

**Robert Thornberry**

Derek Allan

*Art and the Human Adventure. André Malraux's Theory of Art*  
Rodopi: Amsterdam/New York, 2009, 340 pages.

This new study, on Malraux's reflections on art, comes to us care of a philosopher steeped in aesthetics and art history as well as several schools of contemporary literary criticism. Written in English – the first such analysis of Malraux's essays on art in that language since *The Rhetorical Hero* by William Righter (1964) – it is a consistently outstanding piece of research that will most certainly be welcomed – particularly, though by no means exclusively – by Malraux readers whose French is either tentative or non-existent, to name (albeit arbitrarily) but two categories of potential readers. The timing could hardly be more propitious since Malraux's major essays on the philosophy of art were reissued by Gallimard in two volumes in October 2004 in the highly prestigious Bibliothèque de la Pléiade series. The exhaustive critical apparatus appended to each of these weighty tomes by a team of outstanding Malraux specialists goes hand in glove with Professor Allan's lucid analysis of the same corpus. This fortuitous complement enhances the usefulness and originality of all three works, and should spark a radical reassessment of Malraux's stature as a theorist of art.

In his introductory chapter – an arresting synthesis of the main issues raised in his book –, Professor Allan leaves no doubt whatsoever as to where he stands with regard to the value and relevance of Malraux's theory of art. In forthright fashion he presents his research as a "direct challenge" (p. 15) to the lowly status currently afforded Malraux's contributions to aesthetics, a situation that has obtained for several decades, that is to say, for far too long. In establishing the general parameters for his study, Derek Allan reminds us that there is a near consensus among art historians, academic critics, generalists, and philosophers who persist in dismissing Malraux's theories as inconsequential. As he ably shows, through close scrutiny of the works in question, whole sections of *La Psychologie de l'art* and *La Métamorphose des dieux* have been studiously ignored, or misunderstood, or (in some extreme cases) not even read by many of his most strident detractors. In order to redress the situation, Professor Allan claims that a "rediscovery of André Malraux's works on the theory of art [...] represents a vitally important contribution to modern thought, not only in relation to

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art but also to broader questions about the fundamental meaning of human life. Malraux provides a truly revolutionary understanding of the nature and significance of art. [H]e also offers a glimpse of a new humanism, – a tragic humanism, to borrow his own phrase – which is compatible with the agnosticism and disenchantment of the world in which we now live” (pp. 15-16).

Cogently argued, elegantly written and painstakingly researched, *Art and the Human Adventure* stands out too by virtue of its copious and informative footnotes. Some thirty or so illustrations – which include Rembrandt, the caves of Lascaux, Grünewald, Giotto, Titian, Picasso, Goya, da Vinci, Vermeer, and others – are faithfully reproduced in glorious color. The author’s main objective is to retrieve Malraux’s philosophy from generations of critics and academics who, for the most part, have little or no professional training in art history, and who are often content to substitute invective for reasoned debate.

Early admirers of Malraux’s writing and *vision du monde* were often disbelieving of the venom that once greeted *La Psychologie de l’art*, *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des Dieux*. They were surprised by the volume and variety of disparaging remarks which included accusations of “negligence, ignorance and fraud” (Georges Duthuit) leveled at Malraux’s essays on aesthetics. Consider the following representative sample of pejorative remarks: Malraux’s art books are “a cultural patch-work with Spenglerian metaphysical bric-à-brac” (Pierre Bourdieu); or they are “hegelian monstrosities” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty); or “dazzling pieces of sophisticated double talk” (Ernst Gombrich). It is very much to Professor Allan’s credit that, in contextualizing such extreme views, he is able to maintain strict scholarly objectivity and eschew polemics. Instead, and with consummate skill, he exposes the errors and misinterpretations that prevail among various eminent art historians.

*Art and the Human Adventure* is a brilliant example of what could be described as *critique engagée*. Malraux’s essays on art have inspired countless readers, many of whom first discovered him as a novelist, albeit one whose fictions contain memorable dialogues on art and incisive observations on different artists. Initially, they were often dismayed by Malraux’s seemingly inexhaustible knowledge of art history. Future generations of Malraux specialists and lay readers alike will therefore be most indebted to Professor Allan for showing the way to a greater understanding of *La Psychologie de*

*l'art*, once described (by Gaëtan Picon) as "one of the greatest books in all modern literature" (p. 17).

For the most part, *Art and the Human Adventure* revolves essentially around three major works by Malraux: *La Psychologie de l'art*, *Les Voix du silence* and *La Métamorphose des dieux*. Nevertheless the author does not hesitate to draw upon the wide spectrum of Malraux's other writings in order to demonstrate the centrality of certain literary topoi. With a single exception, the *retour sur la terre* episode (Ch 2), a particularly insightful chapter, he eschews the biographical approach though there are inevitably sporadic references to Malraux's entire *œuvre*.

In order to chart a path through the dense thicket of Malraux's thought, Professor Allan opts for a broadly thematic approach, devoting chapters to "The Years Before 1934" (Ch. 1); "The Human Adventure" (Ch. 2); "Art: A Rival World" (Ch. 3); "Art and Creation" (Ch. 4); "The Emergence and Transformation of Art" (Ch. 5); "Art and Time" (Ch. 6); "The First Universal Work of Art" (Ch. 7); "The Anti-Arts" (Ch. 8); "Art, History and the Human Adventure" (Ch. 9). Furthermore, as some of the chapter headings and the choice of subtitle clearly show, the author frames his ideas and aperçus within the broad concept of humanism: tragic humanism. He reinforces this concept by inscribing, *en exergue*, on a separate page, an introductory statement from Malraux's 1946 speech for UNESCO: "A form of humanism is still possible, but we need to be quite clear that it is a tragic humanism."

This is a problematic concept, especially in the year 2009. Largely superseded by more radical schools of critical inquiry (deconstruction, psychoanalysis, semiotics, etc), humanism may now seem to be a slightly antiquated if not counter-productive approach. After all, in the fifties and sixties, some of the earliest monographs on Malraux promoted a simpler version of humanism as the key to a better understanding of his *weltanschauung* and thematic. It is very much to Derek Allan's credit that, in this outstanding book, he has managed both to rekindle interest in a major philosophical current and, at the same time, to reexamine its universality in order to illuminate André Malraux's highly original, though unjustly neglected, writings on art.