THE FIGURE OF ANDRE MALRAUX IN EDDY DU PERRON'S HET LAND VAN HERKOMST

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Many students of French literature must have idly wondered to whom André Malraux' La Condition humaine (Man's Fate) was dedicated; is a name like Eddy du Perron, they surmise, English or French? In point of fact he was a Dutch writer; indeed, he translated La Condition humaine into Dutch.

He was born in the East Indies in 1899 and grew up there. (I will not attempt a detailed biography, but we may note that he was to die in 1940 of a heart attack when the Nazis invaded the Netherlands). In 1921 his parents retired and bought a property at Gistoux, near Brussels, and young Eddy, who saw himself as a colonial aristocrat, took up the life of a young man about town and moved into literary circles, in Brussels and even more in Paris. While he was interested in all the phenomena of the contemporary scene, his greatest admiration was for classical authors such as Stendhal and Gide (and for Multatuli, but for different and obvious reasons; he wrote a biography of his great predecessor). Literary works seem to have given him a definition of himself, to have provided him with roots; and friendship and conversation with living writers also helped him to define himself and his position.

The words "conversation" and "writer" (or artist, or intellectual) certainly come to mind when we read his 500-page 1935 novel Het Land van Herkomst[1] (My Native Land), for conversations between its chief character, a writer called Arthur Ducroo, and fellow writers, loom large in it. We are reminded that long serious conversations are a prominent feature of European novels in the first part of this century. Henry James in English, and Thomas Mann in German (notably in The Magic Mountain) construct their novels around such conversations, and in France they are the building blocks of the multi-volume novels, portraying a whole society, of Jules Romains and Roger Martin du Gard. Like these works, Het Land van Herkomst is a roman-somme, a statement about all the major problems of life. But more than this, the novel raises the whole question of the relationship between reality and fiction. However, this is not the topic of conversation among the writers; rather the question emerges from the plot and shape of the novel.

The action takes place in Paris between February 1933 and February 1934. Two events mark this year and make it a unit of time with shape and meaning for Ducroo: at the beginning his mother dies, leaving him in poverty, and at the end he experiences the riots of the political left and right in Paris which seemed to herald the death of democracy in France. Both events lead Ducroo to the alarming conclusion that he is helpless in the modern European world. Indeed, everything he learned as a boy in the East Indies -- respect for authority, belief in love as an absolute, as a

bond with one woman which lasts forever[2], and the conviction that he is an individual and has power over his life and is of importance -- all these precepts are called in question by events. Both in politics and financial matters, he feels, we are the victims of a low form of life called lawyers -- a term he extends to cover politicians, financiers, and their obtuse servants, the police.

In an attempt to reaffirm his individuality, Ducroo begins to write his autobiography. Chapters of magnificent reminiscences of his childhood, with its rich mingling of cultures in an exotic setting, alternate with a diary of his year in Paris, spent in poverty, trying to make a living as a journalist during the Depression. He is aware, however, that one cannot recapture the past correctly, because to write it down is to falsify it: "When an adult says 'I' in speaking of the child he once was, there is always a certain amount of falsification." (102) Indeed, Ducroo would rather call himself, when young, "little Ducroo", but he doesn't, because of course the third person is false too. At the end of the novel, having told his story, he confirms the fears he had when he started: "One cannot represent oneself,... at best one produces a double of oneself." (516) Consequently one cannot know the past any more than the future; one cannot know oneself or assert one's individuality. One has had no active part in the moulding of one's character in the past, and one can have little impact on the course of present and future events.

Of these twin problems -- what is truth? and, can an individual exist? -- the first is in the domain of the literary critic. At first sight a book which interweaves childhood memories and a diary of the present is not a novel, because it is not a fiction. Yet we have just seen in du Perron's eyes that the problem is the other way around. It is not: how do I justify passing off reality as fiction, but: how do I manage to avoid serving up fiction as truth? The mere fact of telling a story falsifies it. Moreover, du Perron knows perfectly well that one must rearrange facts somewhat to give them a better literary shape. However, he scrupulously recorded these changes, along with other comments, in 460 notes which he intercalated into the copy of the novel he gave to Jan Greshoff. The editor of the French translation of 1980 has reproduced 123 of these notes, thus allowing his French readers a further game of mirrors; they can either ignore the notes and read the novel as fiction, or take the notes into account and compare the requirements of fiction with those of autobiography.

Even read purely as fiction, however, the novel makes us aware of the relations between fiction and reality. Less aware, admittedly. Thus the text without the notes would not tell us that the first chapter and the last two were written after the rest of the novel, to strengthen its framework, and immediately after du Perron translated <u>La Condition humaine</u>, and therefore in du Perron's opinion the first chapter reflects the

influence of Malraux' work. (note 1) However, it is the text itself which offers us a discussion between Ducroo and one Luc Heverle about a passage in the latter's novel, which we may recognize as a passage from La Condition humaine. In other words, Heverle is Malraux. In addition, two other well-known writer friends of du Perron's, Menno ter Braak and Jan Greshoff, wrote a few pages for the novel at du Perron's request, and these are incorporated into it in revised or abridged form. Indeed, one ter Braak passage is a critique of the novel so far. At the very end, Ducroo sends to Wijdenes (ter Braak)[3] the whole manuscript we have been reading, with some comments, although these are much less literary than political.

However, there are also differences between the fiction and the reality. The first is that the importance of the writer-characters in the novel is not in proportion to the importance of their models in du Perron's life. Graaflant (Greshoff) is marginal, since he is in Belgium guiding the settlement of Ducroo's estate. Wijdenes comes for one visit of a few days, the account of which occupies a chapter. As a result, the only character anything like equal in importance with Heverle is Viala, whose model is a minor French writer and literary critic called Pascal Pia, of whom more in a moment.

The second difference follows from the first: not all the characters are faithful portraits of their models. Thus the painter, engraver and illustrator Alexandre Alexeieff (here called Gouraeff) is frankly used as a novelistic convenience. In the opening chapter he has a conversation with Ducroo in which all the themes of the novel are foreshadowed: love and fidelity, politics, Paris, the bourgeoisie and Dutch colonialism. Such a utility person can have lines ascribed to him which have nothing to do with his real utterances. As du Perron says in the first of his 460 notes: "I didn't know him well, even when I wrote this chapter, which is why he is treated more picturesquely than the others and presented much more like a character in a novel." And indeed, Gouraeff's determination not to talk about politics and such "serious" matters reveals a picturesque personality with a streak of fantasy and a belief in individualism at all costs.

One other artist-character is portrayed with a good deal of humour and some licence, and that is Wijdenes (ter Braak). It is true that the description of his angular face with its sudden strange grins accords with photographs of ter Braak, and that the love affair which (together with his remarks about love) demonstrates his ignorance on the subject, really happened. (We also have here another entangling of fact and fiction, since ter Braak had written an autobiographical novel about the affair). Fantasy, however, seems to come into play in connection with Wijdenes' intellectual evolution. A lapsed "liberal protestant" with a Ph.D. in philosophy, he has for some years believed in "a relativistic positivism" (346), that is to say, in the individual but not in the mind. He says he could still in theory live under a dictatorship or in an anarchy, because either way he

would hear no more about politics. What has completely cured him of contempt for the mind is the misuse by the Nazis of his beloved Nietzsche, from whom they derive "the ideology of the most vulgar arrogance" (347). As a result, he finds himself adopting a political position, and this is humiliating!

Those who know the life and work of Menno ter Braak may well find this a curious portrait. Du Perron agrees. One of his notes reads: "Wijdenes' portrait being in theory that of ter Braak, there is an abundant correspondence about it between TB and me to prove that this portrait is biased, a caricature for the sake of picturesqueness, that I have made him speak too well, etc. Indeed it would be ridiculous to maintain that this is a complete portrait of TB's personality. But none of my other friends are drawn completely either, and does Ducroo (in five hundred pages) portray all of me? Of course not!" (note 74)

The two most important portraits, however, are essentially serious, though, to be sure, Viala (Pascal Pia) was a picturesque personality in real life. Du Perron met him in 1922, by going up to him while he was selling paintings and rare books at an open-air market. Pia was taken with this man for whom everything in Europe was still strange and new, and du Perron liked his anti-conformism -- he lived by publishing clandestine editions of spoofs and erotica. Viala's opinions, however, are quite bitter and cynical, even though this is in conflict with his natural sensitivity. He has no time for writers because they end up adding to national glory, nor for revolutionary leaders because they end up as party bureaucrats. He has time only for working-class people who have a hard life and don't know how to write about it. Heverle sees a chip on Viala's shoulder, and remarks to Ducroo: "At the origin of all this is a misunderstanding between Viala and God." (99)

So we have an <u>a priori</u> anarchist in Viala, two individualists in the middle, and -- we will reveal this prematurely, in order to bring out the symmetry we see in the novel -- we have Heverle who comes to represent submission to the collectivity. He does not arrive at that position all at once. But at this point we should give some account of the life of André Malraux.

His father was a civil servant in colonial Indo-China, and the son studied Sanskrit, Chinese and archeology at the Ecole des langues orientales in Paris before going out to the colonies in 1923. He spent a year digging up Khmer statues, which the French colonial government unsuccessfully tried to take away from him as a reprisal for his activity in the Young Annam league, which was trying to win Indo-China greater autonomy. In 1925 Malraux went to China and became the associate secretary general of the Kuomintang, with whom he took part in the uprising and general strike of that year; during the rebellion of 1927 he was

propaganda chief for two provinces. Not until Chiang Kai-Shek fell out with the communists, and the revolutionary movement became a vicious dogfight, did Malraux return to Paris, and he remained adventurous. He became interested in the most modern exciting occupation then possible, namely flying, taking part in a nonstop flight from Paris to Saigon and also in aerial exploration of Somalia. He also remained politically active, notably as the organizer of French writers into a body which strongly opposed Hitler. During the Spanish Civil War he combined both of his passions by alternating service as a Loyalist air force commander with tours of France and the United States to raise funds for the fight against Franco. In between all of this he found time to turn his experience into novels, introduce foreign authors to the French public -- notably Faulkner and D.H. Lawrence -- and produce art criticism.

Small wonder, we may think, that du Perron became not only Malraux' friend but also, for a time, his admirer. We can see the rise of Malraux as a figure in du Perron's work. Before 1935 the great figure from real life was Pascal Pia, who is the model for Férat in Een Voorbereiding, for Daniel in a novella called "De Avonturiers", and for Vincent in another one called "Het Drama van Huize-aan-Zee" (both in the volume Nutteloos Verzet); indeed, a period in Pia's life is the whole subject of "De Avonturiers." It is in this story, however, that Malraux first appears, under the name of Antonius, and indeed his part is large. As the editor of the 1980 French translation of Het Land van Herkomst puts it: "He replaces Daniel or Vincent, inspired by Pia, as a character surrounded with the romantic halo of action. The novella contains fictionalized but obvious references to Malraux's wife, to the Cambodian expedition, to Malraux's political activities in Saigon, and even to his book La Tentation de l'occident." (p. 527, translator's note 1). This book within the novella, we may add, is itself quite as much factual as fictitious, since it consists of letters between two imaginary people about a real problem, namely the impact of Western culture on Chinese culture.

Thus it is not surprising to find that reality plays a greater part in the portrait of Heverle than of anyone else. Du Perron notes when several real conversations between them have been stitched together into one, or their location has been changed, but the topics and often the words themselves are authentic. His portrait of Malraux, he says, is incomplete, but at least it is right. (note 24)

In the 1930's, Malraux and du Perron became closer and closer friends. Pascal Pia, who introduced them to each other, records that Malraux tried out all his ideas on du Perron, whose judgment was unaffected by "the snobberies of the intelligentsia". (intro p. 20) And indeed, in the novel we see Heverle trying out many ideas on Ducroo, spinning witty paradoxes on occasion, which Ducroo shoots down. We also see the evolution of those ideas. Only Heverle and Ducroo, indeed, are seen to evolve.

An interesting feature of the ideas people hold in this novel is that they often seem built over a weakness. Heverle and his wife Bella have an understanding that either of them may be unfaithful, he assures Ducroo that fidelity does not exist in Paris, he argues that sleeping with someone else can be the opposite of a betrayal of love; but an outburst from his wife strongly suggests that on the contrary he idealizes her, a habit she finds unfair, and is jealous of her two previous loves. (We may note that the two couples, the Heverles and the Ducroos, spend less time talking about politics than about sex, and indeed all conversations in the novel turn to this subject).

So likewise Ducroo hints at a weakness underlying Heverle's extreme intellectuality. He remarks in the first chapter that "Heverle only confides himself on impersonal ground, on a sort of high plateau where everything blows in the winds of the history of civilization and philosophy." (43) But where is the man himself? He always seems to be playing a part, or more correctly, he is always creating himself. This same "continual transmuting of words into general truths" (138) seems also to reveal a need for tragedy; indeed, his infidelities seem to be a search for tragedy. This is a straining towards the future. Heverle maintains he has no memories, and Ducroo feels "as cunning as a real little Freudian" and wonders "what miserable childhood he is trying to run away from, in the more and more tense character he embodies today." (145)

However, there is a paradox in Heverle's belief in freedom, as we see in the longest single conversation between him and Ducroo, which occupies a whole chapter. During their discussion of a passage in Heverle's latest novel (which we may recognize as La Condition humaine), its author argues in favour of sexual freedom in marriage, and Ducroo argues against it. Yet up to this point in the conversation Heverle has been maintaining that one is the product of one's class, country, generation and so on, and that to believe one is a free individual is to fool oneself. The paradox is resolved for the time being by his wise observation that all theories break down when one is confronted with the reality of love and death - and jealousy. This statement, says du Perron in a note, is almost a leitmotif in Malraux and is one of the things Malraux taught him. (note 32)

Yet still Heverle's more theoretical side, which perhaps means his strategy to cope with a weakness in himself, leads him in a direction Ducroo cannot follow. By December 1933 he has become an avowed communist and is active in anti-fascist popular-front causes. "It is a natural evolution", the diarist declares, "the logical conclusion of all his previous positions, despite the individualism he has never renounced. There is here a contradiction between ideology and action, a provisional compromise; ...everything leads me to wonder again what he is running from, not in society, but in himself." (346) Heverle speaks of "dying for what is richest in meaning in our time", not indeed a complete explanation of

humanity, but a rational attempt at one, whereas Christianity is lies. Thus he feels part of a great cause, and he counter-attacks Ducroo's objections with the question: "What existence do you have without such a feeling?"

Yet clearly he is speaking only for himself. For when Ducroo and his wife one day express the feeling that they don't live in reality, they are achieving nothing, Heverle reassures them that they are thinkers, and all leaders need the approval of thinkers; he dismisses their fear of being liars and cowards as "the typical intellectual's masochism" (438). Despite this, however, he puts his own faith in the masses, who, he claims, "feel as a whole what its isolated individuals wouldn't understand" (513), and maintains that one need not feel any sympathy for one's fellow-fighters for the cause: "when you are capable of living intensely enough for the myth, you can ignore the people involved." Ducroo knows he couldn't.

On the other hand, Ducroo admits that his own position is as paradoxical as anyone else's. He would like to be "against the finks" (the lawyers, if you will), but he is an "irrecoverable intellectual". "I feel no hostility for those who are not bourgeois, and no sympathy for those who are, but I have given up all the anti-bourgeois attitudes considered interesting today." In short, "I am a bourgeois. Well, what the heck. One can dislike what one is, and still not be able to change." The only wisdom, he writes to Wijdenes, is to "live according to one's nature and as if one had all the time in the world, and keep all the curiosity and hope one can still muster - but with enough pessimism in reserve to acquiesce instantly in the loss of what made our life possible." (521). With these words the novel ends.

Du Perron translated this last chapter for Pascal Pia, who found it anarchist. "By all means", the author writes (note 123, last note). "Even today (20 June 1935), after a long conversation with Malraux, I can only confirm my disgust with politics and my indifference to all classifications." One might be tempted to conclude that this political divergence ended their friendship, but it was not so; indeed, in 1935 they were closer than in 1933. It was physical separation which intervened: Malraux went to fight in Spain, and du Perron returned for a few years to Java, where he knew independence fighters, understood that their cause was just, but could not condone fighting. Essays in which he pursued the dialogue with Malraux reveal his clearsightedness about both fascism and communism - and indeed all violent political movements.

All this seems to us utterly modern. Perhaps the contemporary world's problems were first stated fifty years ago; certainly these discussions, and the choices they offer us, seem strikingly up to date. Ducroo is too modest, in our opinion, when he comments at one point: "And for someone who reads these pages in ten years' time, perhaps they are just an account of a conversation between intellectuals in Paris around 1930."

Notes

(1) I have used - indeed, read - only the French translation by Philippe Noble Novel (Le Pays d'origine, Paris: Gallimard, 1980), with its excellent introduction, selection of notes by du Perron, translator's notes, and vocabulary of administrative and native terms in use in the Dutch East Indies. All quotations are from this edition and translated by me. Page references are to this edition; "note" refers to the 123 notes by du Perron except for the one "translator's note" which I quote, and which I label as such.

(2) For du Perron, the question of fidelity is closely linked with his upbringing. He does not spell this out in the novel, but he explains it in a note (note 21 in the French edition): being a creole from the Indies, Ducroo "has kept a more persistent idea of the difference between the women one sleeps with and the others". This led to the failure of his first love affair in Europe, but all through his young-man-about-town act which he then put on, he was still hankering after "the unique woman", until he met his second wife.

For us, the question also arises as to the link between Ducroo's misadventures in love and his political views. We think the connection lies in his belief that both he and the woman whom fate destines for him must be unique individuals. This belief seems contradicted by the apparent failure of corrupt democracy and the attitude towards the individual held by dictatorial political philosophies.

(3) A propos of the names of the characters, we may note that they seem mainly geographical in origin and unconnected with the names of their models. However, Ducroo says his name was formerly Du Crau and is of Provençal origin. A crau in Provencal is a stony plain and the word comes from a pre-Romance root kraw, a stone. Now, perron comes from the Latin petra, a stone....