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Jean-Claude Larrat, *Sans oublier Malraux*. Classiques Garnier, 2016. 419 pp. Bibliography and indexes. 39€ (pb) ISBN 978-2-8124-4771-6.

Review by Dr Derek Allan, Australian National University.

The title of this work is food for thought in itself. While there is little sign that Malraux is being forgotten in France, where there is a steady stream of critical texts devoted to his works, the situation in English-speaking countries is rather different. In the two or three decades immediately following the Second World War, Malraux was a well-known name in Anglophone contexts, particularly for his novel *La Condition humaine*, his illustrated works on art theory such as *Les Voix du silence*, and his *Antimémoires*. Since then, however, for reasons not easily fathomed, his star has dimmed considerably and one might be forgiven for wondering if he is in fact being forgotten. Malraux is certainly not without his admirers in English-speaking countries but in the present writer's experience, the question "André Malraux? What did he write?" is not an unusual one today, especially among younger academics.

Jean-Claude Larrat's book may help reverse this situation, at least for those who read French. The work consists of a number of essays on aspects of Malraux's works, written by an author who is clearly well versed in his subject. Books that consist of a collection of essays often run the risk of seeming a little disjointed but Larrat largely avoids this problem by a sensible grouping of his topics and by providing an introduction not only to his book as a whole but also to each section. Happily, he avoids another danger that can sometimes rear its head where Malraux is concerned—an excessive focus on biographical issues. Malraux's varied and colourful career has sometimes attracted writers whose interest lies more in what he did than what he wrote (biographies, not all of which are reliable, have become something of a minor industry), leaving the reader with the impression that Malraux was simply a "man of action" and little else. Larrat refers to events in Malraux's life where relevant, but his principal emphasis lies where it should—on the works themselves, and the fascinating and highly original ideas they contain.

Malraux's intellectual horizon was wide and Larrat's book gives the reader a good sense of its breadth and variety. Topics he covers include: the problematic nature of autobiography and its unavoidable similarities with fiction—an issue that the author of the *Antimémoires* never sought to side-step; the complex and often troubled relationship between the individual and history; the place of ethnology in Malraux's thinking (Malraux being one of the first twentieth-century writers to recognise the full implications of the new "discontinuous" understanding of history that anthropology brought with it); the role of the art museum in our modern relationship with art (where, unlike a number of modern thinkers who view the museum in a negative light, Malraux provides a forceful explanation of why it plays such a vital role in our relationship with art today); the notion of metamorphosis which is a key element in Malraux's thinking; the curious notion of the "farfelu," one famous instance of which is the character of Clappique in *La Condition humaine*; and the changing nature of literature and of the novel in particular. The book discusses many of Malraux's works—it would be hard to think of one that is not mentioned—and in addition offers some very useful comparisons with other contemporary writers,

giving Larrat the opportunity to place Malraux in the context of twentieth-century thought more generally.

Larrat's familiarity with his subject matter pays dividends in helping him correct some common misunderstandings. Criticism of Malraux's works, especially his books on art, has sometimes been marred by a tendency to read him superficially (he has been "skimmed a lot but very little read," as one French writer put it<sup>[1]</sup>), a problem which has, not surprisingly, resulted in some decidedly questionable interpretations of his thinking. One example is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's claim, which seems to have had flow-on effects to other commentators, that Malraux's theory of art rests on a form of Hegelian determinism (Merleau-Ponty accuses Malraux of harbouring unacknowledged "monstres hégéliens").<sup>[2]</sup> This view, which is sometimes enlisted to support the claim that Malraux is an advocate of a "modernist grand narrative," is clearly inaccurate, first because it conflicts directly with Malraux's notion of "discontinuous history"; second, because he rejects it quite explicitly in *Les Voix de silence* and *La Psychologie de l'art* (where, strangely enough, Merleau-Ponty professes to find it); and third, because it would conflict with key aspects of his theory of art. Larrat does not refer to Merleau-Ponty specifically, but he perhaps has him in mind when he points out, quite rightly, that Malraux's thinking is "quite unlike the grand nineteenth-century philosophies of History, especially Hegelian and Marxist, which are both universalist and dependent on the idea of progress" (p. 166).

Larrat's book covers a lot of ground and explores many more aspects of Malraux's thought than it is possible to discuss here. One that perhaps deserves to be singled out, however, is Malraux's thinking about the "death of man" and the predicament of Western civilization that has resulted. Malraux, Larrat notes, was aware that "l'homme est mort, après Dieu" as early as 1926 and said so clearly in *La Tentation de l'Occident* (incidentally, well before Foucault broached the same theme, rather more tentatively, in *Les Mots et les choses*). In Malraux's case, the meaning of the proposition is quite clear. In the eighteenth century, a collapsing Christian faith was replaced by a form of humanism based on reason and science, and in the following century this was supplanted by a teleological notion of man ("L'Homme à naître" or "Man yet to be born," as Malraux describes the idea in *Les Voix du silence*<sup>[3]</sup>) which we associate with thinkers such as Hegel and Marx. Both conceptions of man have since disintegrated (destroyed by, among other things, two world wars and the extermination camps) and modern western civilization is now in a state of limbo (hence the collective title of the "Antimémoires": *Le Miroir des limbes*) in which the humanistic beliefs that replaced Christianity have died and there is nothing to take their place.

Thus, in a well-known statement to which Larrat refers, Malraux describes the modern West as the first civilization "that is aware that it does not understand man's significance."<sup>[4]</sup> What does the future hold? What new significance of man is likely or possible? Larrat provides an interesting discussion of the point, comparing Malraux's thinking with that of Peter Sloterdijk who is quoted as suggesting that modern man is striving to put an end to history and to enter a post historical stage—an "eternal present." Critics occasionally suggest that Malraux also offers predictions about the future but in fact the evidence is quite otherwise. The very nature of such "bouleversements de l'âme," he writes in a statement that Larrat quotes, "throws doubt on any predictions about them," and in any case such an event may well be a long time in coming. Moreover, he asks, with a characteristic willingness to consider all possibilities, "Would a civilization strongly immunised against the need for life to have a meaning be any more surprising than was the triumph of Christianity at the death of Tiberius?" (pp. 163-164).

*Sans oublier Malraux* makes a valuable contribution to the critical literature surrounding Malraux's works. Clearly written and judiciously expressed, by an author who is very well acquainted with his topic, it explores Malraux's multifaceted thought from a variety of angles and adds significantly to our understanding of the broader intellectual context in which he wrote. It also reminds us of the vitality and originality of Malraux's thought, and in doing so makes us wonder why the possibility of his being forgotten could even arise.

## NOTES

[1] André Brincourt, *Malraux, le malentendu* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1986), p. 120. My translation.

[2] The essay in question is: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le Langage indirect et les voix du silence," in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960). It has been translated into English as "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1993).

[3] André Malraux, *Les Voix du silence, Ecrits sur l'art (I)*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 731.

[4] *La Métamorphose des dieux: Le Surnaturel, Ecrits sur l'art (II)*, ed. Henri Godard (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 37. My translation.

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