

Malraux's Mission

Official symposia and ceremonies marked France's "Malraux autumn" last year.

But they were not the end of interest in the writer who became his nation's first minister of cultural affairs. His vision of the unifying power of national culture grows even more pertinent, to France and to other nations, in these contentious times.

by Herman Lebovics

On November 23, 1996, amid elaborate and solemn ceremony, the remains of the writer, freedom fighter, and statesman André Malraux were transferred—*translated* is the mediievally correct term—from the Verrières cemetery outside Paris to France's highest place of honor, the Pantheon. President Jacques Chirac spoke on the occasion, though not so movingly as Malraux had himself in 1964, when, as minister of cultural affairs, he presided over the same rite for the Resistance hero Jean Moulin.

The tradition of translating the remains of France's secular heroes to the Pantheon (exclusively a men's club, until Marie Curie's recent arrival) extends to the rise of the First Republic in 1791. But even before that, the domed church that Louis XV built at the highest point in Paris's Latin Quarter, on the site of an even older abbey church, provided earthly shelter for the remains of Saint Geneviève and an assortment of sacred relics. These were unceremoniously tossed out in 1791, when the structure was given its classical Roman name, but scenes from the saint's life adorning the interior walls and a cross at the top of the dome suggest a religious legacy that three secularizing republics have been unable entirely to erase.

The Pantheon's mingling of sacred and secular elements provides a particularly appropriate setting for the remains of André Malraux (1901–76). No other Frenchman in this century, save perhaps

his patron Charles de Gaulle, worked harder to sacralize the French republic. De Gaulle's strategy was to recover the glory of France through a bid for European and even global leadership, the strategy of great power politics. Malraux sought to do so through the preservation and extension of French culture, hoping to make it not only a powerful force in the world but the pre-eminent force for unification in a divided nation.

The Pantheon reburial is only one recent attempt at enshrining Malraux. In his new biography of the man, *Signé Malraux* (1996), Jean-François Lyotard, the philosopher famous for having announced the demise of all grand "metanarratives" such as Christianity and Marxism, declared his deep affinity with Malraux. According to Lyotard, the Malraux of the years after World War II was a man courageously living and acting in a world with neither the "God-story" nor any of the humanist variants to guide him.

Lyotard's attempt to annex the spirit of postwar Malraux to his rewarmed existentialism is understandable, but it requires him to play a little too loose with the biographical facts. After all, how existential is a man who embraces the ideal of a renewed France, with art as the weapon and de Gaulle as its savior?

Still, Lyotard's gambit points us toward a central mystery in the life and career of Malraux. How did this man who lived through so many of the nonre-

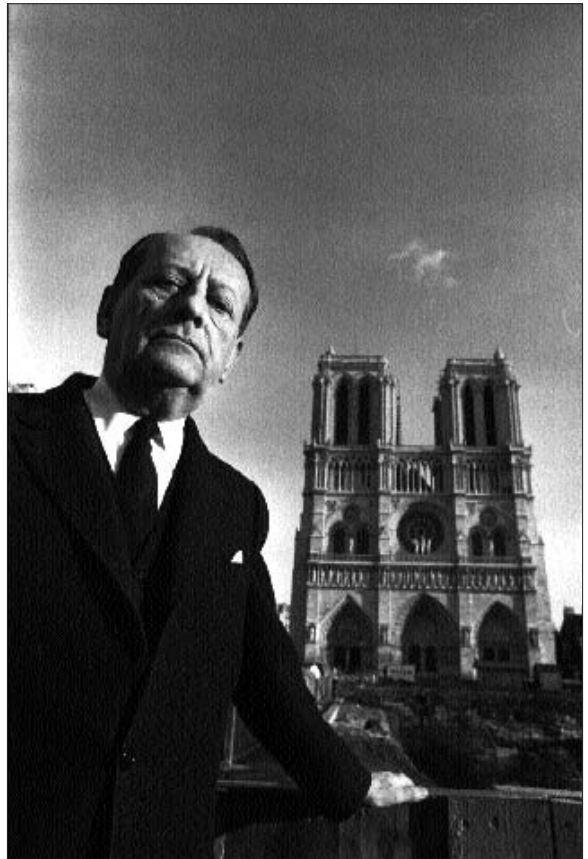
ligious metanarratives of the 20th century—aestheticism, communism, anticolonialism, and finally a kind of mystical nationalism—do so while preserving the persona of the rebel—a rebel, moreover, who seemed to invent himself, again and again, under the pressure of some of the more dramatic circumstances of our century? How do we make sense of this human paradox, this rebellious true believer?

His beginnings hardly augured a heroic life. Born in 1901 into a lower-middle-class family, Malraux spent most of his childhood and adolescence in the drab Paris suburb of Bondy, where his mother, grandmother, and aunt tended a small grocery store near the local railroad station. (His father, a man of uncertain employment who gambled on the stock market, separated from Malraux's mother in 1905.) By the time he had finished elementary school, in 1914, he had begun reading widely, if unsystematically, both French and foreign authors, and, when possible, attending the theater in Paris—habits he kept through his middle-school years, while the Great War took its heavy human toll. Formal schooling ended at age 18, when his application for admission to the Lycée Condorcet was refused. He later wrote that he had hated his childhood, but being the only male in a house with three doting women must have made him into what the French call a *fils gâté*, a spoiled son.

How to live? He could always be a grocery clerk. But that was not very promising. So Malraux began the practice of self-invention that would characterize his entire life. Years before, while a schoolboy, he had found books at bargain prices in the stalls and quayside boxes of Paris's second-hand dealers. He now devoted himself full-time to haunting the used book and print dealers, looking for unnoticed treasures, which he then resold to upscale

rare book and antique print dealers. Postwar economic uncertainties had driven French investors into safe and tangible investments, including rare books, prints, and objets d'art. Systematically working the shops, he lived from his work as a *chineur*, as such scourers were called, and at the same time continued his aesthetic self-creation.

One of his buyers, the rare book dealer René-Louis Doyen, started a literary magazine in 1920. He invited the young aesthete to write something for the first issue. Malraux's article was appropriately trendy: an appreciation of cubist poetry. Valuing both his entrepreneurial skills



André Malraux (1901–1976), minister of cultural affairs, stands before Notre Dame in the late 1960s.

and his aesthetic judgment, another dealer offered to underwrite a literary series, the authors of which Malraux would select. He moved then to the avant-garde leftist review *Action*, and then to edit books on cubist art for the important dealer of avant-garde art, Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler. Kahnweiler

would publish Malraux's first book, *Paper Moons* (1921), a fantasy with strange animals acting in surreal ways, illustrated by Juan Gris, Georges Braque, and Fernand Léger.

As Malraux moved around the Latin Quarter, he met and became friends with most of the leading literary figures of the day: Blaise Cendrars, Louis Aragon, Jean Cocteau, Raymond Radiguet, Paul Éluard, Tristan Tzara, Antonin Artaud, Erik Satie, André Derain, Maxim Gorki, Ilya Ehrenburg. Most important, he formed a fast friendship with the poet Max Jacob, a Breton-born Jew whose conversion to Catholicism would fail to spare him from death in a concentration camp in 1944.

Throughout the 1920s, Malraux lived a calculated if feverish aesthetic existence, sporting a fresh rose in his buttonhole and striding through the Latin Quarter in a silk cape. An early biographer, Jean Lacouture, described the young artist as "a cautiously subversive dandy, a poet alertly spacey, a talented critic, polymath, collector of rare sensations, and aesthete of unquenchable curiosity, [who] threw himself into the movement of the day."

While working at *Action*, Malraux met and fell in love with Clara Goldschmidt, the daughter of German Jews who had settled in France before the war. At the review, Goldschmidt specialized in finding and translating German authors who were part of the Weimar Republic's lively intellectual scene. In his first phone call to her, she recalled in her memoirs of those years, she already recognized "the value he attached to each word, the nuance which individualized for him this one, or discolored that one." Malraux courted her successfully by, among other little sweet things, telling her that she was the most brilliant person—after Max Jacob—he had ever met. They eloped to Italy and, when their money ran out, returned to be mar-

ried at a local *mairie* in Paris.

The aesthete's pursuits put little food on the table, but for two years the new couple lived adequately off investments in Mexican mines that Malraux had made with his wife's small inheritance. When the mine stocks plunged in 1923, André proposed to Clara that they go to Cambodia and rob a temple, or at least as much of one as they could carry out of the jungle. The Royal Road, extending from Siam (Thailand) to Cambodia, had many well-known temples along its way, the most famous of which, Angkor-Wat, stood at its southern terminus. They would travel the road, find one of the lesser temples, and, as Clara remembered him saying, "take some statues and sell them in America."

So off to Indochina they went, locating the temple of Baneai-Srey and making off with some of its reliefs. On their return to Phnom Penh, however, their plan was foiled. They were arrested by the Sûreté, the colony's counterpart to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and were charged with archaeological theft. Only by mobilizing the literary world back in Paris did Clara Malraux save her husband from a three-year prison term. Impressed by the great names on the petition that she and André Breton, the surrealist chief, had circulated, the judge suspended the sentence.

This brush with colonial justice and a new friendship with his Saigon lawyer, Paul Monin, an active supporter of the Vietnamese in their growing resistance to French rule, moved Malraux toward involvement with the anticolonial struggle. That such activity would allow the as yet unrepentant plunderer to get back at the authorities who had thwarted his collecting and charged him with a crime made the enterprise all the more compelling.

With Monin, Malraux launched an opposition newspaper, *L'Indochine*. The

> HERMAN LEBOVICS, a former Wilson Center Fellow, is professor of history at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. He is the author of *The Alliance of Iron and Wheat in the Third French Republic, 1860–1914: Origins of the New Conservatism* (1988) and *True France: The Wars of Cultural Identity, 1900–1945* (1992). He is currently completing a book on Malraux's years as minister of cultural affairs. Copyright © 1997 by Herman Lebovics.

Biographer Jean Lacouture described Malraux as ‘a cautiously subversive dandy, a poet alertly spacey, a talented critic, polymath, collector of rare sensations, and aesthete of unquenchable curiosity.’

timing couldn't have been better. The Chinese Revolution was still unfolding; its Russian counterpart was not a decade old. Young Vietnamese intellectuals—both the nationalists and the communists—were beginning to mobilize their compatriots for the struggle against French rule. Publishing the first of 46 issues in June 1925, a talented team of European, Vietnamese, and Eurasian contributors waged a spirited if brief journalistic campaign to win greater rights for the people of Indochina.

Regretting that he had licensed the troublemaking paper, the colonial governor-general decided to shut it down. In the last issue, published on August 14, Malraux warned the French against the folly of denying Cochin Chinese and Vietnamese access to France and to French culture: “Young Indochinese will leave and be educated elsewhere. Full of resentment, they will return hostile to the France that made them second-class subjects of the Empire.” Twenty-five years later, as minister of cultural affairs, he would express a similar belief in the binding power of national culture. Some claim that Malraux acquired his belief in the political uses of culture during his involvement with the communists of the Popular Front in the mid-1930s, but it is clear that the revelation came 10 years earlier, in Vietnam.

After this period of political activism, Malraux began to turn his Indochinese experience into literature. During his return to France, he drafted *The Temptation of the West* (1926), which, like Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, explores the crisis of values in European civilization from the perspective of a visitor from the Orient. Two years later, he published *The Conquerors*, a novel set during the Chinese Communist struggle against the

Kuomintang in Canton. Two years after that came *The Royal Way*. This cautionary tale of treasure hunters in Indochina dramatized the folly of mistaking the way of alienation, violence, and crime for the royal road—a moral failure that Malraux now at last recognized in himself.

Malraux's literary career reached its zenith in 1933, when he received France's coveted Prix Goncourt for *Man's Fate*. As Hitler assumed power in Germany and went about crushing all remnants of leftist opposition, this novel treated a hauntingly similar event in another part of the world: the Kuomintang's bloody suppression of the 1927 communist revolt in Shanghai, China's first and only urban proletarian uprising. The title of the book, an explicit reference to Pascal, evoked the 17th-century Catholic writer's overwhelming sense of the divine power over human destiny. Malraux's novel responded to Pascal's determinism by speaking of people's need to struggle against their destinies, to define their humanity by acting, even if the end for us all, finally, is death. The theme struck a responsive chord among progressive readers throughout the world.

Despite his lionization as one of the leading European novelists of the Left—and despite receipt of an enviable sinecure with the Gallimard publishing house—Malraux felt that he could no longer live solely for art. Longing for the fraternity he had experienced while editing *L'Indochine*, Malraux jumped into leftist politics in the 1930s, landing close to—but not among—the French Communists. There would be writers' congresses, visits to the Soviet Union, a trip to Hitler's Berlin with André Gide to seek the release of political prisoners, and direct involvement in the Spanish Civil War. For the last, Malraux organized a squadron of volunteer pilots and, though a novice himself, flew several sorties against Franco's fascists



Malraux, in uniform, talks with Albert Camus (extreme left) and other editors of the Resistance newspaper Combat in 1944.

in late 1936 and early 1937 before republican generals ordered him and his ragtag España unit back to France. The novel *Man's Hope* (1937), and a film of the same name that he made during the last days of the Spanish Republic, provided moving testimony to a lost struggle against the encroaching barbarism.

Man's Hope would be the last of Malraux's major novels. Many other works would follow, more (though slighter) fiction, autobiographical works, and, most important, his books on art, written mostly after World War II. But his engagement with politics and his intensified search for some collective "Anti-Destiny" meant that his days of dandified aestheticism were definitely over.

In March 1937, he sailed to the United States to raise money for the Spanish Republic. At a fund-raising banquet in New York, speaking about the heroic resistance to Franco's troops, Malraux seized the occasion to combine political with cultural criticism. Specifically, he denounced the fascists' "aestheticization of war," a phrase he had learned from the German

culture critic Walter Benjamin, then living in exile in Paris. The ideas that Benjamin had set forth in a recent essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," would have a decisive influence on Malraux's thinking not only in the late 1930s but up through his years as the minister of cultural affairs.

Benjamin had begun his influential Essay by pointing out that the making and showing of art first took place in the context of community and ritual. The communal and spiritual setting gave the artwork its meaning and its satisfactions, its personal immediacy and its awesome majesty. He called that effect of both immediacy and distance the work's "aura." In our secular age, Benjamin explained, art had lost the aura that, for instance, a 13th-century Christian experienced when looking at the stained glass windows of Sainte-Chapelle. Today, we can still admire their fineness, their richness of color, and their glorious translucence. We are both drawn to them and awed by them as a unique cultural creation, as we are by

a great musical or theatrical performance. But in the modern age, when art no longer has a context besides other art, the aura originates in the special rapport between what live artists do and the impact of the work of art on the feelings of the audience at the moment of performance, viewing, or creation. This is not community; it is only a moment of communion. And with mechanical reproduction—records, radio, photographic reproductions of artworks—even this kind of aura is in jeopardy. Moreover, Benjamin concluded, there is no returning to auratic art. Any effort to do so produces only false community, specious unanimity, coercive harmony—the art of Nazi and Fascist rallies and parades, ceremonies and political symbols.

In an article he wrote the year before he went to the United States, Malraux took up Benjamin's argument. "No one believes that reading a *chanson de geste* is the same as hearing a bard reciting it." Nor could contemporary art be given back its aura by artificially connecting it to the *Volk* or the masses. Malraux would not defend what he called "the old chimera" of art guided by the masses and submitted to them for approval. Nor was he expressing nostalgia for a lost pious aesthetic traditionalism. Rather, he wanted to tie the present to the past in a unique way: "Each art innovation of our day, modifies the whole of the past heritage of the Civilisation in which it is done." Art comes from, and belongs to, all of humanity in all its varied and dialectical manifestations. This both socialists and liberals understand. Fascists and National Socialists, by contrast, employ categories such as race and nation; they posit essential differences in humankind. The communion fascists seek can be realized only in a military order. "And fascist art, when it exists, [promotes] the aestheticization of war."

But here Malraux set off in his own direction. Benjamin wanted to reveal the vicious politics behind the intoxicating rituals. He praised Bertolt Brecht's plays and poems for doing just that. Malraux proposed something more existentially hopeful, a kind of aesthetic immortality: we may die, but the great art we create continues and deepens the humanity of all

past and future generations. He wanted all that made up "*le destin*"—a term he used to mean, depending on the context, all determinisms, all limits, fate, and death itself—"transformed into human consciousness, awareness." In this formulation of 1936, we see already his emerging vision of the importance of art for both the present and the future of humanity: art was the highest expression of the human, the liberation from the limits of the human condition.

But how to carry out such a vast transvaluation? Here Malraux marked a path for the rest of his life, one that he stayed on despite his transformation from a militant communist ally to a fervent Gaullist. At the end of his 1936 essay, he called for a new "idea, a new state structure, a heritage, and a new hope." In 1936, in the midst of Popular Front activities in France and the Civil War in Spain, he meant the triumph of a communist state. In the wartime Resistance in southwestern France and Alsace, where he fought bravely and was wounded several times, the state began to mean something like the unity of the French people against foreign oppressors. By the end of the war, in fact, he had given up his hopes for communism. He judged the world had changed. The Soviet Union was not endangered but rather a cause of danger to its neighbors.

While fighting in the Resistance, Malraux had written to de Gaulle in London offering his support. The message never got through, and Malraux thought he had been snubbed. But after the war, mutual friends who knew that the two men admired each other arranged for a meeting, and the historic alliance was formed.

The search for an Anti-Destiny had brought Malraux from a quirky political leftism to an even more quirky mystical Gaullism. Gaullism held two completely contradictory and yet, for him, necessary attractions: one was instinctive and personal, the other, deliberate and social. In an interview he gave last fall, Jorge Semprun, a former minister of culture in Spain, explored his old friend's Gaullist infatua-



Bringing Mona Lisa to America: Malraux with the Kennedys in 1963

tion: “Malraux loved the rebel in de Gaulle. Although ideologically completely opposite from Malraux, de Gaulle said no [to German victory and to the Vichy regime], and battled the course of history. De Gaulle said no. The rebel attracted Malraux, fundamentally, despite what would become institutional Gaullism.”

The initial attraction seems plausible, but why did Malraux, the eternal rebel, stay with de Gaulle until the very end of the General’s reign? The answer lies in Malraux’s complex adaptation of Benjamin’s thought. By 1945, disappointed by the failure of Soviet communism to create true community, Malraux had accepted Gaullism as the means of restoring the lost social frame of French culture.

De Gaulle, Malraux gambled, had both the mystique and the political skill to restore the aura that united people and culture.

Joining the General’s effort to renew the nation meant losing many long-time friends on the left and bearing up under the frequently hurled charge of turncoat. It also meant having to collaborate with right-wing Gaullist politicians who worried that, deep down, he was not a true convert, that he had abandoned neither the aesthetic dandyism of the 1920s nor the social radicalism of the 1930s. Malraux, for his part, believed that his Gaullist persona was a part he had to perform in order to accomplish what he believed was necessary for France and for the arts. As he confided to his friend Roger

Stéphane, “Intelligence is knowing how to play your role in the play.”

After serving as information minister in de Gaulle’s short-lived postwar government, Malraux served his leader during the out years by championing a principled left-Gaullism, refusing to deal with Franco or his Spain, signing letters denouncing the use of torture against Algerian rebels, voicing support for the fledgling nation of Israel. But the threat of civil war brought de Gaulle and his followers—including Malraux—back to the middle of the political fray. In 1958, units of the French army fighting in Algeria were threatening to revolt if Paris admitted defeat and surrendered the country to the insurgent Arab and Berber majority. Parisian politicians, fearful *pieds noirs*, and the putschist military all put their hopes in de Gaulle. Again, he came to power and acted decisively. Staring down the generals, he made peace with the Algerian rebels and conceded the dissolution of most of the empire.

The cultural dimensions of the conflict were less easily solved and, in fact, plague France to this day. In Algeria, the *piéd noirs* had developed a settler mentality that identified the people of metropolitan France as superior to all others. The repatriation of one million of these *piéd noirs* to France made their racism increasingly a French national problem, especially with three million North African Muslims now living in the country.

Soon after becoming president of the new Fifth Republic in 1959, de Gaulle asked Malraux to be France’s first minister of cultural affairs. “Cobble together some offices for Malraux,” he instructed his premier, Michel Debré. “It’ll enhance the image of your government.” Bending to de Gaulle’s will, but not very enthusiastically, the stolid technocrat installed the loose cannon in his new ministry.

Malraux served in that post for 10 years. He began by immediately taking over the funding of Henri Langlois’s jumbled treasure house of classic films, the Cinémathèque. He initiated a thor-

ough scrubbing of the walls and buildings of Paris, uncovering the beautiful white-gold surfaces of the city so long coated with the purple-black patina of careless urbanism. He had historic districts defined, saving many urban neighborhoods and whole towns from what had happened in so much of the United States.

Besides preserving culture, he worked hard to support the creation of new works. Shortly after taking office, he organized the first International Exhibition of Young Artists. To help young directors of the cinematic New Wave make movies, he created a loan fund by arranging for a special tax on box office receipts. He commissioned Georges Braque to paint a ceiling in the Louvre, André Masson to do the same for the Odéon theater, and Marc Chagall to apply his brush to the domed ceiling of the Paris Opéra.

To Malraux, art could be diplomacy by other means. In 1963, he sent Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* to Washington and New York City to add to the luster of the Kennedy cultural awakening and—more important—to enhance the prestige of France as the cultural capital of the world. Just as he brought America its first blockbuster art show, so Malraux and his ministry provided inspiration for

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the National Endowment for the Arts, created under John F. Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, in 1965.

Administratively, Malraux oversaw most of France’s beaux-arts institutions, including the school of architecture and art, all the state museums, the Paris music conservatory, the national theaters, and the film administration (including its school). Applying a lesson he learned from the Popular Front government, he began building multipurpose houses of culture throughout France, bringing Paris, as it



May '68: Malraux supports his leader.

were, to the provinces. He was not given the national radio or television to administer. Seeing them more as entertainment or political tools, de Gaulle kept these, and the powerful Ministry of Education, out of Malraux's hands.

Building on the tradition of both royal and republican France, Malraux established the Fifth Republic's political commitment to enhancing the cultural life of its citizens. He saw himself as completing the work of the Third Republic's schoolmasters, who had brought quality national education to every town and village of the French hexagon. Malraux reined in or upstaged many of the fossilized culture guilds, including the French Academies. With his regional houses of culture, he prepared the way for subsequent culture ministers to decentralize cultural policy and spending. Today, in a nice equilibrium, French people still speak of a national culture, but regional councils and mayors spend most of the nation's culture budget.

The student uprising of May 1968 undid de Gaulle and with him Malraux. As part of their rejection of France's centuries-old *dirigiste* tradition, the student rebels rejected a culture that seemed to them imposed by the state from above. Aestheticism, communism, and Gaullism—the worldly schools in which Malraux had studied—had done little to prepare him for the demand for cultural democracy. Being the target of a rebellion of young idealists was painful to the one-time rebel. At the height of the street disorders, he wanted to place himself at the head of his chief administrators on the bottom step of the grand stairway of the old Louvre—his arms spread wide to block the vandals from the treasures of the nation.

The Christlike sacrifice was unnecessary. The students spared both the Louvre and the ossified Comédie Française. Instead, they vandalized the stock exchange and occupied the art school, the Odéon theater, and the Sorbonne. Malraux withdrew from politics to write—in various guises—his memoirs. We can understand why, a few years later, well into his seventies, he wanted to go fight, one last time, to save Bangladesh.

The ministry Malraux created not only survived the upheaval of 1968 but thrived, attracting France's most talented civil servants and taking its place alongside the other important offices of French government. In 1981, François Mitterrand added the portfolios of radio, television, and national education to culture minister Jack Lang's office. Yet though the ministry went forward and expanded, the May student uprising cast serious doubt on the most important part of Malraux's mission: producing condi-

At the height of the street disorders, Malraux wanted to place himself on the bottom step of the grand stairway of the old Louvre—his arms spread wide to block the vandals from the treasures of the nation.

tions under which “aura” could be approximated through the creation and display of artworks in a shared culture. No one could deny that Malraux had created a ministry of artists. Yet by putting most of his energy and discretionary budget into the care and feeding of the art makers, he had left the public behind and in some cases alienated it—a problem that is familiar to Americans who have followed their own nation’s culture wars, particularly the battles over work supported by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Given Malraux’s complicated legacy, it is possible to read several meanings into what the French government last year called its celebratory “Malraux Autumn.” Paris cynics point to the colorless nature of President Chirac’s Gaullist regime. With no celebrated contemporary intellectuals to crown the current administration, the latter-day Gaullists appeared to be digging up and recycling an old figure of undisputed standing. At the same time, the Gaullists’ desire for closure might have been as important as their need for orchestrated nostalgia. Writing “finished” to the Malraux–Lang era permits the current culture minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, to propose a new direction, revamping arts training and focusing aid on what he calls the “culture industries” of film, radio, television, and recording.

Yet in all the official fuss about Malraux the writer, the engagé, and the trustee of culture, there was also a recognition—from both the Left and the Right—that the goal of constructing an inclusive national culture for the sake of a

stronger national community is laudable and perhaps essential. Having found emptiness rather than liberation in post-modern disengagement and irony, many French intellectuals who are seeking sustenance in public engagements such as support for Bosnia or justice in Africa also find themselves defending old institutions of art and taste as well as the idea of a mystical True France. To them, Malraux’s project holds great interest.

In particular, it brings into focus the dilemma of cultural modernity in France and in other societies dealing with the challenge of multiculturalism. How can a degree of community and aura be revived amid the centrifugal forces of competing identity movements? Both in France and the United States, when culture is left to the private media conglomerates, then sitcoms, flashy-fleshy music videos, dumb-bad movies, and violence-saturated songs end up being the main agencies “constructing” the citizenry. But when the state tries to function as a bridge between the cultural heritage (including the tradition of the new) and the living nation, it risks its legitimacy among some groups with its failures, and among others with its successes. Artists, meanwhile, risk being taken as political hostages in the combat. The French are right to honor Malraux for engaging these dilemmas. The mission he set for himself, even with its dissonances, has increased in urgency, for France and for all other nations in which the ties of social solidarity are frayed and in risk of breaking.