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A Spiritual Dialogue with the Other in Malraux's *La Condition humaine*

Dr. Nina S. Tucci

University of Houston

Department of Modern & Classical Languages

612 Agnes Arnold Hall

Houston, Texas 77204-3006 USA

Email: ntucci@uh.edu

In his book *Rage for Order*, Austin Warren says the following:

“The philosopher must decide between alternatives or reduce his thesis and antithesis to some underlying or overlying synthesis. But the novelist of a speculative turn need not push his positions to a stand. He can divide his conflicting insights between his characters A novelist has the latitude of imaginatively projecting states of mind, giving *experimental* fulfillment to what in the man are but hints and implications”¹

At the outset of the twentieth century, the French novelist, André Malraux, in an article entitled

“The Question of *The Conquerors*,” echoes Warren’s thesis: “. . . the novelist, after the philosopher, has become a man who proposes - whether he wants to or not - a certain number of modes of being . . .”²

Malraux, by both a lived and intellectual encounter with the Orient, sought to expand the horizons of the Western psyche. He rejected, however, the Oriental tenet that man is but a fragment in the chain of creation, anchored in a divine matrix, which gives rise to the multiplicity of forms in the relative world, and that the goal of man’s existence was to be absorbed into this divine ground, through sustained meditation or other forms of contemplation. He equally rejected the extraverted Western notion of the supremacy of Man in the universe and his ability to dominate Nature through human action. Instead, drawing from both, Malraux experiments with creating alternate ways of being that might give new meaning to life and death for Western man in the human realm.

In his preface to *Le Temps du Mépris (The Days of Wrath)*, Malraux addresses the difficulty of establishing an equilibrium between opposite forms of being: “It is difficult to be a man. But no more in becoming one by deepening *his communion* with man than by cultivating *his difference*, and the first nourishes (him) with as least as much force as the second, through which man is a man, through which he goes beyond himself, creates himself, invents or conceives himself.”³ In this essay, we have chosen examples of Malraux’s thesis from *La Condition humaine (Man’s Fate)*, published in 1933 by Gallimard, also the recipient of *le prix Goncourt*.

The failed communist revolution of 1927 in Shanghai provides the backdrop against which each of Malraux’s heroes strives to validate himself in a manner consonant with his idiosyncratic tendencies and, at the same time, sacrifices personal concerns for the collective. Unlike the

philosopher who creates rubrics for his ideological treatises, the heroes of the novelist become living embodiments of ideas. For example, Communism, Confucianism and Bushido become experiential codes of human behavior that motivate different forms of behavior in different heroes.

In Malraux's universe, there is a parallel between the anti-individualist communion of Confucianism and the classless society of Communism. Another comparison between Confucianism and Communism resides in the concept of multiplicity within unity. The Confucian tenet holds that man is a link in the chain of a hierarchal social order. The many and the one in *Man's Fate* are conceptualized in the multiple paths of the heroes united by a common ground. The hero establishes an I-Thou relationship (the man to man-ness of Confucianism) with his fellowman while participating in the revolution and the hero becomes aware that, through action, he can take positive steps to go beyond a limited sense of self, and at the same time, change the world in which he lives. Spiritual autonomy, then, does not merely consist of a personal union of ego with a transcendent Self. Action born of individual codes of being are offered for the communal good. In throwing open the portals of the Western psyche to a dialogue with various, spiritual systems of the Other, Malraux, was to discover yet another value system that might give meaning to death: the Japanese code of Bushido. Bushido is a code of conduct, which emphasizes loyalty and courage, and which confers upon the hero the choice of death through the ritual of hara-kiri, the act of voluntary suicide. Malraux experiments with this ethical value that would allow Western man to act upon his own death, and restore to him the honor of being a man. Each one achieves a sense of serenity because each chooses death in accordance with personal ideology, while anchored in a fraternal union. We have chosen a few key players to illustrate Malraux's experiment with incorporating into consciousness what C. G.

Jung would call the Oriental shadow of the Western psyche, each in accordance with his own innate predispositions.

Kyo Gisors was the Soviet emissary who oversaw the clandestine operations for the ill-fated insurrection. In Kyo, the issue of an Occidental father and a Japanese mother, East and West are genetically contained. Kyo's grounding in Oriental thought came through his Japanese education for he had lived in Japan from his eighth to his seventeenth year. He is described as being imbued with the Bushido code of behavior in which heroism had content and in which life could be lived with serenity in the face of death because the individual was the master of his own destiny. Kyo's double heritage allowed him the psychological flexibility to move seamlessly from one sensibility to the other. On the level of political action, the I-Thou relationship consisted of a fraternal flow between him and his comrades, between himself and the collective whole in which individual lines are obscured. His Western will and commitment to revolutionary action is put at the service of an Asian tenet for union with the world, which Kyo transforms into union with his cause and his people. Later, with the demise of the insurrection, Kyo is thrown in prison, and there meets with a death that is consonant with his philosophy. Kyo transcends the barrier of relative time and moves into the cosmic realm of mythical time where the vision becomes boundless, which Abraham Maslow would call a "peak experience."⁴ This moment of ecstasy culminates in the act of hara-kiri. Western will coupled with serenity of his Bushido training taught him that he was master of his own destiny. Such is not the case with another comrade, the Russian communist, Katow.

Katow's I-Thou relationship with his comrades stands on tolerance and compassion. Katow's knowledge that courage is unequally distributed among men, coupled with a human capacity for

self-sacrifice determines his decision to give his portion of cyanide to two comrades whom he deems less able to be burnt alive than he. In Katow's scale of values, man cannot achieve the full stature of his human dignity if he cannot put the needs of his fellowman before his own, for the true definition of a hero is one who has the courage to act in the face of fear. His serenity comes from the fact that he acts upon the circumstances that life presents him, in accord with his own nature. He experiences a moment of transcendence when he admits to the prison officer his sacrifice of self in favor of his two comrades. The localized man in Katow is dwarfed and the archetypal shadow of his heroism emerges and casts an image on the wall that reaches mythic proportions, a Christ figure who repeats the gesture that one lays down one's life for a fellowman.⁵ Death, however, is not the only solution to the dichotomy of being and doing. Hemmelrich, Katow's friend tells another story.

Hemmelrich is described as a man who "had betrayed his youth, his desires and his dreams" and who is prevented from full participation in the revolution by his responsibilities to a wife and sick child (CH., 146). But if the archetype of death and rebirth is one, its manifestations are many, and Hemmelrich's negative life experience can be construed as the period of initiation that precedes liberation. For Hemmelrich, as Kyo had predicted, his period of obligatory inactivity would come with the death of his wife and child. The period of darkness is over. This moment of awakening when the initiate becomes cognizant of those inner forces that give him an identity. "Being" and "doing" will be consummated in the act of imposing death on the enemy, an act that is permitted in the state of war. The act will coincide with and reflect all the various facets of Hemmelrich's suffering. It not only restores balance to the inner man, but also rectifies the injustices of his external reality. It makes amends for the agony and death of his wife and child. Hemmelrich goes through a personal ritual in which forced inactivity is leveled off by action.

From this union of the opposites, there emerges a transformed individual who survives the insurrection to carry on his work on another level of consciousness. Hemmelrich shows that man can take what the world has to offer, and through experience, transform it into a living ethic. At the end of the novel, we learn that Hemmelrich is working in a factory. He writes that it is the first time of his life that his work has meaning and he is not merely waiting patiently to “croak” (CH., 268-69). For Malraux, however, the revolution is a breeding ground for diverse forms of language, for instance the language of terrorism.

It is the story of the Oriental terrorist, Tchen, who had received an Occidental education. Tchen’s Occidental indoctrination is two-fold: the Christian teaching of the grandeur of each individual soul is later substituted, under the tutelage of Gisors, with the notion of grandeur through action. Occidental extraversion, however, is balanced with an inherent Oriental introversion. Kyo makes an incisive comment on Tchen’s complex character. “Perhaps Tchen is a fly that secretes its own light” (CH., 129). This Oriental notion that each man is a temporal container of absolute Truth is concisely stated by the Buddha: “. . . be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Look not for refuge to anyone beside yourselves.”⁶ Here is Tchen’s goal as stated to a comrade: “The complete possession of self.” (CH., 150). The teachings of the great Oriental master are subtly reconfigured to fit another mode of being, terrorism.

The task of killing an arms trafficker reveals to Tchen the essence of his true nature. He discovers that he is not a revolutionary but a kind of priest performing a sacrificial rite. Tchen’s initial disorientation gives way to a transpersonal union with the rhythms of the universe. When

Tchen re-crosses the threshold from sacred time to profane time, he realizes that the act of murder and the transformative process that it had set in motion would not be understood by his comrades, not because the act in itself was uncommon but *because his behavior had become mythical*. In order for mythical behavior to become a reality and have its own specific identity, the gesture must be repeated. The failure of his first attempt on the life of Chang-Kai-Shek represents a moment of clarification for Tchen of the inner exigencies of his own nature and of the specific path he has chosen: “It was necessary that terrorism become mystical” (CH.,189). Tchen survives a second aborted attempt on Chang-Kai-Shek, and like Kyo, Tchen reserves for himself the right to die by his own hand, death by a revolver. In a sense, Tchen resembles the “religious man’ described by Mircea Eliade in the *Sacred and the Profane*.⁷ For such a man, neither time nor space is homogeneous. From the chaos of the world at large, the religious man creates a fixed point in the relative fluidity of profane time and space. For Tchen, this fixed point is the revolution, and within its parameters, he seeks to establish his own unique cosmogony. Tchen’s psychological orientation reveals elements of his innate Oriental heritage and acquired Christian training. His act is reminiscent of Christ’s shedding of blood for man, but the emphasis has shifted from the divine to the human sphere. Christ was a mediator between man and God; Tchen’s goal was to become a mediator between man and an archetypal *idea* of the revolution. (CH., 53). As a humanized Christ figure, Tchen parallels the historical Christ who lived in relative time and was therefore subject to death. In his archetypal life, he was a mythmaker. For future terrorists, his new act must be referred to as the primordial terrorist act of *illo tempore*.⁸ Tchen seeks to survive through the archetypal aspect of his life, for the “mythical character of a life,” says Jung, is just what “expresses its universal validity.”⁹

Action and the knowledge of the ramifications of action are not simultaneous. In the annals of

human history, the initiate who steps out to purify himself of the parochial setting of his own cultural customs, has almost always done so under the tutelage of a master, be he called a shaman, a guru, etc. Such an individual is the shamanic figure, Gisors.

The shaman, in a heightened state of awareness, is in communication with nature because he is a part of it; therefore, the action of the universe supposedly flows through his being and he participates in it non-actively. Gisors has achieved a certain degree of detachment, for we are told that even though he formed the revolutionary cadres of North China, “he did not participate in the action” (CH., 35). Gisors does experience fleeting glimpses of that transpersonal field, but most importantly, he is the focal point of the basic human values that maintain the integrity of the community and define relationships between its members.¹⁰ Gisors merits the title of teacher because his experience of the world and of men has permitted him a measure of wisdom. His thoughts during a conversation with one of the characters of the novel reveals his psychological acuity: [His interlocutor] “did not guess that the penetration into his character came from the fact that he recognized in [him] the fragments of his poly-psyhic nature, and that one could have created the most subtle portrait of it in uniting his examples of perspicacity.” (CH., 186). This is what Jung calls becoming cognizant of the shadow, becoming aware of those values that we attribute to the Other, on the individual, and archetypically, on the cultural level. It is in this sense that we can speak of Gisors’ passing over to the Orient to experiment with that culture’s concept of being and its solution to the problem of death. To an extent, Gisors fits the mold of the sage as Chuang Tzu, the Taoist philosopher, would have described him:

“Though he did not follow other men in their follies, he did not judge them severely - he knew he had follies of his own He does not set himself apart from others and above him. And yet

there is a difference: he differs in his heart from other men, since he is centered on Tao He is also aware of his relatedness to others, his union with them . . He lives it.”¹¹

Gisors is not centered on Tao, but like the Taoist sage, he is centered on men and has attained sufficient wisdom to be able to say with authority, but more importantly with compassion:

“Every man is insane . . . But what is a human destiny except a life of effort to unite this fool and the universe . . .?” (CH., 273). Gisors’ wisdom is a wisdom of becoming. Gisors, like all the heroes of *La Condition humaine*, is a prototype of Malraux’s new man. They stand poised at the threshold between East and West, possessing the overarching images necessary to create a man “for all seasons,” a man able to adapt and share in the collective cultural values of East and West, able to contribute to a coherent world culture without losing personal identity. This does not mean that they foresee the consequences of their efforts in the light of this knowledge for “to continue acting . . . When one doesn’t know what one is doing amounts to experimenting with the truth.”¹²

¹ Austin Warren, *Rage for Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 89.

² André Malraux, “La Question des Conquérants,” *L’Herne* (1982): 33.

³ André Malraux, *Le Temps du Mépris*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1935), 12-13 (author’s translation).

⁴ Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

⁵ André Malraux, *La Condition humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 252 (All further references to this work will be indicated in the text as CH. with the page number. Author's translations).

⁶ Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 106.

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Le Sacré et le profane* ((Paris: Gallimard, 1965) (author's translation).

⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 94.

⁹ C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works*, vol. 11 (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 409.

¹⁰ Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), 4.

¹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 29-30.

¹² John Dunne, *The Way of all the Earth* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc, 1972), 101.