 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 deletes 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.

The point of this is not to denigrate historical scholarship or suggest that one should *prefer* the ‘myth’ to the historian’s account. Malraux 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, he is suggesting, the past we encounter through art tends to move us more profoundly, and to etch itself on our memories more deeply, than any recitation of historical fact, however comprehensively or skilfully done. If Malraux had gone on to say: ‘This being so, one can safely ignore the work of historians, including art historians,’ he

---

146 See above, esp. pages 77 to 88.
would have certainly been guilty of the charge Gombrich lays at his door. There is, however, no such proposition, express or implied, in *Les Voix du silence* or anywhere 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 a sense that statement is quite true because Malraux is expounding a theory of art in which art figures as much more than a series of historical facts.¹⁴⁸ To suggest, however, that he is essentially interested only in ‘rhapsodies about art’ and happy to play fast and loose with history in the interests of these ‘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 theoreticians, should be the one accused of a lack of interest in history. Levelled against an aesthetician in the contemporary ‘analytic’ tradition, for example, the charge might be understandable, given the staunchly ahistorical approach adopted by many writers of this persuasion and the scarcity of their references to historical developments earlier than the twentieth century.¹⁴⁹ 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 to ‘pass each other like ships in the night.’¹⁵⁰ Yet, one has only to skim the pages of *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 very important role. Moreover, in view of Gombrich’s remark that Malraux seems not to have ‘done a day’s consecutive reading in a library’,¹⁵¹ it is perhaps worthwhile suspending the non-biographical focus of the present study long enough to add that there is ample evidence to the contrary. The overwhelming view

¹⁴⁸ 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.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. above, Chapter 5, note 70.


¹⁵¹ See above, page 166.
of those who have written about Malraux’s life is that he was very widely read indeed, and there is good evidence (if his works on art alone were not enough) that the history of art was high on his lists of interests\textsuperscript{152} – 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 and from reproductions. A tireless traveller throughout his life, he saw \emph{first-hand} large numbers of the works to which he refers, his itinerary including such distant and varied locations as Elephanta in India, Borobudur in Indonesia, the Lung-Men caves in China, Palenque in Mexico and many more. None of this, of course, is intended to suggest 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 not only 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 judgement 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 of his thinking could, as we have suggested, be much more significant than they might be in other theories of art. 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.

The present chapter has again sought to draw attention to the unified and systematic nature of Malraux’s thinking about art. In the previous chapter, we saw

\textsuperscript{152} 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 housed in 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 \textit{Écrits sur l’Art}, ed. Henri Godard (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 1268–78. 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 \textquotedblright, XXIV.
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, Malraux argues, 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.\footnote{See above, page 149.} 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 (if not re-used as building materials) 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 each of his principal ideas one by one. To proceed further, however, we will need to turn our attention to this issue. In doing so, we will encounter one of the most revolutionary, and also one of the 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 will be the central concern of the next chapter.
Chapter Seven

Art and Time

"La métamorphose est ... la vie même de l'œuvre d'art dans le temps, l'un de ses caractères spécifiques." 1
Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: L'Intemporel.*

Surprisingly enough, very little has been written in recent times about the 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. The recent *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* and *Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics,* 2 for example, contain no entry or index reference for the topic, and one needs to search very diligently to find more than a handful of books or articles in aesthetics over recent decades that concern themselves with the question of time, even obliquely. Before examining Malraux’s position, it may therefore be appropriate to offer some preliminary remarks about the general nature of the issue at stake.

The focus of interest in this context 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 Tour3 and the sense of an ‘eternal moment’ evoked by some Dutch still-lifes.4) The issue at stake here, however, is much broader. The question here is: what is Malraux’s understanding of the relationship between time and art *in general?* What is his explanation of the temporal nature of art?

---
1 ‘Metamorphosis is ... the very life of the work of art in time, one of its specific characteristics.’
4 Malraux, "Articles de 'Verve': De la représentation en Occident et en Extrême Orient," 935.
This, it should be stressed, is not the familiar and somewhat clichéd question of whether a true work of art should pass a ‘test of time’. In one of the few recent discussions of time in relation to art, the aestheteician Anthony Savile argues, in a book entitled *The Test of Time*, that ‘as long as the arts have attracted interpretation and criticism it has been common, though not universal, practice to appeal to the judgement 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 asks if this practice is justifiable – that is, if it is reasonable to expect a work of art worthy of the name to pass ‘time’s test’ – and returns a cautiously worded, affirmative response. It is legitimate, he claims, 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).

Whatever one may think of this claim (a matter about which we shall have more to say†), it rests on a presupposition that Savile appears to overlook. If one thinks it reasonable to expect a work of art to pass a ‘test of time’, one must presumably think that there is something in the nature of art – something not possessed by other objects and endeavours of which one does not have that expectation – that enables it to endure in this way. Setting aside for the moment the question of what, precisely, ‘endure’ might mean in this context, and how precisely art might ‘endure’ (both crucial questions as we shall see later), the very fact that Savile can pose the question as he 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 such a test. Underlying Savile’s inquiry, in other words, is a puzzle of a more fundamental kind: What gives art its apparent ability to ‘hold our attention’ or ‘survive’ for ‘a sufficient period’? What is the nature of this special capacity? And in what way, precisely, does art ‘survive’? These are the questions that concern Malraux in his reflections on the temporal nature of art and the ones to be examined in the present chapter.

---


7 See below, page 200.
Despite the lack of attention paid to the topic in modern aesthetics, it is possible to identify two principal ways in which the temporal nature of art has traditionally been understood in art theory and criticism. On the one hand there is the familiar idea, which has strong roots in the Renaissance and which has played a prominent part in Western thought ever since, that art – or at least great art – is ‘timeless’, ‘eternal’ or ‘immortal’. In his speech on the function of art in 1974 mentioned earlier, Malraux evoked this idea by quoting some lines from Théophile Gautier:

All things pass. Sturdy art
Alone is eternal;
The sculpted bust
Outlives the State.\(^8\)

According to this view (which, as we shall see, Malraux rejects), the work of art is essentially immune from the vicissitudes of time. Other aspects of life, such as political credos, social customs, beliefs about the nature of the physical world or the gods, eventually succumb to change and sink into oblivion – into the ‘chamel house of dead values’ to borrow Malraux’s phrase.\(^9\) Art, however, has a power of resistance. It rises above the merely transitory and inhabits a realm in which it enjoys a timeless or ‘eternal’ existence, so that Hamlet, or Michelangelo’s David – to choose two familiar examples\(^10\) – can still seem vital and alive to us today when so much else that men and women thought important or admirable in Elizabethan

---

\(^8\) 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)

\(^9\) Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 890.

\(^10\) Most of the discussion in the present chapter applies to art in general. That is, Malraux’s account of the temporal nature of art is intended to apply to music and literature as well as visual art.
England, or sixteenth century Florence, has (unless one is a specialist historian) slipped into the realm of forgotten things.\(^\text{11}\)

By contrast, there is the influential stream of thought originating with figures such as Hegel and Taine, and interpreted in various ways since by Marxist and post-Marxist theoreticians, that treats art, like all other aspects of human activity, as part of man’s \textit{historical} experience.\(^\text{12}\) Seen in this light, art is not insulated from time. It participates in the world of change, either as a reflection of it, or as an agent of change itself, or as both. Understood in this way, both \textit{Hamlet} and Michelangelo’s \textit{David} are closely linked to a particular moment in historical 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 \textit{removed} from history would, on this account, be to misrepresent them and deny their true nature.

The weakness of the notion of timelessness quickly becomes apparent if one takes the full extent of the history of art into account. There are, of course, certain works such as the plays of Shakespeare or the works of Michelangelo that have been admired more or less continuously since their creation despite the major changes in knowledge and belief that have taken place since then. But to anticipate an issue to be examined later, the category ‘art’ today covers a much broader field, and a much longer history, 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

\(^{11}\)‘Eternal’, ‘immortal’ or ‘timeless’ in this context do not of course mean ‘indestructible’. This obvious point scarcely seems to warrant comment. However, in his recent book \textit{What Good are the Arts?}, John Carey writes: ‘No art is immortal and no sensible person could believe it was. Neither the human race, not 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 eyelink...’ This remark misses the point comprehensively. The issue is not the \textit{physical} endurance of works of art but the \textit{kind} of time they inhabit— their temporal nature. If physical immortality were the issue, one would not of course need to wait for cataclysms such as the extinction of the human race to resolve the matter. How many great works of art of the past, one wonders, have been destroyed by wars, earthquakes, various iconoclasts, re-use as building material, or simple neglect? Indeed, the fragility and delicacy of many works no doubt made them \textit{more} vulnerable to the effects of time than other more sturdy objects. See: John Carey, \textit{What Good are the Arts?} (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2005), 148.

\(^{12}\)Hegel argues that there are three ‘forms’ of art (Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic) that emerge in the historical unfolding of the Idea. Hegel, \textit{Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics}, 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, \textit{Philosophie de l'Art}, vol. 1 (Paris: Hachette, 1948), 7. (Elsewhere, for example in his \textit{Lectures on Art}, Taine adds race as a factor, giving his familiar formulation: race, milieu, moment.)
masks from Africa, Pre-Columbian figurines, and statues from Egyptian tombs. How well does the idea of ‘timelessness’ apply 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 tend to forget – the West encountered these cultures well before that, and for centuries regarded their artefacts as merely the botched products of unskilled workmanship, or as heathen idols or fetishes. Moreover, even in their original cultural settings, as the previous chapter has indicated, 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 frequently 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 heathen idol or ‘fetish’, 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 seem, indeed, to have played a very powerful role, not only in terms of whether or not the artefacts in question 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, as we shall see, always need to go as far afield as Africa, Pre-Columbian Mexico, or Ancient Egypt to find them.

The Achilles’ heel of the historical approach is perhaps more familiar. Stating the matter summarily, the more strongly one insists on the importance of connections between a work 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, and not they, should be able to transcend that context and evoke the admiration of subsequent ages, perhaps centuries, or even millennia, afterwards. *Richard III* and the countless politico-religious tracts circulating in

---

13 These claims are discussed in more detail in the next chapter. See below page 218 et seq.
14 See, for example, page 230 et seq.
15 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 which we today would probably regard as
Elizabethan England were both, one might say, 'products' of the same historical context, 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.

These are only summary descriptions of the two approaches in question and there has been no attempt to examine the subtle variations proposed from time to time. Even this brief analysis, however, suggests that we quickly reach an impasse. The idea that art is timeless appears as hard to defend as the claim that it belongs essentially within historical time, leaving us, it seems, with no satisfactory way of explaining the relationship between art and time. We appear to require a different account of the relationship that will, among other things, make sense of the kinds of transformations and discontinuities noted above where, for example, the artefact originally functioned as a sacred object, then passed through a lengthy period in which it was regarded with indifference, and then subsequently became a '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. The next step will be to examine his position, showing how it accounts for such 'metamorphoses', to employ his own term, and explaining why his thinking in this context follows as a natural consequence of the fundamental ideas about the nature of art we have already explored.

***


16 The persistence of the two fundamental ideas, and their irreconcilability, continues, however, to pose problems. 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.
As a preliminary, it is useful to reflect 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 a sense of ‘all this’—including man and all his activities—as mere appearance, as grounded in nothing, and thus as easy prey to the depredations of time. It is an emotion, Malraux writes, that is ‘inseparable from the passing of time; a simultaneous awareness of the strange, the contingent, and the ephemeral.’\(^{17}\) Man inhabits a universe in which his presence seems a matter of indifference and where all his endeavours, no matter how ambitious, are implacably swept away into the oblivion of time.

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.\(^{18}\) 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 unimportant they might appear, partake of the revolution’s enduring ‘historical significance.’\(^{19}\)

---

17 Malraux, "Discours prononcé à la Fondation Maeght," 885.
18 See above, page 130.
19 In *La Métamorphose des dieux*, Malraux illustrates the idea at stake here 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...’ Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II)*, 19,20.
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 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 unknown and unknowable. Thus, while art ‘stands for unity as against the chaos of mere, given reality’, as Malraux writes, 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 appearances – they are, by their very nature, never fixed – never final, never part of an ‘eternal’. They are worlds born to metamorphosis. 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.’ 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 rather abstract explanation can be made more accessible by comparing Malraux’s position with the familiar claim 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. Is this all Malraux is saying when he says that metamorphosis ‘is the very life of the work of art’? 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 perhaps regard it with varying degrees of importance (including none at all). But by itself 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 variety of different interpretations to which the work lends itself are those

20 See above, page 80.
21 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Intemporel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 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. below, note 22.
with which it was originally endowed – the specific, *fixed* range of meanings that the artist, consciously or unconsciously, gave it at its moment of 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 very nature* – and not simply as a result of external circumstance – is not fixed. While always ‘standing for unity as against the chaos of mere, given reality’, it is a domain of significance that 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.’

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 then 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 the mere historical object it is capable of ‘living 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 characteristics immediately cease to be

---

problems because they are precisely the characteristics 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 chapel 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. 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 held. Thus the works of Ancient Egypt, Byzantium, and Giotto ceased to be sacred images created for tomb, basilica or chapel, and became, after periods of obscurity, ‘works of art’ in the sense that phrase has for us today. This does not of course explain why those particular changes took place when they did. (That issue will be considered below.) It does, however, explain the general 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 own power of metamorphosis. Thus, the destiny of any great work, Malraux argues, is inseparable from a dialogue – though at times a dialogue 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

---

23 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: Schoken Books, 1968), 106-08.

24 More specifically, in the sense discussed above at page 149. This matter is discussed in more detail in the next chapter. See especially page 230 et seq.

25 See page 193 to 195, and Chapter Eight.
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.26

This is the kind of statement that critics such as Bourdieu and Righter, who accuse Malraux of needless rhetoric, might perhaps choose to support that claim. Yet it is clear from what has now been said that Malraux has chosen his words with great 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.27 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 later28), 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, but because it is capable of resurrection, and thus of conquering time, even though speaking a language different from that which it had originally spoken.29

Art, in other words, (and this applies to literature and music as much as to visual art30) lives not as an eternal presence – through what it renders impervious to time and transmits across the centuries intact – but through a process in which time and change play an inescapable part, sometimes by plunging a work, or a whole style, into centuries of obscurity. But while metamorphosis implies vulnerability to

---

27 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, 4 vols., vol. 1 (London: Everyman, 1963), 12-19.
28 See below page 227.
29 Malraux use of a capital letter for ‘Time’ in the statement quoted is also not simply a rhetorical device. He is seeking to evoke the idea of destructive transience rather than mere chronology.
30 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 above, page 15.) One such aspect is the relationship between art and time in question here. Malraux’s explanation of this relationship is not, however, limited to visual art. It applies to art in general.
change, it also holds out the promise of rebirth. Unlike social customs or patterns of belief, works of art (whether termed art or not) do not slide irrevocably into the oblivion of the past. The moment and the form of their resurrections are always unpredictable because the future into which the work is launched is unknown, but the work nonetheless remains a participant in ‘an invincible dialogue.’ While not eternal, it represents a victory over time through a capacity to live again.

The challenge this explanation poses to much traditional thinking can be illustrated by the light it casts on the Renaissance. According to a familiar account, the new, ‘naturalistic’ forms of Renaissance art were largely inspired by the discovery of the long-buried works of Antiquity during excavations in Roman ruins. But what does ‘discovery’ really mean here? Malraux asks. The traditional account is framed in terms of what, in the statement quoted above, he terms a ‘monologue’, that is, the notion that certain works – in this case Graeco-Roman sculpture – possess such a high degree of artistic excellence that they exert an ‘authoritative’ influence on their beholders, the result in this instance being the progressive adoption of a new ‘naturalism’ or ‘realism’ in place of what came to be seen as old-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. But in any case, Malraux argues, the decisive factor was not discovery in the physical sense. The works of Greece and Rome had spoken of a profane world which Byzantium (like Romanesque Europe) had resolutely rejected in favour of the supramundane world of an eternal, loving God embodied, as we have seen, in images such as those at Torcello and Ravenna. The works of Greece and Rome became important again, Malraux contends, once they became part of a dialogue – that is,

32 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, Écrits sur l’art (I), 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), 42,1.
once the process of metamorphosis to which they, like all art, were subject, and the emerging forms of the Renaissance, which were progressively revealing a new, exalted, 'fictional' world, rendered them intelligible, although now speaking a language quite different from that which they had originally spoken. (For, while becoming central to the Renaissance's new 'repertoire of exalted acts', 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'.) Thus, here, as elsewhere, Malraux argues, the notion of a monologue – a one-way influence – misleads us. The discovery that counted 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 brought to full flower by artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael. Thus 'what the Renaissance gave Europe,' Malraux writes, 'was not only a new art of the living but a new art of the dead' (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'. Or more arresting still: 'In art, the Renaissance produced Antiquity as much as Antiquity produced the Renaissance."

The most dramatic example of such a metamorphosis, Malraux contends, 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 is not simply the physical discovery of the objects in question, many of which, like African carvings, Pre-Columbian figurines, 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

---

33 See above, page 140. 'Who made the Antique statues reappear?' Malraux asks, 'The excavators or the Renaissance masters who opened their eyes?' Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l'art (I), 263.
34 See above, page 138.
35 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: L'Intemporel, Ecrits sur l'art (II), 490.
36 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l'art (II), 24.
37 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l'art (I), 261.
38 Ibid., 484.
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 the modern world of art, and which, as we have seen, Malraux does not hesitate to call ‘another Renaissance’ (although, of course, a Renaissance of much larger proportions) merits a more extended discussion 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 that underlies Malraux’s thinking. There is no question of ‘timelessness’ since so many of the objects, far from being immune from the vicissitudes of time, were ignored or despised for centuries or millennia; and their resuscitation has seen a radical transformation in the function they served (since, for us, they are not objects of veneration or 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 very different from that which they originally possessed.

Linking these ideas to those in the previous chapter, one 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’. 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 explained, ‘often [obliging] me to follow [the history of art] step by step.’ (It is incidentally also why, Malraux argues, we have a strong 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

39 See above, page 149.
41 See above, page 128.
of time’, especially if expertly done, is a perplexing anomaly. Yet while inseparable from history, art, for Malraux, as the explanation in the present chapter has shown, is not fully accounted for by history. Or as he writes, ‘the great work of art belongs to history, but it does not belong to history alone.’ A work like Titian’s *Nymph and Shepherd*, he continues

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.

Our relationship with Titian is not the same as that with Rouault and Picasso (or, going 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 and is 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 the next chapter. The important point for the present is that while, for Malraux, 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, mother-goddess, though all made from the same stone, became separated along the way…’

***

42 Malraux provides a valuable analysis of this malaise using the Van Meegeren forgeries of Vermeer as his prime example. See Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art* (I), 592-604.
43 Or geography, he adds, where, as in the case of, say, Oceanic art, we know little or nothing of the history involved. Ibid., 596.
45 Ibid. The description of art as ‘the presence in life of what should belong to death’ recurs elsewhere in Malraux. See, for example, Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art* (II), 33.
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 some of Malraux’s critics have drawn attention to its importance. The critical responses have, however, left much to be desired. In his book, André Malraux: A Reassessment, Geoffrey Harris argues, for instance, that ‘Malraux himself never sought to disguise the ultimate fallibility of the concept of metamorphosis’. The precise significance of the term ‘fallibility’ in the context is a little unclear, but Harris goes on to comment that Malraux is conscious of the ‘ultimate paradox’ of the ‘only civilization to have inherited the world’ also being ‘the one which has invented nuclear weapons and which has therefore become “the highest-risk civilization ever”’. The implication thus seems to be that the concept of metamorphosis is ‘fallible’ because Malraux sees it as ultimately powerless to protect modern man from the disasters he might bring upon himself. If this is the suggestion, it is quite beside the point. Malraux was certainly conscious of the paradox of modern Western civilization being at one and the same time the most powerful in human history and also devoid of any fundamental value – a paradox he once expressed by asking ‘What is the good of going to the moon if it’s just to commit suicide?’ This, however, raises questions going well beyond the concept of metamorphosis, which Malraux proposes as an explanation of the temporal nature of art not as, in some way, a guarantee of humanity’s security. One might, of course, wish to find fault with the concept, but it would certainly be a mistake to do so on the grounds Harris seems to be suggesting.

Misunderstandings of a different kind emerge in Maurice Blanchot’s essay ‘The Museum, Art and Time’ mentioned earlier. Arguing that Malraux represents the artist as ‘sole master of the eternal’, Blanchot claims that for Malraux,

[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 that, 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.49

47 Harris, André Malraux: A Reassessment, 189.
Like much of Blanchot’s essay, the comment is somewhat opaque. He appears to be suggesting, however, 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 link between these concepts, one has to say, is by no means self-evident, and there is, in any case, no suggestion anywhere in Malraux that ‘art bestows a meaning on history’.50 For present purposes, however, the key point is that, despite suggesting 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 resists ‘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 ideas of metamorphosis and eternity (or timelessness) where art is concerned.51 Indeed, it is precisely here that the striking originality – and explanatory value – of his thesis lies. Unfortunately, Blanchot’s account tends to obscure the point rather than elucidate it.52

50 Unless perhaps Blanchot is alluding to Malraux’s claim, discussed earlier, (see page 178) 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 meaning that ‘art bestows a meaning on history’ because one risks suggesting that Malraux is somehow advancing a theory of history, which is certainly not the case. This issue is discussed further in Chapter Nine. 51 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), 278. On occasion, Malraux uses the word 'immortality' as a synonym for eternity. Thus he writes: 'Let us stop confusing metamorphosis with immortality.' Malraux, L'Homme précaire et la littérature 19.

52 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 (Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l'art (I), 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
Loose interpretations of Malraux’s concept of metamorphosis have occasionally led critics to suggest that he simply borrowed the idea from the art historian Henri Focillon who also uses the term from time to time. 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, he writes, 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.’ These propositions clearly bear little resemblance to Malraux’s arguments (who never suggests, for example, that forms are ‘an order of existence’) but the differences become even starker when Focillon begins to speak specifically of 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 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.’ 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 notion of the temporal nature of art involves an attempt to escape the strict boundaries of historical time (sometimes going as far as suggesting, somewhat 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, Malraux’s Anti-Aesthetics, 98. Somewhat enigmatic though this comment is, it hardly seems consistent with Malraux’s argument that art ‘does not belong to history alone’. 53 See for example: Righter, The Rhetorical Hero, 23-25. Boak, André Malraux, 193. 54 Henri Focillon, The Life of Forms in Art, trans. Elizabeth Ladenson (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 41,44. 55 Ibid., 141,53,54,56.
confusingly, that the forms are in some way timeless. Superficial interpretations that would align his thinking with Malraux’s serve, once again, only to obscure the latter’s position.

A key implication of Malraux’s argument, as we can now see, is that the question of the temporal nature of art would be misconceived if it were posed merely in terms of the work’s capacity to ‘last’ or ‘endure’. In his book *The Test of Time* to which we have referred, Anthony Savile argues, as noted earlier, that if a given work ‘holds our attention’ for a ‘sufficient period’, it will have passed ‘time’s test’ and thus have earned a place in ‘the pantheon of the great’. As we have seen, 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 very terms in which this proposition are formulated would be potentially misleading in Malraux’s eyes. Without further stipulation, terms such as ‘test of time’ ‘last’, and ‘endure’ tend to suggest *continuing* recognition over a given period (a ‘sufficient period’ for Savile) and thus immunity from the effects of time. For Malraux, this 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, moreover, that the way they are now viewed – as ‘works of art’ – is often at variance with the ways they were originally regarded. Thus the very notion of a ‘test of time’ is potentially misleading from Malraux’s standpoint. 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. In the mid-nineteenth century, in other words, Egyptian painting and sculpture were not ‘art’ (and were routinely excluded from art museums) 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, ‘begun’ to endure: they were now regarded as art for the first time and were entering art museums. The notions of ‘lasting’ or ‘enduring’, without qualification, are therefore much too imprecise.

---

56 See, for example, Ibid., 63.
57 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.
58 See above, page 183.
59 See above, page 3.
60 Cf above, note 51.
Indeed, the contemporary attitude toward Egyptian painting and sculpture, which accepts them as art and houses them under the same roof as, say, a Rembrandt or a Rubens (an unthinkable step in 1850\textsuperscript{61}) 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 fifteen hundred years and which, before then, had been an object of worship, not ‘art’. With minor qualifications, the same argument applies to Asian art, African art, Pre-Columbian art and many others, including even pre-Renaissance Western art such as the works of Byzantium and Romanesque Europe.\textsuperscript{62}

The issue for Malraux is not therefore whether an object has passed a ‘test of time’. That question might retain 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;\textsuperscript{63} but the realm of art, as Malraux frequently reminds us, is now much more extensive than that, stretching back many millennia and across a range of 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 regarded as lying beyond the pale of art. Art ‘endures’ or ‘lasts’, in Malraux’s eyes, only through its capacity for metamorphosis, not through immunity from time. (See Fig. 25, next page.)

This is perhaps an appropriate point to consider the quotation from Malraux’s early novel, La Voie royale, discussed briefly in the Introduction,\textsuperscript{64} 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

\textsuperscript{61} This question is discussed in more detail in the next chapter. See page 219 et seq.

\textsuperscript{62} 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 below, page 230.

\textsuperscript{63} Although even here one can often discern changes over time. Is the Shakespeare who won the applause of audiences in 1600 the same Shakespeare we admire today? He certainly seems to differ from the Shakespeare of seventeenth, eighteenth and even nineteenth century audiences, who often seem to have had no objection to his plays being drastically rewritten. Is the music of Vivaldi or Bach that bulks so large in the modern repertoire ‘heard’ in the same way as the Vivaldi or Bach that the Romantics referred to as ‘the old music’?

\textsuperscript{64} See above, page 11.
Chapter 7 – Art and Time

Fig. 25 Extract from television program: Promenades imaginaires dans Florence.

Stills and text from an interview with Malraux in 1975 which forms part of the program.

Malraux: We today are beginning to see that the living presence of works of art is very problematical. How did our forebears solve this problem? By the idea of immortality. Why is Venus admirable? Because she is immortal. Beauty is immortal. But for us today the idea of immortal beauty is simply ridiculous. We know that in the seventeenth century one of the world’s greatest arts, Gothic art, was in some cases completely covered over by awful, third rate stuff. We know that the art of Antiquity completely dropped out of sight for more than a thousand years. For us, metamorphosis isn’t something arcane; it stares us in the face. To talk about ‘immortal art’ today, faced with the history of art as we know it, is simply hot air. Every work has a power of resurrection or it doesn’t. If it doesn’t, end of story; but if it survives it’s by a process of resurrection not by immortality. There’s no work of art exempt from a descent into hell.

Interviewer: A bit like those rivers that disappear into the earth and then reappear without any obvious reason?

Malraux: Yes. And here we’re putting our finger on an issue of major importance – a straightforward matter obvious to all of us: on this earth of ours where everything is subject to the passing of time, one thing only is both subject to time and yet victorious over it: the work of art.
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.'

In itself, Savile's observation would not perhaps merit more than passing mention because his quotation is, as we said earlier, not drawn from any of Malraux's works 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 almost to have become a standard point of reference for his ideas on art. One can only conjecture how this came about, especially since La Voie royale is not one of Malraux's most widely read novels, but it is perhaps not irrelevant to note that E.H. Gombrich quoted the passage in question (at somewhat greater length) in his early review of Les Voix du silence in 1954 (subsequently reprinted in his widely-read collection of essays entitled Meditations on a Hobby Horse) and introduced the quotation with the statement: 'Here [the novel's hero] pronounces the theme on which all Malraux's subsequent writings are but variations.' Whatever the origin of the idea may be, however, the importance the passage seems to have assumed for various writers makes it difficult to dismiss without comment. Fortunately, the obligation is not without its

---

65 Savile, The Test of Time, 268. The quote is only an approximate translation and deletes some important phrases, as we shall see.

66 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'Hermé, 1982), 304. Cf. also: Righter, The Rhetorical Hero, 25. Moncef Khemiri, L'Esthétique de Malraux (Tunis: Office de la Topographie et de la Cartographie 1999), 216-18. Harris, André Malraux: A Reassessment, 80,81. (Harris, however, appears to recognise that it represents an early phase in Malraux's thinking.) The contexts in which the passage is alluded to are sometimes quite surprising. In a collection of essays on ancient history, 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.

67 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. Gombrich repeats the claim that for Malraux 'art survives only as what he calls "myth"' in his widely-read Art and Illusion. See E.H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion, 5th ed. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977), 54.

68 In some cases Gombrich's influence is quite evident. In one of the rare references to Malraux in the British Journal of Aesthetics, Christopher Perricone quotes Gombrich's claim in Art and Illusion that for Malraux 'the art of the past survives only as what he calls "myth"'. Perricone goes on to disagree with the claim, evidently assuming that it accurately reflects Malraux's own view. Christopher Perricone, "Art and the Metamorphosis of Art into History," British Journal of Aesthetics 31, no. 4 (1991): 314,15.
advantages since it affords another opportunity to see how significantly Malraux’s thinking about art had evolved between *La Voie royale* and post-1934 works such as *Les Voix du silence*.69

The passage 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.70

There are some obvious points of a 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 quite 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 already in connection with the Renaissance,71 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*.

There are, however, some major differences between Claude’s formulation and the understanding of the temporal nature of art Malraux later advances 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

---

69 The significance of the year 1934 is discussed earlier, especially in Chapter Three.
70 Malraux, *La Voie royale*, *Œuvres complètes* (I), 398.
71 See above, page 194.
that the process of ‘sleeping’ and subsequent re-awakening is part of the very nature of art, or that resuscitation is inevitably accompanied by a change 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 of 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’). The explanation poses some obvious difficulties. 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 just 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, however, 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 works such as Les Voix du silence and La Métamorphose des dieux 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 comment which seems to have played no small part in influencing later commentators – seems particularly unfortunate. Setting aside the point 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. Here, regrettably, we encounter another instance of
the tendency of some critics to skim Malraux's books on art rather than read them, although in this instance the problem is compounded 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 wrote specifically on the topic.

***

Before concluding this discussion, it is worth noting certain recent attempts in the field of 'analytic' aesthetics to deal with the question of art and time. As noted earlier, the prevailing approach of this school of aesthetics has been ahistorical — or perhaps more accurately, atemporal. Art is usually regarded, in effect (the question is seldom addressed explicitly), as a cultural 'given' common to all societies and thus as an issue which should be addressed at an appropriately general and abstract level free from too close an involvement with the contingencies of time and place. 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 reveal the problems they pose.

The first is associated in particular with the American aesthetician Jerrold Levinson. The background calls for a little explanation. One of the trends in analytic aesthetics in recent years, for some writers at least, has been a shift away from definitions of art formulated in terms of what are called 'intrinsic' factors — such as beauty, form, symbolic function, or structural unity — towards 'extrinsic' factors deriving in some way from the social and intellectual world surrounding the work of art. The prime example is the so-called 'institutional theory' of art principally associated with George Dickie who argues (stating the matter very 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 possessing certain specified cultural attributes. The theory has been criticised on a number of grounds.

---

72 See above, page 11.
73 See above, page 116.
(its apparent circularity among others) but the point of interest for present discussion is that, consistent with the prevailing approach in analytic aesthetics, Dickie’s definition, even though ‘extrinsic’ in nature, remains essentially atemporal and involves no reference to the history of art. Jerrold Levinson has sought to modify this element and, while continuing to seek answers in ‘extrinsic’ factors, insists on the need for an historical dimension in accounts of ‘arthood’. He thus formulates the definition 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.’ In effect, there is an appeal to a chain of ‘regards’ receding into the past, or as Levinson puts it,

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...

The definition has been criticised on a various grounds, most of which need not concern us here. One critic, Claire Detels has, however, raised an objection of direct relevance to the subject of the present chapter. Detels notes that if we wish to include Gregorian chant, for instance, under the rubric art we need to ask, according to Levinson, ‘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 points out, is not easy to answer. In the first place, she writes, ‘the “composer” of the great majority of Gregorian chants is anonymous,’ and even when this is not so, ‘there is little likelihood of finding evidence of intentionality about “regard”.’ More importantly for present purposes, she adds,

53. This article was first printed in Proceedings of the Eighth Wittgenstein Symposium, 10, (1983) 57-64. For a 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), 93-107. Dickie’s thinking seems to have been strongly influenced by Arthur Danto in his early essay ‘The Artworld’.
76 Levinson, "Defining Art Historically," 36.
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.)

Detels is alerting us to the same historical point raised earlier in the present study – that there is good 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 currently regarded as art 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, but (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, Sumer, Africa, Oceania, ancient Greece, the European Middle Ages, and many more in which the idea of art seems to have been unknown. Levinson’s response to this objection is revealing. 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.

The ‘Surely’ following the ‘certainly’ suggests that Levinson is perhaps a little less certain about the historical evidence than he would like to be. More importantly, whether intentional or not, there seems to be 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, we recall, 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 an obstacle – the absence of ‘regard-as-art’ at certain points in history – he abandons the basis of

77 Claire Detels, "History and the Philosophies of Arts," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 51, no. 3 (1993): 368-69. 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.’
78 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, encompasses the kind of case Detels raises. Levinson, "The Irreducible Historicality of the Concept of Art," 370.
his argument and switches, out of the blue, so to speak, to 'intrinsic' factors such as 'emotional, formal, and symbolic aspects.' Quite apart from the inconsistency, this immediately raises the old questions (questions that seem to have sparked the move away from 'intrinsic' factors in the first place) of whether art can satisfactorily be defined in terms of ideas such as its 'emotional, formal, and symbolic aspects' (given, for example, that 'emotional, formal, and symbolic aspects' are by no means confined to art).

This analysis provides an interesting example of the apparent inability of analytic aesthetics to provide a coherent account of art once history is brought into play. In effect, Levinson has attempted to provide an historical grounding for the universalist assumptions lying at the heart of this school of thought by representing the abstraction 'art' as a series of 'regards-as-art' stretching back in time. The problem, as Detels' objection neatly highlights, is that one does not need to 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 many such societies that large numbers of works regarded as art today originally came. The chain of 'regards' simply peters out, and the analytic aesthetician is obliged to throw in the towel by resorting to other approaches (such as 'intrinsic' definitions). A signal advantage of Malraux's theory of art in this respect is that it contains at its heart the notion of metamorphosis and is not obliged to assume that all the objects we regard as art today 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 wall paintings in the caves of 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 described in this chapter (and to be further examined in

80 Or perhaps by minimising the importance of the historical evidence. Detels notes, for example, that Levinson minimises the historically relative nature of the concept 'art'. Detels, "History and the Philosophies of Arts," 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.
the next). But they were not ‘art’ originally and there is no question of a chain of ‘regards-as-art’ stretching back through time. 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, as we have seen, the very nature of that creative act makes possible, not because they are part of a continuous chain of ‘art regards.’

The second attempt to give a temporal dimension to the ‘analytic’ approach has arisen in the context of a debate about the effects of interpretation. Again a little background is in order. Participants in this debate divide roughly into ‘realists’ and ‘constructivists’. The former argue, broadly speaking, that for any ‘objects-of-interpretation’, a category in which works of art are included, there must be one and only one ideally admissible interpretation. The latter respond that objects-of-interpretation can legitimately answer to more than one interpretation. If the constructivist is correct and the object is ‘interpretation-dependent’, the process of interpretation, it is argued, ‘changes its properties’ in some way. The realist replies that, on the contrary, the object is basically complete, and independent of interpreters, before the process of interpretation begins.82

One might perhaps wonder what this debate has to do with the temporal nature of art (and we shall argue in a moment that in fact it has nothing to do with it) but the notion of ‘change’ invoked in this context has sometimes been employed in ways that imply relevance. A representative example is an essay by Jerrold Levinson entitled ‘Artworks and the Future’. Levinson adopts the stance of the ‘realist’ and, seeking to relate his 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

81 A phrase widely used in this debate.
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. 83

There are a number of points to be made. First, one might perhaps argue that this debate is not really a debate in the philosophy of 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 more general class of objects (such as ‘objects-of-interpretation’). In contrast with Malraux’s argument, for instance, nothing in the debate is predicated on claims relating to the nature of art, and participants seem generally to assume that where questions of interpretation are concerned, it makes little difference whether one is speaking of a work of art or a road sign: everything is grist for the same philosophical mill. 84 Second, it is surprising, to say the least, that Levinson’s claim should be framed so readily and unapologetically in terms of the 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. 85 (How exactly would one state 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 our present concerns, on what basis could one safely conclude that ‘subsequent’ audiences will necessarily ‘find more in artworks’ than original audiences? Levinson tends to obscure the point at issue here by referring simply to ‘we’ and ‘us’, irrespective of the point in time involved. 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 I than the ancient Egyptians?’, one quickly sees that such questions are — or at least

84 From time to time there are explicit acknowledgements that the debate about ‘objects-of-interpretation’ (a significant choice of terminology in itself) is not limited to works of art, or dependent on claims concerning the nature of works of art. Cf. for example: Margolis, "Plain Talk about Interpretation on a Relativistic Model," 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.
85 The issue is further confused by Levinson’s definition of ‘content’ which seems to include properties frequently regarded as part of ‘form’. See Levinson, "Artworks and the Future," 182-84.
seem – quite unanswerable. How could one possibly know? We can be reasonably sure that we find something different in such works (since, as Malraux points out, if what we found were the same, we would quickly remove them from our art museums86); but whether this amounts to something ‘more’ is surely quite unknowable.87 It is not inconceivable, though equally unverifiable, that we may in fact know less. Finally, and more fundamentally, nothing in this debate – either in Levinson’s statement, or in the philosophical context we have briefly outlined – indicates anything definite about the temporal nature of art irrespective of which side of the argument – realist or constructivist – one chooses to favour. As pointed out earlier,88 whether or not a work of art lends itself to different interpretations is, in itself, irrelevant. It is perfectly compatible with the view that art is something whose nature is fixed ‘once and for all’, or with the view that it is not. For, in the first case, one need only assume that the different interpretations are those with which it was originally endowed – the fixed range of meanings that the artist, consciously or unconsciously, gave it at its moment of creation (a possibility, one might note in passing, that Levinson himself raises, probably unintentionally, when he speaks of ‘our access to the full extent of that content.’); or, in the second case, that the work has no determinate range of meanings. Thus, the crucial question is not whether or not interpretation ‘changes the properties’ – or the ‘content’ – of the work (whatever exactly that might mean) but whether or not the changes manifest a pre-determined, fixed range of meanings. And it is precisely this question that the debate we are examining fails to address since there is nothing in its terms of reference that would allow one to make a reasoned pronouncement on the matter – nothing that would allow one to say what kind of object art is, temporally speaking. Here, as earlier in the discussion of creativity in art,89 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 treats art simply as a member of a

86 See above, page 164.
87 Just as it is unknowable also whether, to quote Levinson, we today have ‘access to the full extent’ of the work’s ‘content’ – since we have no way of knowing what the future will find in it.
88 See above, page 189.
89 See above, page 122. Levinson’s article has been discussed more recently by Peter Lamarque in a collection of essays entitled The Philosophy of Interpretation. Despite some reservations, Lamarque does not question the fundamentals of Levinson’s approach and raises none of the objections discussed here. 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), esp.115-17.
larger class of objects (in this case ‘objects-of-interpretation’). 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 it does as a necessary consequence of his fundamental propositions about the nature of art.90

***

In the course of this study so far we have noticed a number of ways in which Malraux’s theory of art challenges major currents in modern aesthetics. We have seen, for example, that, contrary to prevailing practice, Malraux does not regard art as addressed to something vaguely described as ‘the world around us’ but sees it as a response to the fundamental sense of chaos and meaninglessness to which absolutes such as religious faiths have also been addressed.91 We have seen that, for Malraux, art is never essentially representation, even when it represents, but involves the creation of a rival world which depends for its very existence on a process of transformation.92 We have seen that, in Malraux’s eyes, the psychology of the human response to art does not, as aesthetics so often claims, take the form of a judgement – a weighing-up of comparable significances and qualities – but of a reaction which is fundamentally emotional in nature (even though, as we noted, one might of course make a judgement post facto).93 And we have seen that Malraux takes directly into account the historical fact that many of the objects now regarded as art came from cultures in which the concept of art was unknown.94 All these matters, and others, will be reviewed again later in this study, but it is perhaps appropriate to remark here that while comparisons are perhaps out of place in a context such as this, the issue analysed in the present chapter – Malraux’s explanation of the relationship between art and time – stands out as possibly the most

90 This final point is one that even Malraux’s sympathetic critics often seem to overlook. The concept of metamorphosis tends to be presented as an isolated proposition rather than as an integral part of a coherent theory. See for example: Jean-Claude Larrat, "La Notion de la "métamorphose" et le problème de la diversité culturelle dans l’œuvre d’André Malraux," in Malraux et la diversité culturelle, ed. Jean-Claude Larrat and Dominica Radulescu (Paris: Minard, 2004), 87-99. Also: Khemiri, L’Esthétique de Malraux 133-37.
91 See above, pages 80 and 129.
92 See above page 111.
93 See above, page 106.
94 See above, page 164.
revolutionary element of his theory of art considered so far. As we noted early in this chapter, modern aesthetics has at its disposal two principal ways of understanding this relationship: either art is timeless, in which case it is essentially impervious to change, or it is part of man's historical experience and, like all other aspects of human activity, essentially at the mercy of changing circumstances.

Neither explanation accounts for the facts as we know them: neither accounts for the fact that art does not live 'eternally' or, alternatively, disappear irretrievably into 'the charnel house of dead values'. And neither even begins to explain why, when resurrected, the objects we call art today assume a significance quite different from that which they originally held – that a god or an ancestor figure has become 'art'. Malraux has provided an explanation of these points. He enables us to understand why art 'conquers time' – why we find (for example) Sumerian religious objects 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 a self-evident absurdity – that art is eternal. As we said 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 in the domain of history. Broadly speaking, the twentieth century made do either with variations on Hegel (Arthur Danto is an example95) 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 (although one might perhaps argue that the tendency of this school to treat art as a universal 'given' carries with it an unacknowledged claim that art is, in some essential way, timeless). Meanwhile, in an unprecedented historical development which we shall examine more closely in the next chapter, art museums – again, art museums not just history museums – have been filling up over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries 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 thus poses the question of the relationship between art and

95 Part of Danto's theory of art consists of 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.
time in an acute and pressing way. To put the matter in a more concrete form: how do we explain the presence of a figure such as the Gudea of Lagash (Fig. 26) in one of today’s art museums (something unthinkable a century ago) if the only theories we have 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 area is not only that he recognises the pressing need to address that question (and recognised it, as we have seen, at least as early as the 1930s) but that he provides an answer that makes sense of the facts as we know them. His account of the temporal nature of art thus stands out as a landmark intellectual achievement – at least as important, due allowance made for the problematical nature of such comparisons, as the revolution in thinking brought about by Hegelian and Marxist thought which placed art within the unfolding, teleological time of history. Malraux in short has given us a third fundamental way of understanding the relationship between art and time: there is now timelessness, history, and metamorphosis. The signal advantage of Malraux’s account, as we have seen, is that it fits the facts as we today know them: it explains the now well-established presence in our world of art of objects that were dead for

Fig. 26 Headless statue of Gudea, Prince of Lagash

circa 2100 BC. Louvre.
centuries or millennia and have now been resurrected. In the next chapter, we shall examine this unprecedented development in more detail and see why it has led to the emergence of what Malraux terms 'the first universal world of art.'
Chapter Eight

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...’
Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel.

The observation that the Renaissance was accompanied by a revival of the works of Graeco-Roman Antiquity is a commonplace. Malraux’s own explanation of this event, as we saw in the previous chapter, is quite different 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 then 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 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 civilizations of Mesopotamia. In general, however, the event itself – the vast expansion of the domain of ‘art’ that has taken place over the past century – has received very little attention; and seldom, if at all, has aesthetics or the history of art raised the question of whether that event might have signalled a major transformation in the significance of the idea of art.

Malraux’s own view stands in stark contrast to this. As foreshadowed in the previous chapter, he regards this vast resuscitation of works from other cultures, and from previously neglected periods of Western culture, as intimately connected with

1 ‘...the domain in which Chardin still-lifes join the Chartres Kings and the gods of Elephanta in a common presence...’
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, the event is of the first importance. It is an event which, as noted earlier, he readily calls ‘another Renaissance’,2 mindful though he is, of course, that this recent Renaissance has revived much more than the works of two Mediterranean cultures. The present chapter will begin with an examination of Malraux’s analysis of this event, linking the discussion to the explanation of the relationship between art and time considered in the previous chapter. It will then explore a number of implications of Malraux’s position, highlighting the challenges his thinking poses to aesthetics as it has been traditionally understood.

***

Early in the first volume of La Métamorphose des dieux, Malraux asks us to suppose that when Baudelaire had finished writing Les Phares,3 a ‘demon security guard (in the form of a cat)’ appears and invites him to visit the present-day Louvre. Malraux imagines Baudelaire’s amazement. Les Phares, written in the mid-nineteenth century, is Baudelaire’s homage to the artists he regards as the greatest of all time who, the poet 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 sees them, Malraux notes, as examples of a ‘childish barbarism’ and an ‘urge to see things on a grand scale.’4 At the time, Malraux adds, Gothic sculpture was still treated as ‘a province of archaeology’, its resuscitation as art, like that of Egyptian sculpture, coming

---

2 See above, page 195.
4 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 8.
Chapter 8 – The First Universal World of Art

substantially later. ‘Never,’ Malraux writes, ‘did Baudelaire make mention of Chartres’. 5

Malraux admired Baudelaire as art critic 6 as well as poet, and the point he is making by the latter’s imaginary visit to today’s Louvre is not that Baudelaire was artistically insensitive, or that any of his ‘beacons’ is not a great artist (with the probable exception of Puget). Malraux is 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 limited exclusively to the works of High Renaissance and post-Renaissance Europe. Objects from non-European or pre-Renaissance sources (even including Giotto and Van Eyck) were outside the boundaries of that domain, and remained so for decades to come. The shortcomings of such works were agreed on all hands: they were seen, Malraux writes, as the products of barbarian tastes, lack of expertise, or clumsy execution. 7 Some made their way into collections of curios, or archaeological or ethnological museums (once these came into being), but they were unthinkable in art museums 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 observes, 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 (Fig. 27) and Renefer, the Kore of Euthydikos, and the Lady of Elche, a number of images of Shiva and certain Buddhist figures, the Eagle-Knight of Mexico, the Dogon mask in the Musée de l’Homme, the Chartres Kings, 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

5 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 Écrits sur l'Art, ed. Henri Godard (Paris: Gallimard, 2004.), 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.

6 Cf. Tadié, "Introduction," XII.

7 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Écrits sur l’art (II), 9,10.
Chapter 8 – The First Universal World of Art

(Fig. 28), Chardin’s *La Pourvoyeuse* [The Return from Market], Courbet’s *The Painter’s Studio*...

One might perhaps be tempted to dismiss this list as what Pierre Bourdieu, in his comment on *Les Voix du silence*, calls a ‘purely incantatory [litany] of proper names’ – that is, a list designed primarily to impress. But that, as we can now see, would be a hasty judgement. Malraux has chosen a series of specific examples to illustrate the enormous expansion that has taken place in the domain of art over the past century, his list going well beyond Western art (which is, of course, not excluded) to include works from Ancient Egypt, Pre-Classical (and no longer just Classical) Greece, the unknown fourth or fifth century BC culture that produced the *Lady of Elche*, Hindu and Buddhist cultures, Pre-Columbian Mexico, Africa, Medieval Europe and Byzantium.

One might of course ask: By what authority does Malraux make such a claim? What entitles him to announce that ‘we today’ would include these works in an ‘ideal museum’? And who exactly (as some critics, including E.H. Gombrich, 8 ibid., 26,27. (The collection of the Musée de l’Homme is now largely housed in the new Musée du Quai Branly.)

9 See above, page 9.
have asked\(^{10}\) is the ‘we’ in question? 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 an 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.’\(^{11}\) 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 which, as we have seen, Malraux rejects in any case\(^{12}\)) 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\(^{13}\)) are very likely to assent to many, if not most, of Malraux’s choices. Secondly, it is important to bear in mind that precisely the same question – that is ‘on whose authority?’ – could just as readily be asked about the selection of European artists whose works have been considered important over the centuries. Figures such as Michelangelo, Titian, Shakespeare, Balzac, Mozart and Brahms have, one might reasonably argue, been considered more important than others because they also have commanded the same kind of ‘consensus of opinion’ that 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, as we have seen, by Baudelaire). This does not mean, one should stress, that Malraux espouses something resembling the ‘institutionalist’ theory of art,

\(^{10}\) 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 comments from time to time on the large numbers of visitors to today’s art museums and art heritage sites around the world, clearly took a less pessimistic view. Cf. Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II)*, 36. The popularity of the new Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, where visitor numbers have far exceeded expectations, suggests that Malraux was more perceptive.

\(^{11}\) Malraux, *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale: La statuaire, Ecrits sur l’Art (I)* 972,73. In *L’Homme précaire et la littérature* Malraux makes the same claim in relation to the ‘library’ of books that would be generally regarded as important works of art. See Malraux, *L’Homme précaire et la littérature* 258.

\(^{12}\) See above page 4. This issue is discussed again below. See page 254.

\(^{13}\) As indicated in Chapter Five, Malraux argues that, fundamentally, the response to works of art takes the form of enthusiasms, or the lack of them, and is not essentially an intellectual process – a judgement. See above, page 106.
mentioned in the previous chapter, which holds, in essence, that an object is a work of art if it is accepted as such by a particular cultural group (the ‘artworld’).\footnote{14}{See above, page 206.}

Malraux, as we have seen, defines art in terms of its fundamental \textit{purpose} — briefly stated, as a rival, coherent world acting as a defence against the ‘chaos of appearances’; moreover, as we have also noted, art understood in this fundamental sense has not, in his view, always functioned as ‘art’ in any Western sense of the word.\footnote{15}{Cf. above, page 157.}

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 \textit{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 above) than in the first.\footnote{16}{It should perhaps be added that 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.} For at least four hundred years, he is pointing out, ‘art’ had signified painting and sculpture (confining our attention here to visual art only) 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.

One might of course ask if this is historically correct. Was there in fact the sudden expansion that 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.\textsuperscript{17}

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,

\begin{quote}
 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.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

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 \textit{Histoire de l'art: L'Esprit des formes} published in 1927. ‘In appearance,’ Faure writes,

\begin{quote}
 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.
\end{quote}

‘And yet’, he continues

\begin{quote}
 One of the miracles of this time is that an increasing number of spirits 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
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} H. Gene Blocker, \textit{The Aesthetics of Primitive Art} (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994), 272.

\textsuperscript{18} Gombrich, "André Malraux and the Crisis of Expressionism," 79. Gombrich cites as his source an essay by Tietze entitled ‘Die Krise des Expressionismus’, \textit{Lebendige Kunstwissenschaft}, Vienna, 1925, 40. In the context, Gombrich is citing 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 discussed above (see page 136) and is the subject of further brief comment below (see Chapter Nine, note 29). The important point for present purposes, however, 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, incidentally, 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.
accords that lead us back to man and show him to us everywhere animated by analogous passions...\textsuperscript{19}

None of this is intended, of course, to suggest that Malraux shared the theoretical outlook of either Tietze or Faure, who were both art historians. Here, nonetheless, are two well-informed authorities writing in the early twentieth century who attest quite clearly to the change to which Malraux refers. 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: one need only consult the histories of the collections of major Western art museums that were in existence in the early twentieth century or before. Wherever these collections now include items from non-Western cultures, one finds that such items only entered the museums, and were only placed within general collections – that is, in the same collection as post-Renaissance Western painting and sculpture – during the first half of the twentieth century, and even then usually 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 that it was ‘comparable to 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 from then on African art, along with that of the other cultures mentioned, took its place in the museum’s general collection.\textsuperscript{20} 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 up a collection of items chosen for their artistic value, and not simply for 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, which was first established in 1952. 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 museums, 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 of the growing body of historical and archaeological research. Malraux does not accept this explanation. The inescapable fact, he points out (and as Blocker also stresses in the comment quoted above), is that many of the cultures whose works began to enter art museums in the early twentieth century had been familiar 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 all 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.

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 civilisations now regarded as treasured works

---

21 Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer, ed., Asiatic Art in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff/Landshoff, 1985), 7-22. Scheurleer writes of the pre-twentieth century situation: ‘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.

22 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Écrits sur l’art (II), 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.
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, 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.  

Thus, the crucial factor, Malraux is arguing, was not an increase in knowledge but 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 objects in question. ‘The metamorphosis of the past’ that occurred, he 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.24

What brought about the ‘metamorphosis of our way of seeing’ – the aesthetic revolution – to which Malraux is referring? It is, he argues, the direct consequence of the development we have discussed in Chapter Six – 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, in Malraux’s words, solely on ‘the age-old urge to create an autonomous world, which, for the first time, has become the artist’s sole aim’.25 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’,26 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, that of the previous centuries of the West itself. The Renaissance, as we saw earlier, had revived the works of Greece and Rome not as part of its religious life (they became gods ‘to whom no-one prayed’27) 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’.28 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 the art museum, and, moreover, the original significance of many objects from ancient cultures was unknown) but in this case 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’.29 In the terminology discussed in the previous chapter, there has been, once again, 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

24 Ibid., 25.
25 See above, page 149.
26 See above, page 194.
27 See above, page 194.
28 See above, page 140.
of Raphael, Michelangelo and their successors; and this vast range of works, from cultures as diverse as Egypt, Pre-Columbian Mexico and Africa, underwent a metamorphosis, henceforth speaking a language quite different from that which they had originally spoken but now disclosing art’s fundamental power to create ‘another world’ – the ‘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 the 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 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-lifes join the Chartres Kings and the gods of Elephanta in a common presence.’

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 Wei 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.

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), comparing those images with objects from other cultures would have meant comparing objects of different kinds – objects that could

---

30 Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l’art (II)*, 25. In French: ‘le premier monde de l’art universel.’ Stuart Gilbert renders this as ‘the first world of a truly universal art’. (Malraux, *The Metamorphosis of the Gods* 21.) This is a misleading translation as the context indicates. It is not a question of a new form of art – a ‘universal art’. The claim is that, for the first time, the category ‘art’ encompasses the works of all cultures. Malraux is making the same point in the passages from the closing sections of *Les Voix du silence* discussed below. (Gilbert’s translation would in any case be more likely to translate French which read: ‘Le premier monde d’un art réellement universel’.)


32 Malraux saw Delacroix as the last major representative of the post-Renaissance notion of art. See above, page 142.
not sensibly be compared. For their contemporaries, Romanesque statues, like Byzantine images, were not, as we have seen, ‘works of art’; \(^{33}\) 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 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, for example (an institution which, significantly, did not exist). The images of other cultures, unconnected as they were from the only ‘other world’ that counted, 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 which allows us to see 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 have seen, both events, in Malraux’s eyes, are closely connected.)\(^{34}\) 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 insists,

> 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.\(^{35}\)

\(^{33}\) See above, page 134 et seq.  
\(^{34}\) See above, page 147 et seq.  
\(^{35}\) Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l’art (I)*, 866, 71. Malraux’s emphasis.
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 specific style since this, as we have seen, is Malraux’s definition of style. 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.’

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 cultures and of pre-Renaissance works such as those of Giotto or Cimabue but also of the works of the post-Renaissance Western tradition itself. 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 the works of

56 See above, page 80.
37 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 882. One might perhaps object that Malraux has not been the only one to notice that many works from other cultures have been transformed 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 any further). By contrast, Malraux, as we have seen, does provide 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 seems to imply that within the African traditions the ‘greatness’ in question was viewed in terms of ‘art’ – an assumption that Malraux would obviously not accept. Danto, "Artifact and Art," 19.
38 See above, page 227.
artists such as these, are, like all others, also seen today 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, or perhaps found it enhanced, though even in these cases they 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?’ Malraux asks (see Fig. 30 and Fig. 31). ‘For us their names are Rembrandt and Titian’ – implying that we no longer care if these are suitably ‘noble’ portraits of the individuals 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 meant rescue from semi-oblivion. (‘It was 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

39 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 204. The Man with the Helmet is now sometimes attributed to ‘Rembrandt’s circle’ rather than to Rembrandt specifically. The point Malraux is making remains, however, unaffected.
pathetic candles that Van Gogh, already mad, placed on his hat to paint the Café d'Arles by night that Grünewald has re-emerged.¹⁴⁰ 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, 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;¹⁴¹ and as the above analysis implies, it would be equally mistaken to conclude that the revival it has brought about can be understood in this way. For Malraux, the 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 stress, that the art of the past has somehow become ‘the same’ as modern art. Certain Gothic or Sumerian figures, for instance, have been resuscitated as ‘works of art’ because we discover in them the same power to create an autonomous world we find in modern art; but this resuscitation has necessarily occurred via a metamorphosis – a metamorphosis of what were, at their origins, religious images. 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.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 263.
¹⁴¹ See above, page 150.
¹⁴² Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l'art (I), 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 do not regard 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
Thus, though the modern significance of such objects is no longer what it was to
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 a particular kind – 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 Flayed Ox and Soutine’s
painting of the same name as his examples (Fig. 32 and Fig. 33). ‘We should be
wrong,’ he writes, ‘to think that the difference between the two is only one of
talent.’

Third, there is no suggestion in Malraux’s argument that our contemporary
attitude is somehow inherently 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

'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 ipso facto superior. Malraux is simply distinguishing
the effects of works of art of different kinds – works created in different contexts for different
purposes.

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 or have ‘access to the full extent of [their] content.’\(^{44}\) Nor even, to anticipate an issue to be considered shortly, does Malraux regard our contemporary response as definitive – a kind of terminus ad quem, or apotheosis of art.\(^{45}\) 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 the inheritors of ‘the first universal world of art.’

Finally, Malraux would not agree that the incorporation of the art of other cultures into the modern art museum as part of a ‘universal world of art’ necessarily entails what some writers have termed a process of ‘appropriation’ or ‘commodification’,\(^{46}\) implying that the removal of the works from their original cultural contexts deprives them of their ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ meaning. First, one needs to bear in mind that the aesthetic revolution under discussion has, in Malraux’s eyes, affected our perception 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 contemporary Western response should somehow displace or supersede that original significance. In such cases (no doubt steadily decreasing in number as the influence of Western culture becomes more and more pervasive) the object may well evoke two quite different kinds of response simultaneously, depending on its ‘audience’.

\(^{44}\) See above, page 210.
\(^{45}\) This point is discussed at page 250.
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 is a misleading question. Neither significance – the original sacred significance or the contemporary significance 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. 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 the religious beliefs these communities may hold 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 the ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ meaning of the objects 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 those of 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, for the reasons mentioned, that significance may be quite incompatible with the idea that they can be regarded as a ‘work of art’, or displayed in an art museum. Both significances, Malraux is arguing, are ‘authentic’; neither is definitive.

***

As we saw earlier, Malraux has sometimes been accused – unjustly as we have argued – of superficiality and inaccuracy where the history of art is concerned.47 The issues currently under discussion suggest, however, that in some respects at least

---

47 See above page 165 et seq.
he is rather more perceptive than many professionals in the 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.’ And many art historians do in fact 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 this question solely in terms of an ‘evolution of styles’, and as part of a general account of what is often termed ‘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 part of ‘art’ as the West understood 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 Jansons’ History of Art, Gardner’s Art through the Ages, and Gombrich’s The Story of Art – seem indeed 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.’ It is not simply a question, 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 approach of modern aesthetics, especially in the Anglo-American arena, tends in any event to be ahistorical, treating art as a universal category and keeping the contingencies of historical change at arm’s length. Not surprisingly therefore, it is very uncommon to encounter any consideration by modern aestheticians of the development under

---

48 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Intemporel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 1015.
50 See above, page 223.
51 See above, page 116.
discussion, or even any sign that it is regarded as a significant event.\textsuperscript{52} 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.\textsuperscript{53} 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 development, given both the relatively static notion of art with which it usually operates and, as we have noted, its resistance to historical findings of the kind which suggest that there have been many cultures in which the idea of art was non-existent.\textsuperscript{54} If we accept Malraux’s analysis – an analysis which, as we have seen, is supported by enough historical evidence to make it difficult to ignore – the conspicuous silence of aestheticians on this topic is a matter of some concern. An aesthetics or philosophy of art that ignores what appears to be a radical and unprecedented 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 major significance in the very disciplinary field in which it stakes its intellectual claims.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{52}The book by H. Gene Blocker cited above is a rare exception. See above, page 222.
\textsuperscript{53}Kristeller, "The modern system of the arts: a study in the history of aesthetics (II)," 35-64, Kristeller. "The modern system of the arts: a study in the history of aesthetics (I)."
\textsuperscript{54}See above, page 159 et seq.
\textsuperscript{55}Just why this development is so often ignored is a matter of conjecture, but one can perhaps hazard a guess. The enlargement 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 Medieval 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 \textit{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 newsworthy events such as abstract art, surrealism, ‘ready-mades’ such as Duchamp’s \textit{Fountain}, facsimile pieces such as Warhol’s \textit{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 foreshortened view of art history focusing heavily on developments in the twentieth century. Whether or not this explanation is correct, it is
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 brings together a number of major themes in 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 instance, to join ‘general collections’ alongside the Titians and Rembrandts.

The consequences did not, however, stop there. The art world of the post-Renaissance centuries had primarily been a world 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 busts. Many objects in the new world of art were also readily transportable – such as African masks – but there were also many that were not. There could be no question, for example, of detaching the sculptures at Chartres from the cathedral, or attempting to move 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-Men, 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 art museums in Europe but scattered across the world in museums located in countries in which the works originated, or which could more easily afford to purchase them, such as the United States.

certainly true that, to the (relatively limited) extent that 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 importance of some of these twentieth century events (which Malraux acknowledges, with reservations in certain cases), none of them has resulted in a transformation of the overall landscape of art comparable in kind and extent with that which Malraux has highlighted. See also below, Chapter 10, note 9.
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 those works, both inside and outside present day art museums, that we today would 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 above by the post-Manet aesthetic revolution\(^{56}\)), 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 such as those of Mesopotamia and even to Palaeolithic cultures such as those of Lascaux. \(^{57}\) One can of course again ask, ‘Who is “we”? ’ But the answer is the same as that given previously. 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. \(^{58}\) 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 for Malraux, as we have said, is 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 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-Men in China, and Palenque in Mexico. He willingly

---

\(^{56}\) See above, page 230.

\(^{57}\) The explanation of the musée imaginaire in this and the preceding paragraphs is based on the introductory sections of Les Voix du silence and La Métamorphose des dieux. See: Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l’art (I), 203-06. And Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Écrits sur l’art (II), 7-37.

\(^{58}\) See above, page 221.
recognises, however, that photographic reproductions have played a vital role 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 extent to illustrated art books and to television programs featuring works of art. 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 see 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 interiors, 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, he wrote, ‘the plastic arts have invented their printing-press’. Previous centuries had been obliged 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 points out (writing 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.’ 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) 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

59 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.
60 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, Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Écrits sur l’art (II), 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 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Intemporel, Écrits sur l’art (II), 987,88.
61 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l’art (I), 206.
62 Ibid.
63 See above, note 42.
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 important to stress, however, that, despite the comments of certain critics which we shall consider 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.' 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.

As we have said, art, for Malraux, whether visual art, music or literature, is not simply a ‘representation of the world’ – a kind of ‘artistic rendering’ of objects and events located in some realm vaguely conceptualised as ‘the world around us’ or ‘empirical reality’. Art is a response to a reality of a specific kind. It is a response to the same fundamental sense of the 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?’

In Malraux’s eyes, as we have seen, the door to the absolute has closed – at least for the present. Western societies – and most Westernised societies – 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

---

65 The *musée imaginaire* is a concept Malraux applies to visual art in particular but the fundamental principles involved here apply as much to literature and music as to visual art. Cf. the comment in *L'Homme précaire et la littérature*: ‘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.’ Malraux, *L'Homme précaire et la littérature* 255,56.
66 These issues are discussed principally in Chapters Three and Four above.
67 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 hope for the future, he replied: ‘I have no idea. And I will systematically exclude all prophecy from our conversation.’ Suarès, *Malraux, celui qui vient: entretiens entre André Malraux, Guy Suarès, Josè Benjamin*, 21,22.
68 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)*, ed. Henri Godard (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 1183.
awareness that, in Berger’s words, ‘all this might not have been, might not have been as it is.’ 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) 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. But it does create a world (or, more accurately, a series of worlds) scaled down 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.’ And even though now located 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 offering no definitive answers, still manifests 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’ but its responses are nonetheless an affirmation of man’s significance, not an acquiescence to his nothingness.

69 See above, page 48.
70 See above, page 189.
71 See above, page 86.
72 Malraux, Les Voix du silence. Ecrits sur l’art (I), 887. The critic, Claude Tannery, has attempted 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 meagre additional arguments Tannery produces, 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 Seven. 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
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 just that, one might well wonder why the idea has 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 significance or insignificance. 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 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’ 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 that would otherwise have passed away with the passing of the gods’,74 – ‘communion’ here signifying a sense of belonging to a humanity – a human adventure75 – affirming itself against an indifferent universe. ‘The *musée imaginaire*,’ Malraux writes,

... (Brincourt, *Malraux, le malentendu*, 128,41.) Cf. also Malraux’s remark in an interview in 1965 (five years after the appearance of the first volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux*): ‘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, and a transformation of his thinking at least as marked, presumably, as that which occurred in 1934. There is no sign of such a change. 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 here. See Tannery, *Malraux: The Absolute Agnostic*, 234.

73 As we have said, the principle involved here includes music and literature as well. Malraux speaks of the ‘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).


75 It is important to bear in mind that, for Malraux, as we have seen, art affirms man as *human adventure* as earlier defined. Cf. above Chapter Three, and pages 90 and 124. 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*, no. 99 (2002),: 93. The phrase is not explained but if Foster is implying 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* in 1927 (see above page 30); and the ‘human adventure’ is, as discussed earlier, an image of man, *without eternity*, who lives and dies in time (see page 57). There is, as we have seen, a clear distinction in Malraux’s thought between art and an absolute. (See, for example, pages 129 and 189.) Art establishes no permanent truths; it is ‘a series of provisional responses to a question that remains intact’.
“teaches us that destiny is threatened when a world of man, whatever form it may take, arises out of the world *tout court*.\textsuperscript{76}

It has been 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. E.H. Gombrich set the tone for interpretations of this kind as early as 1954 when he 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.’\textsuperscript{77} 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.’\textsuperscript{78} 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.’\textsuperscript{79} More recently, Alberto Manguel has suggested, in his book *Reading Pictures*, that the ‘rich display of reproduced images, open to us on page and screen, [is what] Malraux called “the imaginary museum”’,\textsuperscript{80} while another work comments that ‘we should bear in mind what André Malraux has defined as the “museum without walls”, the recurring issue of reproduction.’\textsuperscript{81} As recently as 2005, Matthew Kieran has written 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.’\textsuperscript{82}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[77] Gombrich, "Malraux on Art and Myth," 53.
\item[79] Crimp, "On the Museum’s Ruins," 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—that is, the apparent assumption that the *musée imaginaire* exists simply in virtue of its capacity to present works in photographed form. See Crimp, "On the Museum’s Ruins," 51.
\item[82] Matthew Keiran, *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 civilisations 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
\end{footnotes}
Chapter 8 – The First Universal World of Art

This is a serious oversimplification. Certainly, as we have said, Malraux believes that photographic reproduction has played a vital role in fostering familiarity with the visual arts, especially those difficult of access. It has been visual art’s ‘printing press’. But important as this is, it is not the fundamental point. In principle, and although it would be seriously handicapped, the musée imaginaire could exist without photography in these days of rapid and relatively affordable transport. Indeed, although an incomplete substitute, the different art museums of artistically well-endowed cities such as Paris, London or New York, which exhibit major works from a variety of cultures within short distances of each other, together represent 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 recording has with music); but photographic reproduction is, to borrow Malraux’s term, the ‘instrument’ 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 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 the contrary. Donald Crimp, as we have seen, 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

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.

Thus it is not even strictly 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.

Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 212.
invention – that is, as something that depends for its existence on his theorisation of it.85 This also is a misunderstanding. For Malraux, the musée imaginaire is simply a fact of modern civilization, and something that has come into existence 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 photographed, 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 are 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 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 in fact 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 to dispel the sense of unease and negativity 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.86

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’,87 a person, who in terms quoted earlier, is ‘in contact with his world’, whose ‘secret’ does not lie ‘in some realm beyond his empirical life’ but

85 Denis Boak speaks of the musée imaginaire as ‘Malraux’s idea’ and as his particular ‘methodological aid’. Boak, André Malraux, 186-88.
87 Merleau-Ponty, "Le Langage indirect et les voix du silence," 73.
is ‘modestly confused with his perception of the world’.\(^8\) On this basis, Merleau-Ponty goes on to argue 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.\(^9\)

A preliminary problem here is the meaning of the word ‘world’. Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion that the art museum somehow divorces works of art from ‘the world’ and consigns them to a ‘necropolis’ begs the immediate question, discussed earlier in this study,\(^9\) of what precisely the notion of ‘the world’ signifies in the context of art. Although he does not define the term with any precision, at least in the article under discussion, Merleau-Ponty appears to imply that the world, or the ‘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’,\(^9\) and that (as one might expect, given his phenomenological 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 interpretation is correct, it is perhaps understandable why he might suggest that the art museum is a ‘necropolis’, since presumably one might argue 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’: that world, as we have seen, 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 at a fundamental level between Malraux

---

\(^8\) See above, page 101.


\(^9\) See above, page 71 et seq.

\(^9\) He writes for example: ‘As long as [the artist] paints, his painting concerns visible things.’ Merleau-Ponty, "Le Langage indirect et les voix du silence," 73.
and Merleau-Ponty – 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 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 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. The ‘dialogue’ (to use the term Malraux employs in this context) between prevailing forms and the forms of an earlier culture had ceased to be a dialogue of the deaf, and the latter had been ‘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. The art museum, which brings together a range of works from different cultures possessing this power, is thus, in Malraux words, ‘a confrontation of metamorphoses’. 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

---

92 See above, page 191.
93 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 204. André Brincourt offers an interpretation similar to that offered 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.
is 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 others.  

As it happens, Merleau-Ponty’s comment quoted above raises another issue relevant to our 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 the claim forms part of a comment on Malraux, one is perhaps entitled to assume that Merleau-Ponty is ascribing this view to Malraux and that he assumes Malraux does regard the art museum — or the musée imaginaire — as the location in which art is destined to ‘end up’ — its final destination where it finds its definitive expression. Similar suggestions have been made by other critics. Maurice Blanchot writes, for example, that

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.

94 Thus 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 Pieta with a New-Hebridean figure or a Dogon mask that we appreciate their significance most intensely.’ Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 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 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. above, page 238.) He nowhere suggests that our responses to such works suffer as a result. Second, even when they are in their original physical contexts, such works, he argues, are, nevertheless, like many objects housed within museums, inevitably divorced from the much more important 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.

95 Blanchot, "Le Musée, l’art et le temps," 27. Blanchot’s comment seems to have exerted some influence. Henri Godard, for example, quotes the second two sentences and suggests (contrary to
And, in a similar vein, a more recent critic 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... 96

Statements such as these can easily be misleading. As we have seen, the modern ‘universal world of art’ is, for Malraux, a manifestation of the ‘the age-old urge to create an autonomous world’, whether we are speaking of art post-Manet, in which the realisation of this urge has become the artist’s sole aim, or of our contemporary response to the art of earlier times or of other cultures which modern art has either resurrected or cast in a different light. 97 Now, given that the creation of an autonomous world is, in Malraux’s eyes, the creative act at the basis of all art, irrespective of the purposes to which it is put and whether or not its products be termed art, one might perhaps be tempted to say, in the terminology of the statements quoted above, that the creation of an autonomous world describes the ‘essence’ of art. But one needs to tread carefully here. To the extent that the term ‘essence’ suggests a timeless principle (such as an ‘aesthetic universal’) which was masked in previous times but is at last fully and definitively revealed, the interpretation would be quite mistaken. For as we have seen, art for Malraux is always creation in the full sense 98 and its characterisation as the creation of an autonomous world describes a possibility only – something standing in need of realisation. In the absence of an absolute, art post-Manet has indeed fallen back on that possibility alone – as a ‘last resort’ so to speak – and has resurrected the art of the past in those same terms. But this in no sense implies a definitive position – a terminus ad quem where art ‘ends

what will be argued here) that there are an accurate reflection of Malraux’s thinking. Godard, L’Expérience existentiel de l’art, 108. Jean-Claude Larrat seems 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.’ Larrat, “En relisant Maurice Blanchot: le musée, l’œuvre et la métamorphose,” 162.
97 As explained above, much Renaissance and post-Renaissance art (Michelangelo, Titian, Rembrandt etc.) has not been resurrected – because it had not been forgotten. Rather, it has come to be seen in a new light. See above, page 230.
98 See above, page 123.
up' or to which it was 'destined' in Merleau-Ponty's words. Malraux is quite clear on this point. The musée imaginaire, as we have seen, is the collective name he gives to the wide range of objects inside and outside the world's art museums that we now, in our contemporary agnostic culture, regard as works of art – works 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. Nevertheless, Malraux points out, 'the musée imaginaire is not eternal,' and 'should a new absolute emerge, a large part of this treasured heritage would doubtless fade away like a shadow.' Or, phrasing the point 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.

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, for Malraux, 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 position. If metamorphosis is 'the very life 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, Buddhist frescos, 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.

---

100 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Écrits sur l'art (I), 696.
101 Ibid., 261.
102 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
world may take a multitude of forms, and the modern form in which it is nothing but that is no more definitive, no ‘truer’ – and certainly no more ‘total’ to use Blanchot’s term – 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. Neither modern art itself nor the contemporary ‘universal world of art’ in toto, is an end-point for Malraux, 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 have a clear view of the ‘true essence’ of art liberated at last from the dross of obsolete beliefs and prejudices (so to speak).

The modern world of art 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 resembling it before. But while it may be a ‘first’, Malraux is by no means suggesting that it is a ‘last’ – a definitive state of affairs. A cultural event of sufficient magnitude, such as the advent of a new absolute, might well see this first universal world of art ‘fade away like a shadow.’

Here once again we see why Malraux’s theory of art poses such a radical challenge to aesthetics in its traditional form. 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 it was understood in the post-Renaissance period, or as it was viewed in earlier times or 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 which we shall discuss shortly), and Malraux, as we have said, is not making a prediction about the future of art. His argument, nevertheless, represents a clear and fundamental challenge to embarks from the moment of its creation.’ François de Saint-Cheron, L’Esthétique de Malraux (Paris: Sedes, 1996), 45. 103 The contrast here with Walter Benjamin is worth noting. Benjamin, at least in his essay, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, proposes, in effect, a two-stage historical process: art was originally cultic; now, in the age of mechanical reproduction, it is emancipated from ‘its parasitical dependence on ritual’. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books 1969), 223,24. Malraux’s account differs in two major respects. First, for Malraux, there is in principle no finite number of stages: the future of art is unknown and unknowable; and second, as we shall see more clearly in the next chapter (see below, page 256 et seq.), Malraux is not speaking, as Benjamin appears to be, in terms of an historical theory. As we have said, the foundations of Malraux’s theory of art are essentially metaphysical.
Chapt er 8
The Fir st Uni ve rsal World of Art

traditional aesthetics. Since its inception as a formal area of philosophical inquiry in
the eighteenth century, aesthetics (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' — permanent and universal 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 same objects we
now regard as art adored or feared as gods, has never been seriously entertained. For
writers as different in their approaches as Hume, Kant, Taine, Croce, Collingwood,
Clive Bell, Adorno, Walter Benjamin and, more recently, writers of the Anglo-
American school of 'analytical aesthetics', art and the human response to art are
treated, implicitly or explicitly, as if they were intrinsic, permanent features of
human experience.104 The possibility that this might not be the case 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 firmly rooted as an anthropological 'given' 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 or Giotto's frescos at Assisi. This is not to suggest, one should stress, that
Malraux is seeking to devalue art as we now know it. On the contrary, he regards it,
as we have seen, as one of the ways in which, in the absence of an absolute, man
defends himself against his fundamental, metaphysical sense of bewilderment and
insignificance. (He writes, we recall, that although not an absolute, art gives us a
sense of that 'profound communion that would otherwise have passed away with the

104 Some writers are quite explicit in this view. Cf., for example, the earlier discussion of Denis
Dutton's article 'But they don't have our concept of art'. See above, page 161.
passing of the gods.'

He is arguing, nonetheless, that the present 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 may perhaps follow. Art, as we experience it now, or as it was experienced pre-Manet, is not a permanent feature of human life, but something subject to further, endless metamorphosis. Indeed, art as we know it now, 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 to its fundamental needs.

This analysis shows, incidentally, how futile it would be from Malraux's standpoint to devise fixed rules that would claim to separate art from non-art – that is, to establish permanent boundaries separating objects which, in the language 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 by what it perpetuates but by what it invents – 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, Pre-Columbian art). Prior to that – in Egypt or Africa for instance – the very notion of rules separating art from non-art of art would have been inconceivable for the good reason that the notion of art itself was non-existent. And the future, Malraux is arguing, is always unpredictable – and may well see a major transformation, or even the disappearance, of the notion of art familiar to us today, accompanied by the emergence of something very different from our contemporary imaginary museum.

For Malraux, in other words, the attempt to capture art once and for all in a system of rules separating it from non-art would be the pursuit of a chimera; and this would apply as much to what analytic aesthetics calls 'extrinsic' rules (since an 'artworld'

---

105 See above, page 243.
106 Malraux's critics seldom take a clear position on the point at issue here. One exception is Claude Tannery who writes: 'In *Les Voix du silence* Malraux argues that art is a permanent given, valid throughout time and space, valid throughout history...' Tannery, *Malraux: The Absolute Agnostic*, 221. The interpretation offered here obviously dissents from that view.
107 See above, page 123
108 See above, page 141.
109 See above, page 206.
would imply a community thinking in terms of art) as it would to ‘intrinsic’ rules based (for example) on notions of ‘harmony’, ‘balance’ or ‘beauty’. For Malraux, there is no ‘essence’ of art apart from the urge to create a rival world different in kind from the fleeting world of appearances, and this urge 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, it has ‘never crossed men’s minds’.

---

110 Stephen Davies, for example, claims that properties ‘such as beauty, balance, tension, elegance, serenity, energy, grace, vivacity’ constitute a ‘transcultural 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), 207.

Chapter Nine

Art and History. The Anti-Arts.

‘Rendre l’aventure humaine intelligible, quelle tentation!’
Malraux, La Tête d’obsidienne

‘... la fausse peinture est née.’
Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Intemporel

There are three further issues requiring brief discussion before the concluding chapter in which this analysis is brought to a close. The first involves some further reflection on the relationship between art and history in Malraux’s theory of art, and particularly on some comments on this matter by Maurice Merleau-Ponty which have fostered certain unfortunate misunderstandings. The second is a brief discussion of Malraux’s concept of the anti-arts outlining his thinking about the ‘academic’ school of painting which emerged in the nineteenth century, and its progeny in contemporary culture. Finally, we shall provide some further brief remarks on the significance of the year 1934 in Malraux’s intellectual development, rounding off the earlier comments on this matter in Chapter Two.

***

The analysis in preceding chapters suggests 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. We have certainly argued that Malraux’s theory is inseparable from the history of art in the sense that it is inseparable from a sequence of specific works. Art is a series of inventions or it is nothing; or as Malraux argues, ‘art in itself’ does not exist. This in no sense implies, however, that Malraux locates art within a unified theory of history, such as a teleology – as Hegel, for example,

---

1 ‘What a temptation – to confer a meaning on the human adventure!’
2 ‘... false painting was born’. Malraux’s italics.
3 See above, page 128.
does in his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*. Malraux, as we have seen, traces a particular course that art has followed. He explains, for example, how the notion of art 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, however, is simply a narrative of a specific sequence of events. Certainly, it is a narrative focused on particular realisations of one and the same urge to create a rival, unified world. There is, however, no suggestion of a unified theory of history – no claim that this sequence of events was in some way inevitable or 'rational', or that it reveals some underlying meaning 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 history figures in his account of art. Malraux’s notion of the human adventure, as we saw, 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 underlying meaning or end-goal. It is an 'adventure', not of course in the colloquial sense of a remarkable exploit, but in the strict sense of an endeavour which is definable only in terms of its discoveries – the regions it traverses – and which knows nothing of its ultimate destination. While, therefore, 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 which, in the words of Berger in his dawning awareness of the human adventure, 'could have been otherwise'. Indeed, far from carrying the somewhat glamorous connotations of something understood simply as a remarkable exploit, the notion of art as affirmation of the human adventure points ultimately to a

---

4 In his study of Malraux’s theory of art, Jean-Pierre Zarader seeks to bring about a rapprochement between Malraux and Hegel. (Zarader, *Malraux ou la pensée de l’art: une approche philosophique*.) There is no space in the present study to examine the detail of this argument but the issue under discussion here (which Zarader does not address) obviously presents a major obstacle. 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 manifesting a ‘primitive artistic pantheism’. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, 83. Malraux expressly rejects any such intellectual schema and the idea of artistic ‘progress’ is quite foreign to his theory of art. See also above, pages 26, 215, and Chapter Seven, note 12.

5 See above, page 56.

6 See above, page 49.
tragic view of human life and all its endeavours – including art. Art affirms man against the vast indifference of things but there is no ultimate justification, no definitive victory, no revelation of any fundamental truth. The human adventure, like the ‘drone of the centuries’ that Berger hears on the morning following the tank trap episode, is something with a beginning and, presumably, an eventual end, and whose ultimate destination can only be oblivion. 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 (he mentions Taine, Hegel and Marx in particular), Malraux exclaims: ‘What a temptation – to confer a meaning on the human adventure!’  

7 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.’ Malraux, L’Homme précaire et la littérature 47.

8 Cf. Malraux’s comment during a speech for UNESCO in 1946: ‘A form of humanism is still available to us but we need to be quite clear with ourselves that it is a tragic humanism.’ André Malraux, "L’Homme et la culture artistique," in Ecris sur l’art (I), ed. Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 1216.

9 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 above, page 66.

10 Claims to the contrary can sometimes take quite subtle forms. Jacqueline Machabeï, 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 Machabeïs, Malraux: La tentation du sacré (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 314,15. 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 (see above page 137) involves the discovery of a ‘new power of painting’, there is no question of a progressive ‘emancipation’, or a progress of any
These points need to be stated firmly and clearly because Malraux's commentators have sometimes painted his argument in quite different colours. A prominent example is the essay by Maurice Merleau-Ponty cited earlier, which merits particular attention because it seems to have exerted an influence on other critics.\(^1\) Merleau-Ponty argues that '[Malraux] can explain the convergence of separate works only by invoking some destiny that rules over them', and goes on to quote a passage from *La Psychologie de l'art* in which Malraux writes:

\[\ldots\]

\[\ldots\] 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 \ldots 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.

\[\ldots\] ‘Thus,’ Merleau-Ponty concludes,

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.\(^2\)

This is a serious misreading of Malraux’s position which achieves what surface plausibility it has only by wrenching his statement out of context and, as we shall see, misinterpreting the quoted words themselves. First, one needs, very briefly, to restore the context. Malraux’s statement occurs towards the end of a relatively lengthy section in *La Psychologie de l’art* in which his principal concern has been to explore the part played by photographic reproduction in the formation of contemporary responses to art.\(^3\) As noted earlier, one consequence he highlights is 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.


\(^3\) Malraux, *La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 18-52.
that contemporary audiences have access to high quality reproductions of a wide range of 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 discussed 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’, in Malraux’s terminology, being equivalent to the work’s style. Now, one effect of photography, he argues, is that it can often make 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 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 result when works of different sizes (a miniature and a large sculpture, for example) lose their relative dimensions and become images 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.’ 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 gain ‘the utmost significance as to style they can possibly acquire.’ Or, translated into the alternative terms employed in this discussion, their peculiar significances as autonomous worlds become as pronounced as they could possibly be.

Now if, by virtue of reproduction, works of the same culture are gathered together in an album—for example of Egyptian art, Chinese art, 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, as we have seen, not mere historical objects but living presences, such arrangements can give the impression of a living organism changing over time. That is, the images seem to be much more than mere examples of a particular stylistic ‘classification’ (as labelled in a history of art, for example) and appear, as

---

14 See above, pages 80 and 229 et seq.
15 Malraux, _La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire_, 24.
16 Ibid., 52.
17 As discussed in the analysis of the relationship between art and time in Chapter Seven.
Malraux writes in a phrase that Merleau-Ponty deletes, to have ‘a life of their own’,\(^{18}\) 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 as ‘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 made possible only by reproduction – can appear as a continuous stream of creativity (due allowance made, as he indicates, for intermittent periods of regression) and as if one were encountering a ‘spirit’ that had ‘a life of its own.’

Nothing in the passage, or in the discussion of the effects of photographic reproduction preceding it, supports Merleau-Ponty’s 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, incidentally, he deletes in the equivalent passage in *Les Voix du silence*\(^{19}\)) is preceded by an ‘as if’ and is, like his ‘imaginary spirit of art’, clearly intended as a metaphor (a point that Merleau-Ponty acknowledges but then seems to forget). In fact, Malraux’s proposition is the very reverse of what Merleau-Ponty is suggesting. The idea is not that art is somehow controlled by an external force – as if it were merely a response to a 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 we might have expected, an image in microcosm of the human adventure. There is no question of a teleology – no ultimate aim that is being met, no historical Idea being realised, no underlying meaning that confers unity or rationality on the process and transforms it into the manifestation of some hidden Truth, or ‘Reason’, or the workings of ‘some World Spirit’ (as Merleau-Ponty claims a few paragraphs further on\(^{20}\)). On the contrary, it is a question, as Malraux writes, of a ‘fatality’ – a fundamentally inexplicable sequence of events. But a

---

\(^{18}\) Malraux, *La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire*, 52.


\(^{20}\) Merleau-Ponty, "Le Langage indirect et les voix du silence," 82.
‘living fatality’: it is not simply part of the vast realm of arbitrariness and contingency; it is something imbued, for a period of time at least, with (in the words Merleau-Ponty deletes) ‘a life of its own’, as if animated by an ‘an imaginary spirit of art’.\textsuperscript{21} Like the human adventure it affirms, this living fatality has no ultimate purpose, 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 of any kind 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\textsuperscript{22}); but there is a question of man differentiating himself, for a time at least, from a fatality-ridden world by the creative achievements of art.

It is of course undeniable that historical events sometimes play an important role in Malraux’s account of art. Egyptian art, for example, ends with the decay of ancient Egyptian culture; in the main, traditional African art is progressively extinguished by its encounters with Europe;\textsuperscript{23} 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;\textsuperscript{24} the radical transformation that took place with Manet was a response to the emergence of an agnostic culture after the intellectual upheaval of the eighteenth century;\textsuperscript{25} and the emergence of a new absolute, Malraux suggests, might well see a major change to our contemporary universal world of art.\textsuperscript{26} But art itself, as we have seen, is always, for Malraux, an activity \textit{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

\textsuperscript{21} Malraux revisits this issue in \textit{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. Malraux, \textit{La Métaborphose des dieux: L’Intemporel, Ecrits sur l’art (II)}, 1000. In fact, Malraux makes the same point in a footnote to the very page of \textit{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 Malraux, \textit{La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire}, 52.

\textsuperscript{22} 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’. Malraux, \textit{Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I)}, 643. See also below, note 29.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 772.

\textsuperscript{24} See above, page 137.

\textsuperscript{25} See above, page 147.

\textsuperscript{26} See above, page 251.
Les Voix du silence that ‘the relationship between art and history ... would seem less puzzling if we ceased regarding it as systematic’; and why he also writes that ‘art is more affected by the deep underlying currents than by the tidal waves.’ Art in Malraux’s eyes is not the ‘product’ (or ‘expression’ as Gombrich would have it) 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; and it proceeds essentially via its own creative processes, as outlined in Chapter Five – the ‘blazing of new trails’ after an initial period of deep admiration for other artists. The ‘tidal waves’ of history – wars, famines or pestilences – are often likely to have only marginal effects, and it will require cultural changes working at a level as deep as itself – such as the death of a religion, or the decay of a whole culture – to bring about major transformations. But in any event 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’, or of class struggle, or of any other predeterminable set of historical forces. This is why – to return to a point left in abeyance a short while ago – there is a fundamental difference between theories of ‘the end of art’ such as that developed by Hegel and, more recently, by Arthur Danto, and the attitude Malraux adopts.

27 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 637. Malraux’s term is ‘rigoureuse’. Stuart Gilbert’s translates this as ‘uniform and invariably decisive,’ which, though a liberal rendering, probably conveys Malraux’s meaning quite well.

28 Ibid., 647.

29 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, “Andre 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 above, page 136.) 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 not the case. In fact, Malraux explicitly rejects this general 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...’ Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 880. There is considerably more in this vein (see, for example, Ibid., 642, 651). None of it seems to have deterred Gombrich.

30 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 above, Chapter Six, note 31.

31 For example in his book Art After the End of Art. Danto’s position is, however, 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.
towards the future of art. 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 quite unpredictable; and there is no historical theory – no theory of ‘late capitalism’, for instance, to choose one currently influential idea – that is likely to alter that. For Hegel and Danto, propositions about the end of art have, essentially, the status of predictions (whether we regard 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 comprehensible, 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, or Marxist and post-Marxist thinkers) yield to the ‘temptation to confer a meaning on the human adventure’. In his own eyes, art is an affirmation of man as human adventure, and beyond those affirmations themselves that adventure has no discernible meaning.

***

As indicated in the Introduction, Malraux’s writings on art are too extensive to be covered in every detail in the present study. Our aim has been to examine the key elements of his theory, and this has now been largely completed. It would, however, be unsatisfactory to conclude the discussion without a brief examination of one further important aspect of his thinking which links up with the issues discussed in the previous chapters, and which has also been the source of considerable critical misunderstanding. This is the question of what he terms the arts of mere ‘delectation’ or the arts d’assouvissement (arts of gratification), or at times ‘anti-arts’ or ‘counter-arts’.


To engage with Malraux's train of thought in this area, one needs to recall his account of the collapse of Christian belief discussed in Chapter Six. He argued there, as we saw, that after a lengthy period of gradual decline, Christian faith received its coup de grâce at the hands of the 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.\footnote{See above, page 144 et seq.} 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 as a further consequence, to the emergence of the first universal world of art.\footnote{See above, pages 147 and 228.}

This, however, was not the only consequence of the dawning of an agnostic culture. It also led, Malraux argues, to new visual, literary and musical forms for which the death-blow to the Christian absolute acted as, in effect, a death blow to art itself, and 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 then with painters such as Horace Vernet (Fig. 34), there appeared a new school of painting – now often called the nineteenth century 'academic' school – which simply accepted the absence of fundamental values, made no attempt, like Manet, to discover a new kind of art that could respond to this predicament, and aspired to nothing more than acquiescence to the world of fleeting appearances. Here, for the first time, Malraux writes, the word ‘vision’, often employed ambiguously in the field of art theory (because it is frequently confused with the idea of an artist’s ‘interpretation’), ‘takes on a quite precise meaning.’ For the painter’s aim now is 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).\footnote{Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Intemporel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 713.} The goal is 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 is submission to, and complicity with, that
Fig. 34 Horace Vernet, *The Battle of Jena* 1836

‘...Vernet, proud of his exact uniforms painted in the name of reality.’ Malraux, *L’Intemporel*, 711

world, resulting in an ‘art’ of a reality *imposed* not created – an art that evokes not veneration, admiration or love, but the pleasures of mere momentary sensation. Thus, Malraux argues, it was not only genuine painting that underwent a radical change at this time; so also did false painting. Or, more accurately, he writes, ‘false painting was born’.  

36 Ibid., 706. Malraux’s italics.

37 Cf. above pages 137 to 141.


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,37 but at no stage had this been allowed to undermine the basic unity of the work. The precise drawing of the human figures in thirteenth and fourteenth century paintings 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’.  

The new form of illusionism sponsored by the ‘academic’, ‘Salon’, or ‘Official’ painting (Malraux often uses the last term) set out to destroy this unity, replacing it with a purely
optical, ‘stereoscopic’ relief based on the separation of planes, like the scenery in a stage setting, with the focus resting on specific figures or objects. 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 – so that if one places Bonnencontre’s Three Graces, for example, beside Raphael’s painting of the same name, (Fig. 35 and Fig. 36) the latter, he writes, seems transformed into a vision of arabesques.

Fig. 35 Bonnencontre, The Three Graces 1903
Fig. 36 Raphael, The Three Graces 1504-1505

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. ‘Official’ painting received a powerful impetus from the invention of photography precisely because the latter, too, offered an implacably ‘optical’ image of the world, freed from any unifying principle – a way of ‘grasping reality without conferring order on it.’ In a very real sense, Malraux suggests,
photography was an invention whose time had come, arriving precisely at the moment when European culture – or at least part of it – was in search of ‘images free of all values’.

Malraux’s key point, however, is that alongside the art of Manet and those who followed in his footsteps, there had emerged, for the first time, a form of painting (and literature and music) that constituted an abandonment of the fundamental purpose of art. It was an art of physical gratification alone – of mere delectation. ‘No school so futile is known to us,’ he 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.’

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”.’ He describes the form of painting now in question as a ‘universal antistyle’ – universal because it appeals simply to vision, not to the mind (and thus excludes any question of values – exclusive or not); and ‘antistyle’ because it renounces any ambition of imposing meaning on experience and simply yields to the world of fleeting appearance. Painting, literature and music of this kind, are ‘in no sense just inferior arts’, Malraux writes, ‘but operating as they do in the opposite direction to all true art, might be called anti-arts’.

---

43 Ibid. Malraux would therefore certainly 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.

44 In *Les Voix du silence* 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, Écrits sur l’art (I)*, 767. Cf. also the comment in *L’Homme précaire et la littérature*: ‘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, *L’Homme précaire et la littérature* 262. Malraux’s emphasis.


46 See above, page 80.


268
This is not just a thing of the past. On the contrary, Malraux argues, while the antistyle in question eventually lost out in the field of painting (Van Gogh, Picasso, and Pollock for example, having largely thrust academic painters into the shade), it soon moved on to other fields where, with the aid of technological advances, it has since enjoyed an almost undisputed dominance. Thus, suitably modernised, the anti-arts now dominate the fields of popular illustrated magazines, film-making, popular music and fiction, and of course television. The ‘Official’ aesthetic, Malraux writes, ‘has been expelled from painting, but elsewhere it reigns supreme.’ The spirit of Rochebrosse and Bouguereau, he writes ‘more than holds its own against reproductions of Picasso.’

While critics have had relatively little to say about this aspect of Malraux’s theory of art (and the account given here is itself abbreviated), the few comments that have been offered frequently distort his position. 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’ thereby deftly confusing two quite separate elements in Malraux’s thinking. 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) were, as we have said, 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. The suggestion that modern art took its beginnings from a ‘protest against’ academic art is quite alien to Malraux’s argument.

Ibid., 766. This is not a blanket condemnation of all cinema (or photography). Malraux admired the work of Eisenstein, wrote an essay on the ‘Psychology of the Cinema’ and directed his own film based on 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.

This is not to say, as we have noted, that the painters of the modern school did not look upon Official painting with contempt. ‘If one day,’ Malraux 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
An equally misleading comment is offered by Denis Boak who writes of Malraux that

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. 52

This again is confused. As we have seen, the term ‘beauty’ plays an important part in Malraux’s thinking, but specifically in connection with the period of Western art history which he terms the irréel – the period from Botticelli onwards as far as Delacroix in which art aspired, as he writes, to be the expression of ‘a harmonious imaginary world’. 53 In this context, as he makes clear in an early section of Les Voix du silence 54 and in the second volume of La Métamorphose des dieux (L’Iréel), the notion of beauty – sometimes termed le beau idéal – was central not only to the aspirations of artists but also to the very notion of art itself. Malraux is by no means ‘contemptuous’ of the art of this period (although, as we have seen, he argues that the metamorphosis it has undergone, following the subsequent

assume that in Paris between 1870 and 1914 there existed two antagonistic civilizations, in water-tight compartments.’ Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 734.

52 Boak, André Malraux, 181.
53 See above, page 141.
54 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), esp. 266-95.
transformation of the idea of art, presents it to us in a different light\textsuperscript{55}). Indeed, some of the artists he praises most highly – Botticelli, Leonardo, Titian, 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 his theory of art between the art of the period of the \textit{irréel} and the \textit{arts d'assouvissement} – the anti-arts. As we have seen, the latter in Malraux’s view were – and are – products of an abandonment of the central purposes of art, and to this extent are certainly worthy of ‘contempt’ (which is precisely how they were regarded, Malraux argues, by the artists who followed in the footsteps of Manet.) The former were, in Malraux’s vocabulary, ‘true artists’, and no less so for their pursuit of a world of harmony and beauty than were Van Gogh, Picasso or Miro, for example, whose aim was quite different. Like Gombrich, Boak confuses two quite separate elements of Malraux’s thinking and misunderstands the issues at stake.

Distortions of this aspect of Malraux’s thinking remain common. A contemporary French critic, Stéphane Guégan, writes that Malraux ‘condemns’ the \textit{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, 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.\textsuperscript{56}

There is no space here to discuss this alleged blacklist in detail but a few brief comments are called for. 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 what exactly Guégan has in mind in his reference to ‘a certain mannerism’, but it is clear that in \textit{L’Irréel} Malraux writes at considerable length – with some excellent reproductions – on mannerist painters such as Pontormo, Rosso, Parmigianino, and Primaticcio and that his

\textsuperscript{55} See above, page 231.
\textsuperscript{56} Guégan, “La pensée sur l’art d’André Malraux: est-elle toujours utile?,” 89.
account exhibits nothing of the attitude one might associate with a ‘condemnation’. And while Malraux does sometimes appear more moderate and selective in his enthusiasm for English painters (Guégan mentions no names so it is difficult to comment further) and for Caravaggio and Courbet, there is again no sign of any blanket condemnation; and, indeed, as we have seen earlier, Malraux proposes Courbet’s The Artist’s Studio as a worthy candidate for our musée imaginaire.

There are further problems. First, as we have seen, Malraux’s thinking in relation to the arts d’assouvissement primarily concerns nineteenth century Salon painters such as Bouguereau, Rochegrosse, and Bonnencontre and their successor cinematic anti-arts. On occasion he does refer to earlier painters such as Boucher and Greuze, and to the late Hellenistic art of Alexandria which also relied heavily on sentimentality and sensuality, but these are seen as episodic forerunners, the decisive development being that of the nineteenth century ‘academic’ school. Second, Malraux’s argument has nothing at all to do with the kinds of prurient attitudes suggested by the word ‘Puritanism’; nor does it rest on a preference for something called ‘autonomous art’. (As we have seen, he speaks of art creating an ‘autonomous world’; but the notion of an ‘autonomous art’ plays no part in his thinking.) The notion of the ‘anti-arts’ – or the arts d’assouvissement – is linked directly to the fundamental tenets of Malraux’s thinking. It is a form of ‘art’ – visual, musical, or literary – which, for the first time, employs the means at art’s disposal exclusively 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?’ The anti-arts, irrespective of their subject-matter (which may, as Malraux notes, concern crime, or ‘action-adventure’,

57 During his tenure as Minister for Cultural Affairs, Malraux instigated the restoration of the frescos of Rosso and Primaticcio in the Galerie François I” at the Château de Fontainebleau.
58 Malraux includes a substantial analysis 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 Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), esp. 604, 05.
59 See above, page 220.
60 Others he mentions include Cabanel, Bonnat, Cormon and Détaille – as well as the ‘official’ art of the Soviet era, which Malraux saw as the Russian equivalent. See Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 766, 77.
61 See Ibid., 772-74. 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... ’ Malraux, La Psychologie de l’art, Le Musée imaginaire, 85.
and sometimes have little to do with sexuality), employ those means solely for passing gratification. Art, Malraux 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.’63) 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 founded on absurdity’.64 ‘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.65

***

One final matter requires brief attention before our analysis of Malraux’s theory of art is brought to a close. It was argued in Chapter Two that although Malraux wrote quite extensively on particular artists and their works in his early years, it was not until 1934, following the incident in North Africa, that he found himself in a position to develop a comprehensive theory of art.66 After this event, as indicated there, he began to publish a series of speeches and essays in which he first enunciated the major themes that would underpin works such as La Psychologie de l’art, Les Voix du silence and La Métamorphose des dieux. That earlier discussion was somewhat hampered by the fact that the major themes in question had not yet been discussed in any detail. Now that this analysis has been completed, we are in a position to revisit the matter.

An interesting litmus test is an article Malraux published in La Nouvelle Revue Française (NRF) in 1931 (that is, three years before the event in North Africa) to accompany an exhibition of ‘Graeco-Buddhist’ art in the NRF’s art gallery. The topic is of particular interest in the present context because many of the works on display in the exhibition were sculptures of the Gandharan period which, as we saw earlier, also form the subject of a major section of Les Voix du silence entitled ‘The

63 Ibid., 769.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 774. Emphasis in original.
66 See above, page 40.
Metamorphoses of Apollo. The article in the NRF discusses the works in question at some length and raises a number of questions about their significance; but for someone who has also read the relevant section of Les Voix du silence, these earlier comments are much more striking for what they do not say than for what they say. A key aspect of Malraux's account of Gandharan art in Les Voix du silence, as we saw earlier, is the idea of metamorphosis – the claim that this early Buddhist style emerged not as a result of a struggle of ‘influences’ (the claim Duthuit mistakenly ascribes to Malraux) but, as Malraux writes, through a process ‘of metamorphosis in the exact sense of the term’, since ‘the life of Hellenistic art in Asia is not that of a model but of a chrysalis.’ The striking feature of the 1931 article in the NRF is that this theme, and the basic theoretical orientation that goes with it – the notion of art as a defence against the chaos of appearances, revealing, in this case, the ‘other world’ of the absolute to which it was linked – are completely absent. As in all his reviews and essays on art-related topics in the pre-1934 years, Malraux’s approach is characteristically thought-provoking but, unlike his later work, there is no attempt to view the issues involved in terms of a general theory of art and there is no trace of the major themes explored in the present study of that theory.

It is certainly true that there are isolated statements in some of the early articles that seem to presage aspects of Malraux’s later thought. As a number of critics have noted, Malraux's 1922 review of the painting of the artist Demetrios Galanis includes the comment that ‘the Greek genius can be better understood by contrasting a Greek statue with an Egyptian or Asian statue than by studying a hundred Greek statues.’ There is an obvious resemblance here to the proposition in Les Voix du silence, discussed earlier, that our modern response to art is stimulated by the kinds of confrontations of styles made possible by the art museum. But this earlier statement is, precisely, an isolated observation, not a claim linked to a coherent and comprehensive theoretical argument. The same is true, as we saw earlier, of the statements made by one of the characters in La Voie royale to which some critics, such as E. H. Gombrich, have attached so much importance. In that case too, there were resemblances with Malraux’s later, fully developed position – as

---

67 See above, page 170.
68 See above, page 172.
70 See above, page 248.
if, even at this earlier stage, he had partial glimpses of where his thought was leading — but once again there is no sign of the fully developed theory of art we have examined in the previous chapters.

Evidence such as this, in short, simply confirms the argument advanced in earlier discussion. The year 1934 was a watershed in Malraux’s intellectual development. It was only after that date that he was in a position to formulate a notion of ‘man’ — as human adventure — and, as a consequence, to develop a fully-fledged theory of art. The concluding chapter of this study will review the key features of that theory and offer some additional comments about its broader significance.
Chapter Ten

Conclusion

In a recent collection of essays responding to Gallimard’s publication of Malraux’s collected writings on art, one of the contributors expresses the view that Malraux is less concerned with ‘persuading’ his reader than with conveying a sense of his ‘experience of the enigmatic power of art’, and that Malraux ‘places the poetic gesture in the foreground’, eliciting from the reader ‘less a grasp of his arguments than a response to his deeper meanings and his lyricism’. The comment suggests that even among his advocates, of whom the critic in question is one, Malraux’s achievement as a theorist of art – as a clear and systematic thinker on the subject – continues to be misunderstood and undervalued. It is of course plain to see that Malraux does not write about art in the idiom of many contemporary textbooks on aesthetics – for example, in the somewhat dry and clinical mode of textbooks in the school of ‘analytic’ aesthetics. At the very 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 emotion to which the major religions of the past have responded. If his prose is to succeed in conveying a sense of this fundamental emotion, and of the kind of response art provides, Malraux cannot, obviously, remain exclusively at the level of abstract, discursive analysis but must also make use of the evocative powers of language – the ‘poetic gesture’ in the words of the critic quoted above. It would, however, be a serious mistake to assume that this ipso facto prevents him from being a lucid and systematic thinker – as if clarity of thought and the use of the striking verbal image were necessarily mutually exclusive. In reality, as we have sought to show in the present study, the truth is quite otherwise. The theory of art presented in Les Voix du silence and La Metamorphose des dieux is, as this study has sought to show, wholly systematic and perfectly susceptible to analysis in terms of its interlocking, component parts – even if, as we said earlier, this analysis requires a certain ‘dismantling’ of elements that Malraux often strives to

keep together. Suggestions that Malraux is primarily concerned with conveying an
‘experience of the enigmatic power of art’ and that his arguments are of secondary
importance are thus potentially misleading, carrying unfortunate echoes of those
eyear early critical reactions mentioned in the Introduction (whose influence apparently
dies hard) which claimed that *Les Voix du silence* is a ‘prose poem six hundred fifty
pages long’, and that Malraux essentially offers us a ‘lyrical and imaginative, rather
than rational’ account of the world of art. Comments of this kind betray a superficial
reading of Malraux. The understanding of art offered in *Les Voix du silence* and *La
Metamorphose des dieux* certainly makes full use of the expressive powers of
language but is, nonetheless, a carefully thought out, unified whole – a coherent
theory of art in the fullest sense.

Of even greater moment than its systematic nature, however, are the
challenges Malraux’s thinking poses to modern aesthetics and the philosophy of art.
The previous chapters have discussed a number of these but it may be useful to
provide a brief summary here.

A fundamental *conceptual* challenge concerns the idea of the ‘reality’ or
‘world’ to which art is addressed. As indicated in Chapter Four, modern aesthetics
tends, implicitly or explicitly, to operate on the basis of an intellectual schema that
posits art on the one hand, and ‘reality’ or ‘the world’ on the other. Generally
speaking, the focus of attention has fallen heavily on the nature of the putative
*relationships between* the two – whether, for example, it takes the form of
representation, or expression, a specific kind of knowledge, or even perhaps a
transformation of reality into ‘form’. In the process, the prior question of how the
reality *itself* is conceptualised has, as we have argued, been largely ignored; and in
Anglo-American aesthetics at least, one is usually left with the impression that
‘reality’ in the context of art signifies, at best, some vaguely conceived
agglomeration of people, things and events (something like ‘the rest of the world in
which aesthetic objects exist’ to quote one formulation\(^2\)). This in turn has led to a
neglect of the key questions posed in Chapter Four: first, is this ‘reality’
conceptualised as something possessing a *pre-existing* form or order, or is it not?
And second, is it a reality *specific to art*, and if so in what way? This is not the place

\(^2\) See above, page 69.
to revisit the issues raised in that discussion, but, as indicated there, the answers one
gives to both questions are of major theoretical importance, affecting first, whether
or not one considers art to play a secondary, post facto, role in relation to reality, and
second, whether the reality in question concerns the realm of individual experience,
or relates (like history for example) to something beyond that realm. Neither
question can be ignored because both concern the way in which a key element of
modern theories of art – ‘reality’ – is understood. Glossing over them, and resting
content with cursory formulae such as ‘the phenomenal world’, or ‘us, them, and our
world’ (to quote two examples mentioned earlier3) is to leave that element
unexamined and opaque – and to that extent beyond the reach of a theoretical
explanation.

A key feature of Malraux’s theory of art, as we saw, is that he does not let
these questions go unanswered. First, the reality to which art is addressed is quite
clearly not something already understood, even partially: it is addressed to the ‘chaos
of appearances’, the primordial sense of arbitrariness and contingency analysed in
Chapters Three and Four. And second, this reality is not impersonal and ‘objective’,
but something in which, as we saw, the individual recognises that he himself is
implicated – at bottom an emotion, which Malraux describes as ‘the fundamental
emotion man feels in the face of life, beginning with his own’.

These claims alone represent a serious challenge to modern aesthetics, not
only because they provide answers to major questions that aesthetics so often leaves
unasked, but also because, in describing the reality in question in this way, Malraux
has in effect shifted the very foundations on which so much modern aesthetics rests.
Art is no longer addressed merely to a vaguely conceived assortment of
‘phenomena’, however described (whether as the ‘rest of the world’, ‘empirical
reality’, ‘the phenomenal world’, ‘us, them, and our world’, etc), but to a
fundamental emotion – the individual’s sense of a human ‘situation’ in which he
feels himself involved – the same sense that Malraux associates with deeply felt
religious belief. This is not, as we said, an emotion with a simple, familiar name; it
is a ‘metaphysical’ emotion – a sense of wonder, bewilderment and incipient

3 See above, page 69.
insignificance evoked not by a particular object or event but by existence as a whole. Art, Malraux argues, responds to this fundamental emotion by the creation of a rival world; absolutes, such as religions, respond by the discovery of an underlying Truth. In both cases, however, the 'reality' responded to is one in which the individual feels directly implicated, not merely a reality of impersonal objects and circumstances.

An 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 'judgement'. As an 'anti-destiny' — as a negation of the incipient sense of nothingness implicit in the fundamental emotion in question — art, for Malraux, acts on its audiences (as on the artist) in a manner much more akin to a 'revelation', and through the 'hold' or 'fascination' it exerts, rather than as an object of reflective judgement. As we noted, Malraux is not denying that one may, of course, make a judgement post facto: one may decide 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 at a concert. But the psychology of the response itself, he is arguing, is not, as aesthetics has claimed for so long, a judgement — a 'weighing up of comparable significances and qualities' — and a fortiori not, as Kantian aesthetics would require, a 'disinterested' judgement.

Just as importantly, Malraux's theory of art challenges a number of basic understandings of the purpose of art that have traditionally played a prominent part in aesthetics. As we have seen, art for Malraux, whether visual art, literature or music, is not simply a source of sensual and/or intellectual pleasure — 'aesthetic pleasure' as this idea is sometimes described. Nor does it exist simply to gratify 'tastes' (although, as we saw, that might well be a function of the anti-arts), or to 'represent the world', or as an avenue for self-expression, or as a form of communication, or as a mediator of social or political experience, or as a manifestation of qualities such as beauty, harmony or 'the sublime'. This is not to say that some of these factors may not have played a role in art at different times. Despite what is sometimes said, 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

---

4 See above, page 51.
5 See above, page 106.
6 See above, page 104.
Chapter 10 – Conclusion

favour of abstract art, and a large proportion of the art he admires is, as we have seen, ‘representational’. But none of these attributes is, in his view, fundamental to art: none of them captures what art is as a form of human endeavour.

Fundamentally, art for Malraux, like the reality it addresses, has a metaphysical significance. This, as we have said, does not imply that every artist is necessarily concerned with questions of a metaphysical nature: it is not a privileging of Goya over Watteau (whose L’Enseigne de Gersaint happened to be among Malraux’s favourite works) or of The Possessed over Les Liaisons Dangereuses (for which he wrote an excellent preface). But as an activity, as a form of endeavour, art exists, he contends, 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 long periods of human history not even understood as ‘art’ — art’s fundamental role is to ‘deny man’s nothingness’.

Implicitly, Malraux also issues a challenge to aesthetics to begin taking the history of art seriously. The comment by one art historian quoted earlier that aesthetics and art history pass each other ‘like ships in the night’ is only a slight exaggeration. As we noted, and as a reading of recent compendiums such as The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics, The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics, or Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition quickly confirms, modern aesthetics, especially in the Anglo-American arena, continues to prefer an ahistorical approach to its subject matter, focusing heavily on general concepts such as ‘beauty’, ‘aesthetic experience’ or ‘taste’, treated essentially from an atemporal point of view; and when, on occasion, it ventures briefly into the history of art, tends to confine itself to the twentieth and twenty-first century, leaving the rather odd impression that the preceding several millennia are of little consequence (despite their heavy representation in today’s art museums). Indeed, as we saw earlier in

---

7 See above, page 179.
8 Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes, eds., The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics (London: Routledge, 2002). Levinson, ed., Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics. Lamarque and Haugom Olsen, eds., Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition. When history does figure in such collections, it tends to be the history of aesthetics rather than the history of art. The Routledge collection, for example, includes a number of articles on aesthetics from Plato to Postmodernism.
9 Interestingly, an aesthetician of the analytic school has recently made a similar point. Dennis Dutton 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
considering the responses of Dutton and Carroll to the proposition that many cultures did not possess a concept of art, this determination to persist with an abstract, ahistorical conception of art can result in quite uncompromising – if unconvincing – attempts to minimise the importance of historical evidence. And to the limited extent that this school of aesthetics has attempted to incorporate the history of art into its thinking – most notably in the essays by Jerrold Levinson concerning the idea of a chain of ‘regards-as-art’ – the resultant theoretical schema falls well short of a satisfactory explanation. In Malraux’s case, by contrast, the gap between the theory of art and the history of art has been closed. And as we saw, the history of art – of world art, not just Western art – functions in his case not just as a source of illustrative examples but as an integral part of his thinking. For Malraux, there is no ‘art in itself’: art is a series of inventions or it is nothing; it persists only by virtue of the new territory it annexes – its ‘conquests’, to use one of his preferred terms. It is therefore inseparable – like an adventure (or a ‘living destiny’, to quote the phrase Merleau-Ponty so comprehensively misunderstood) – from the specific course it has followed, the specific regions it has traversed. In a very real sense, indeed, one might say that art, for Malraux, is its history (both its past and its present) and cannot be dissociated from it. 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, however, is the explanation he gives of the relationship between art and time, and the consequences that flow from this explanation. In this context, as we have suggested, Malraux is not only questioning traditional patterns of thinking – though he is certainly doing that; he is also remediing a serious, if largely unrecognised, area of neglect in modern aesthetics. In a sense, of course, the question of the temporal nature of art cases, prominently featuring Duchamp’s readymades, or boundary-testing objects such as Sherry Levine’s appropriated photographs and John Cage’s 4’33”’. Unfortunately, in responding to this ‘wider perspective on artistic history across cultures and through history’, Dutton himself clings 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 161.

10 See above, page 209.
11 See, for example, Malraux, Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I), 561,62.
12 There has, however, been a tendency among some critics to suggest that Malraux is only interested in the art of the past. (See for example Guégan, “La pensé sur l’art d’André Malraux: est-elle toujours utile?,” 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 Tète d’obsidienne contains numerous references to twentieth century artists and movements. On the other hand, however, Malraux also takes the previous millennia seriously. Hence the importance they assume in his writings.
has only emerged as an obvious theoretical problem in the last hundred or so years – since the appearance of what Malraux calls ‘the first universal world of art’. Prior to this, when ‘art’ 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. The only art that had then been resuscitated – that had been lost from view for a long period of time – was that 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 part of those very ‘Dark Ages’) poses a problem of a quite different order. Clearly, it will not do simply to say that these works had only just come to light: as we have seen, many had been discovered centuries before and had been ignored, placed in collections of ‘curios’, 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, Titian, Mozart, Beethoven, Racine and Goethe, not to mention the series of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophers (including some, like Kant, who figure prominently in aesthetics itself) whom one might 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 very dubious, and the idea that it belongs within historical time scarcely looking like a promising alternative (since how, as Marx himself recognised, 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? How, in looking at objects from distant times, does one explain, in Malraux’s words, ‘the presence in life of what should belong to death’? 

Modern aesthetics, as we have said, has essentially responded to this problem by ignoring it. Apart from the occasional foray into the field by writers such as

---

13 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.
14 See above, Chapter Seven, note 15.
15 See above, page 196.
Anthony Savile – whose account, as we have seen, signally fails to grasp the nature of the issues at stake – aesthetics and the philosophy of art have said almost nothing about the temporal nature of art for several 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 in this area: he both raises the problem in a quite direct and specific way, and provides a solution. As we saw in Chapter Seven, 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 words that some writers, Gombrich aiding, mistakenly took to be his definitive thoughts) of art’s ‘power of resuscitation’. His answer – the notion of metamorphosis – is, as we have seen, a central theme of his theory of art, a theme he was still stressing in the final volume of *La Métamorphose des dieux* where he wrote that metamorphosis ‘is the very life of the work of art in time, one of its specific characteristics.’ In a world in which everything is subject to the passing of time, he commented in the 1975 television interview cited earlier, art alone is ‘both subject to time and yet victorious over it’ – subject, because inseparable from its own history, victorious, because, though not eternal, it is born to metamorphosis and therefore possessed of a power of resurrection.

Closely linked to this issue is Malraux’s explanation 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 that the question has been addressed in aesthetics, the prevailing approach has been, as we have seen, to treat art as a universal feature of human society. Thus, if any culture appears to regard their painting or sculpture (for instance) in ways that differ from ours – if, for example, they worship 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 the 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

---

16 See above, page 204.
17 See above, page 189.
times, it is argued, are certain fundamental and enduring features which, in Denis Dutton’s words, ‘characterise [art] throughout the whole of human history’.  

Malraux, as we have seen, rejects this thinking. 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 Birth of Venus, or later by Manet’s Olympia, are as impermanent as the imperfectly understood, and seemingly quite alien, state of mind that produced the Mexican images of the Feathered Serpent, or the quite unknown beliefs that led to the creation of the Cycladic feminine figurines around 2500 BC. (Fig. 39 and Fig. 40). Such images are, Malraux would certainly agree, 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 gods or ritual

---

See above, page 161.
figures. The challenge this argument presents to aesthetics is obviously fundamental, placing its very subject matter—art—under a sign of impermanence. Not, as we have said, that Malraux is seeking to devalue art. Quite the contrary. But ‘art’ for Malraux is a name we, in the third millennium AD, give to a series of objects, drawn now from a range of cultures worldwide, living and dead, that manifest a power—a power to create a unified ‘other world’—that has only gone by that name in its current sense, and manifested itself in its current form, for about a century. If we could genuinely experience the responses of the men and women for whom objects such as the Pre-Columbian Feathered Serpents and the Cycladic figurines were 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 imaginary museum, could well be swept away 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 can just as readily find expression in objects created by cultures in which the idea of art is quite unknown.

Implicit in this discussion, of course, is Malraux’s challenge to aesthetics and art history to provide an explanation for the enormous expansion of the world of art over the past century—the emergence of what he terms ‘the first universal world of art’. Malraux’s own explanation was discussed in some detail in the previous chapter and will not be repeated here. As indicated in that discussion, however, modern aesthetics and art history have not only left this event unexplained; they have ignored it and said almost nothing about it. This, surely, cannot be regarded as a minor omission. We are, after all, 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

20 As distinct from the previous, post-Renaissance sense. See earlier, especially page 139 et seq.
L’Homme précaire et la littérature, ‘because we accept it without question.’

But we only require a perspective on art history stretching further back than the past century – a very short period indeed in the overall history of art – to see, as he reminds us, 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: 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. The implicit challenge to modern aesthetics, and to art history, is quite plain.

***

Much of what Malraux has written about art, as the preceding chapters have sought to show, has been misinterpreted by his critics. This study began by quoting Malraux’s own comment to his friend, André Brincourt, in 1973, that ‘of all my books, those I’ve written on 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 provided in the present study is correct, one can perhaps make a reasonable guess. In too many cases, to quote Brincourt’s apt words again, Malraux’s books on art seem to have been ‘skimmed a lot but very little read’. There has thus grown up over time a cluster of simplistic and misleading myths about his theory of art that have been obliged to do duty for careful, reasoned interpretations. There is, for example, 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 the myth of Malraux the unsystematic thinker who, in Boak’s words, offers us a ‘lyrical and imaginative, rather than rational’ account of art. There is the myth of Malraux the indiscriminate borrower of other thinkers’ ideas – recycling Focillon, or offering us ‘Spenglerian metaphysical bric-a-brac’ as Bourdieu alleges. There is the myth, due in large measure to Merleau-Ponty, of Malraux as

---

21 Cf. the similar statement from L’Intemporel quoted above, page 236.
22 See above, page 1.
23 See above, page 11.
adept of a 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 as 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 magical but meretricious juggler of glittering words,’ as Righter writes. There is Gombrich’s other myth of Malraux the ‘expressionist’; the myth of Malraux the Romantic; the myth of Malraux seeking refuge from ‘collective praxis’ in the tranquil world of art. And the list is by no means exhaustive.

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 offered. 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 provide careful and thoughtful analyses of his work – writers in the fields of aesthetics, the theory of art, and art history. In part, this is perhaps understandable: who, after all, would not tend to be discouraged by the catalogue of intellectual sins alleged in the list above? In addition, readers in the English-speaking world have suffered from the disadvantage of not having translations of the important works Malraux published in the later years of his life, above all the last two volumes of _La Métamorphose des 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 journals such as the _Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism_ and the _British Journal of Aesthetics_, is quite remarkable – and much to be regretted. As the present study has sought to show, Malraux addresses himself to a range of key issues in the theory of art – including, as we have seen, some that have been conspicuously neglected – and

---

24 Righter, _The Rhetorical Hero_, 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.’ Alex Potts, "Art Works, Utterances, and Things," in _Art and Thought_, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 95. The rather opaque comments by Blanchot quoted earlier are another case in point. See, for example, page 197.
supports his positions with strong arguments and a wealth of evidence, often including reproductions of relevant works. In those instances where we have paused to compare his position with alternatives, such as those proffered by ‘analytic’ aesthetics, we have seen that Malraux’s arguments are both powerful and persuasive, and free from the defects identified in those with which his positions were compared. In short, Malraux has far more to offer than the present neglect of his works seems to imply. It is certainly true that his thought represents a major challenge – perhaps an uncomfortable challenge – to much current thinking in aesthetics and art history, but both fields would seem to be diminished, not enhanced, by their apparent unwillingness 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 the Romantic notions of genius. For the Renaissance, he argues, 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.’25 For the Romantics, by contrast, the artist was seen as 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’ provided the earthly reflection.26 Malraux’s discussion of Romanticism is one of the elements of his thinking which, for reasons of space, we have touched on only briefly in the present study. These remarks, however, serve as a useful springboard for a final comment on Malraux’s own 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.

---

25 Malraux, La Métamorphose des dieux: L’Intemporel, Ecrits sur l’art (II), 661.
26 Ibid. Cf. the similar comments in L’Homme précaire et la littérature: ‘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’. Malraux, L’Homme précaire et la littérature 86.
Despite what is sometimes suggested, 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 with any attempt to portray the artist as a kind of cultural superhero. What matters essentially to 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 belief in the ‘Coming Man’ with its optimistic faith in science and mankind’s golden future, the bewildering diversity of world-views revealed by anthropology, the rapidity of technological change and the concomitant sense of what Malraux terms a ‘violent sense of transience’, the disorienting awareness he described as early as 1926 as a sense of ‘being unable to grasp a reality of any kind’—a state of mind he diagnosed as ‘nihilistic, destructive and fundamentally negative’—and ultimately the bewildering sense that human life itself has no meaning or purpose—a sense that man is, in his words, merely ‘the most favoured denizen of a universe founded on absurdity’. Malraux’s response, as we have seen, was not to cast about for a new sheet anchor of permanence in a world of continual 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 pragmatic world of action, an alternative most vividly illustrated by his best-known novel, La Condition humaine.

The second phase, which began in 1934, saw the emergence of a concept of man—man 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, as we

27 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, René Saisselin, alleged (Saisselin, "Malraux: From the Hero to the Artist," 259.)—has been a recurring theme amongst Malraux’s less sympathetic critics. Cf. the earlier discussion (page 101) which cited Merleau-Ponty’s admonition that ‘there are no supermen’ and ‘no-one who does not have a human being’s life to live.’

28 See above, page 132.
have seen, is one of the ways (although not the only way\textsuperscript{29}) in which the human adventure can be affirmed. It is an ‘anti-destiny’ – a means by which man constructs a rival, humanised world amidst the indifference of the ‘sorry scheme of things’.

Ultimately, therefore, Malraux’s concern is 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 capable of denying man’s nothingness. He writes in \textit{Les Voix du silence} that ‘an art museum is one of the places that give us the highest idea of man\textsuperscript{30} and, as we have noted before, he chooses his words here with care:\textsuperscript{31} the art museum gives us the highest idea not of the artist, but of \textit{man}. It is not a question of artist hero-worship, and still less, of course, of unquestioning admiration for anything that happens to be placed in an art museum. (Malraux’s thinking, as we have seen, has nothing in common with so-called ‘institutionalist’ theories.) His statement means 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 \textit{musée imaginaire}, is an encounter with a world that, in one of his striking phrases ‘is an object lesson for the gods’,\textsuperscript{32} 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 \textit{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 \textit{tout court}. Every masterpiece, implicitly or openly, tells of a victory over the blind force of destiny.\textsuperscript{33}

Thus while Malraux has much to say about the various issues one might naturally expect to find in a theory of art – issues such as those summarised in this chapter – and while his account represents what one might well call a Copernican revolution in our thinking about art – so radical are the challenges it poses to

\textsuperscript{29} As argued earlier, Malraux also sought to show how this affirmation could take place in thought and deed. See above, page 66.
\textsuperscript{30} Cf. above, page 66.
\textsuperscript{31} Cf. the earlier comments on the phrase ‘one of’, page 66.
\textsuperscript{32} Malraux, \textit{Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l’art (I)}, 882.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 887.
traditional thinking – ultimately, his analysis of the nature and significance of art is more than an analysis of a self-contained category of human activity called ‘art’. At its deepest level, his theory of art is linked to a view of man – and especially man in contemporary, agnostic, Western, and Westernised, cultures. There is no question of art as 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 a civilization bereft of any fundamental value. Art does not link man up with the underlying nature of things: unlike a religion, it does not draw aside the veil of fleeting appearance to reveal the longed-for Truth. It does, however, affirm the significance of the precarious human adventure as against the transitory world of appearances. For modern man, art offers a sense of that ‘profound communion that would otherwise have passed away with the passing of the gods.’

34 Cf. above page 243.


Boas, George "Le Musée inimaginable." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16, no. 2 (1957): 281,82.


Bibliography


---. "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), edited by 

---. L'Espoir, Œuvres Complètes (II). Edited by Marius-François Guyard, 

---. "L'Homme et la culture artistique." In Ecrits sur l'art (I), edited by Jean-


---. La Métamorphose des dieux: L'Irréel, Ecrits sur l'Art (II). Edited by Henri 

---. La Métamorphose des dieux: L'Intemporel, Ecrits sur l'art (II). Edited by 

---. La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l'art (II). Edited by 

---. "La Peinture de Galanis." In Ecrits sur l'Art (I) edited by Jean-Yves Tadié. 


---. "La Question des 'Conquérants!'" Variétés, no. 15 October 1929 (1929): 436.

---. La Tentation de l'Occident, Œuvres Complètes (I). Edited by Pierre Brunel. 


---. La Voie royale, Œuvres complètes (I). Edited by Pierre Brunel. 5 vols. Paris: 

---. Lazare, Œuvres Complètes (III). Edited by Marius-François Guyard, Jean-

---. Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale: La statuaire, Ecrits sur l'Art 


Bibliography


305


