

This twofold human effort, on the one hand to make man participate in the privileged part of his being—or in that which surpasses him within himself—and on the other hand to reduce to a minimum the part of comedy natural to the human state; this double effort is even, perhaps, in the ethical order, the sign of a new human type. Its attempts to develop may be felt with each convulsion of Europe. We have dreamt of a new humanism: Can we see the first signs there? The radio has given a happy destiny to my sentence in 1940: 'May victory rest with those who made war without liking it!' A clear-headed and yet comradely insanity is perhaps the form of human greatness which is seeking to be born at this moment in the snow.

Front d'Alsace, le 5 janvier 1945

EDWARD SACKVILLE-WEST LA LUTTE AVEC L'ANGE

André Malraux. *Editions du Haut Pays. Lousanne. 1943*

TO possess only the first part of this most impressive novel is tantalizing and awkward: tantalizing because Malraux's MSS. are said to have been destroyed by the Germans, so that we cannot tell when we may get the sequel; awkward, because without the succeeding part (or parts) it is very difficult to foresee how the trend of thought is going to be worked out. For this is a philosophical novel, of an ambitious order; starting where *La Condition Humaine* left off (*L'Espoir* and *Le Temps du Mépris* may, for this purpose, be considered as interim works, and none too successful at that), *La Lutte avec l'Ange* continues the debate on the limits and respective value of Action and of Intellect. In this first volume we are given—to borrow a simile from music—the exposition and part of the development of a sonata first movement. We await the rest of the development, the recapitulation and (most important) the coda. Until this arrives one is reduced to a provisional judgement.

Volume one falls into five parts, in each of which an experiencing figure stands at a different remove from Action. (1) *Immediate Action*. The hero—'I'—among other French prisoners at Chartres, during the last days of the fall of France. As the battle recedes, the prologue ends with the significant

words: 'In this place writing is the only way of continuing to live.' (2) *Mediate Action*. The diplomatic intrigues, *à-la-Papen*, of 'my father' in Turkey, in the years preceding the 1914-18 war. His mission ended, he returns to his brothers' home, a forest-bound castle called the Altenburg, in Alsace. (3) *Inaction*. On the eve of war, a conference of eminent European *savants* takes place at the Altenburg. Subject of discussion: Man, changing yet eternal. (4) *Mediate Action*. On the Eastern front, in June 1915, 'my father' takes a spectator's part in the first experimental gas attack by the Germans against the Russians. (5) *Immediate Action*. 'I am in a tank which is attacking the Germans in the spring of 1940.

The author's evident aim, in constructing his novel from these oddly disparate elements, is to lead our eye as it were down a funnel on to the focus of his greatest disapprobation—the intellectual divorced from 'life', who sees the world and its problems through the distorting lens of books. These central scenes in the great Gothic library of the castle, with the rain hissing relentlessly among the immemorial chestnut trees outside, are written with a sardonic dignity and a loftiness of tone which few, if any, other novelists of today can even approach. The rather grim satire of these pages makes the most destructive fun of the Romain Rolland-Kayserling type of 'thinker', with his addiction to pretentious phraseology. '*Une idée n'y naissait jamais d'un fait, toujours d'une autre idée.*' It is all very brilliant, and very telling, while it lasts; but the dice are loaded: History and Science and Art are down the drain before we have time to grasp the enormity of the sacrifice we are being asked to make. The trouble is that, in order to drive home his point, Malraux is more or less obliged to blow up the subject from inside: only an intellect of the highest order could have delivered so formidable an attack on its own methods and conclusions, or have imagined the *mise en scène* with so Flaubertian a beauty and exactitude. That this attack comes from a noble source does not prevent it from being unfortunate, since it ranges Malraux willy-nilly alongside the zanies who wave their arms and shout '*A bas Flaubert! A bas Mallarmé!*' Malraux's own war-cry—'*A bas la psychologie!*'—may seem a little different, but the result of taking it seriously would land us—as Malraux sees, with apparent approval—in an oriental fatalism which could not but alter fundamentally the moral basis of our civilization. Perhaps this

might be a good thing, but it is hardly compatible with the strong neo-humanitarian bias which is Malraux's most striking quality as a thinker. 'Man is what he does' is, I take it, the central idea of this book. Its corollary: 'And if he *does* nothing he is nothing', is unavoidable. I find no difficulty in agreeing; but after reading *La Lutte avec l'Ange* and recalling its predecessors, I cannot avoid the suspicion that by action Malraux means violent (i.e. warlike or revolutionary) action. But this is the ancient, endemic illusion of the intellectual; try voicing it to a serving soldier and you will get a horse laugh. Violent action, he will tell you, is 'before, a joy propos'd; behind, a dream'. It is like the rainbow: you cannot be inside it and aware of it at the same time; and afterwards the memory is distasteful and nugatory. The only kind of action which really justifies both itself and the agent is that of creation, which is never violent, wasteful, or destructive of individual integrity.

It is in the third part of this volume—the narrative of the gas attack—that the author rises to his full stature as a master of descriptive prose. And what a stature! There is not a word too many, not one out of place; the cold, precise bitterness with which the destruction wrought, in plants, animals, and men, by the advancing cloud of corrosion, renders these pages as frightful, and as unrivalled in their art, as the etchings of Goya. The moral protest against inhumanity has never been more trenchantly made. Malraux's N.C.O. sums up the horror he has witnessed in a phrase that will have other echoes for the contemporaries of Buchenwald: '*Non. L'homme n'est pas fait pour être moisi.*'

The implications of the second half of this volume run counter to those of the first; and we are left with the impression that, while war may destroy life, it is condemned to remain for ever outside it. This is a fitting conclusion for one whose passionate love for human beings far surpasses, in continuity and purity, any political system that could be devised to fulfil it. Nearly all novels of action (including those of Hemingway) are addressed to boys—or men with the mentality of boys. It is not the least of this novel's virtues that it is, in the fullest sense, an adult book. If Malraux is not the greatest of contemporary novelists—and I believe that palm should still go to François Mauriac—I can think of no modern novel more deeply original or more superbly executed, so far, than *La Lutte avec l'Ange*.

EDMUND WILSON
TWO SURVIVORS:
MALRAUX AND SILONE¹

DURING the decade before the war, when the tradition of Lenin was still alive and Marxism had still its prestige as a moral and intellectual force, there emerged in Europe two first-rate novelists who, though quite different in other ways, both presented the contemporary world in terms of the Marxist class conflict: the Frenchman, André Malraux, and the Italian, Ignazio Silone.

Malraux and Silone belong to the same European generation: there is only a year between them—Malraux having been born in Paris in 1900, and Silone in a little town of the Abruzzi in 1901. Malraux, who studied oriental languages and went to the East as an archaeologist, became interested in the Chinese revolution, in which, in 1925–1927, he took an active part. He worked with the Communist Kuomintang, and was a member of the Committee of Twelve, which organized the Canton uprising. He wrote out of this experience his two novels, *The Conquerors* and *Man's Fate*, and the first of them brought him to the attention of Trotsky, whose acquaintance he made in the years when Trotsky was living in France and who tried to correct what he regarded as Malraux's out-of-date French romanticism and reconstruct him as an unambiguous Marxist. Later, in the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939, Malraux took part on the Loyalist side as chief of an *escadrille*, and accepted the direction of Moscow in its strategy and policy in Spain. Otherwise, he has remained, however, quite independent both of Trotskyist and of Stalinist influence.

Silone, on the other hand, had been an active revolutionary worker from 1917, when, at the age of seventeen, he became secretary of the peasant movement, syndicalist in its political complexion, which had been launched in his native Abruzzi. Soon thereafter, he went to Rome, where he first became editor of a socialist paper, and then one of the founders, under the inspiration of Moscow, of the Communist Youth International, and where he took part, in 1921, in organizing the Italian Communist Party. In the years between 1925 and 1929, he was a member of the

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