Arts & Humanities

Colonel of Truth

André Malraux at Columbia.

By
Michael B. Shavelson
|
Spring 2007



André Malraux

A left-wing French intellectual is invited by his editor at Random House and by the *Nation* magazine to come to the U.S. on a speaking tour. He applies for a visa but is turned down by the American consul in Paris because of his political activism. There's a minor flap in the newspapers, he reapplies, and is given the OK by the State Department. Once in the U.S., he attends dinners in his honor, and makes speeches to liberal organizations and college groups. He talks mostly about the war. He has just returned from the fighting and he tells moving stories of human dignity and civilian suffering. He urges students to learn the truth about what's going on — and to *support* the war. The war against Franco.

It is March 1937. André Malraux, 36, the author of *La condition humaine* (*Man's Fate*) and the recently published *Le temps du mépris* (*Days of Wrath*), has spent half a year in Spain. Like a good number of Europeans and a smaller number of Americans, he is appalled by the brutality of Franco's Hitler- and Mussolini-backed rebels, and joins the Republican Loyalists. Not only that, he somehow arranges in a few weeks for airplanes and pilots to be sent unofficially to Spain and then is named, quite officially, colonel of the squadron — the España Squadron. It flies dozens of missions.

Malraux was likely motivated at first by his celebrated taste for adventure, though he was clearly transformed by the hours he spent with his men in their "flying coffins," as they called their mix of ill-equipped planes. He was also moved to think about his next book.

The invitation to the U.S. allowed Malraux to take care of publishing and political matters. He met with Robert Haas, his editor, and they discussed plans for the book Malraux had started to draft. On his speaking tour, Malraux sought to drum up support for the Spanish Loyalists. That angle had to be handled carefully, though, since the United States was strictly neutral and Stalin's backing of the Loyalists complicated the picture. Accordingly, Malraux spoke to his audiences less about politics than about art, literature, and *fraternité*. He asked them not for arms, but for medical supplies. Still, the FBI considered it prudent to keep its eye on the French visitor.

Most magazines and newspapers were less interested. After *Newsweek*, *Time*, and the big dailies noted his arrival, coverage was pretty much limited to the *Nation*, the *Daily Worker*, and the *New Masses*. That Malraux didn't speak English probably kept him off the airwaves, which prevented most Americans from hearing the voice of "one of the most exciting and provocative of living writers," as *Time* characterized

him.

But there was one intriguing document to surface from Malraux's visit.

A few years ago the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel in Paris released a CD of Malraux's major speeches and on it was a 13-minute recording made on March 20, 1937, at Columbia's McMillin Theater. The amateur recording might have been made by the late Ethel Saniel '55LS, '69GSAS, who was Malraux's interpreter in the U.S., served as a liaison for the Loyalist International Brigades, and later taught French at Hofstra. The great Malraux scholar Walter Langlois says he listened to the original disc at Butler Library in the 1970s, but how it got from New York to France remains a mystery.

Listening to the 70-year-old recording today we hear Malraux speak broadly and allusively about revolution and history, and insightfully about fascism's glorification of the differences between races, classes, and nationalities. The voice is higher in pitch than it would be in later tapes and films, but the flowing lyricism is Malraux's.

Halfway through, he describes what happened when, less than three months earlier, one of the planes of his squadron was shot down and crash-landed in the remote, snow-covered mountains of Teruel in northern Spain. Peasants from the scattered villages made their way to the plane, gathered the wounded, placed them on stretchers, and in a long, single-file cortege, slowly brought the airmen down winding mule paths toward the valley. At each village along the way, the inhabitants joined the lengthening procession.

When they reached the first settlement in the valley, Malraux saw something that affected him deeply. The peasants didn't react visibly to the first injured men, those hit in the legs; they were used to seeing that kind of thing. "But when those wounded in the face began to arrive — flat bandages showing where the noses had been torn off, streams of dried blood on their leather jackets — the effect was completely different, and the women and children began to weep.

"It was the most gripping image of f*raternité* I think I have ever seen in my life," Malraux said. "The great silence, the mountain covered from the summit to the base with Spanish people who had followed these men who had come from every country on earth to defend what they believed to be right."

The descent from the mountain became one of the central points of the Spanish Civil War novel that Malraux had started to write during his New York trip, and Malraux even managed to make a film about it in early 1938. His book, *L'espoir*, was published in France in 1937, and appeared shortly thereafter in the U.S. as *Man's Hope*. Critics found it his best work to date.

But Colonel Malraux's hope would soon be tested under the bombs that began to fall in September 1939. The Spanish Civil War turned out to be a dress rehearsal for another.

Read more from ***Michael B. Shavelson***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Michael B. Shavelson***