



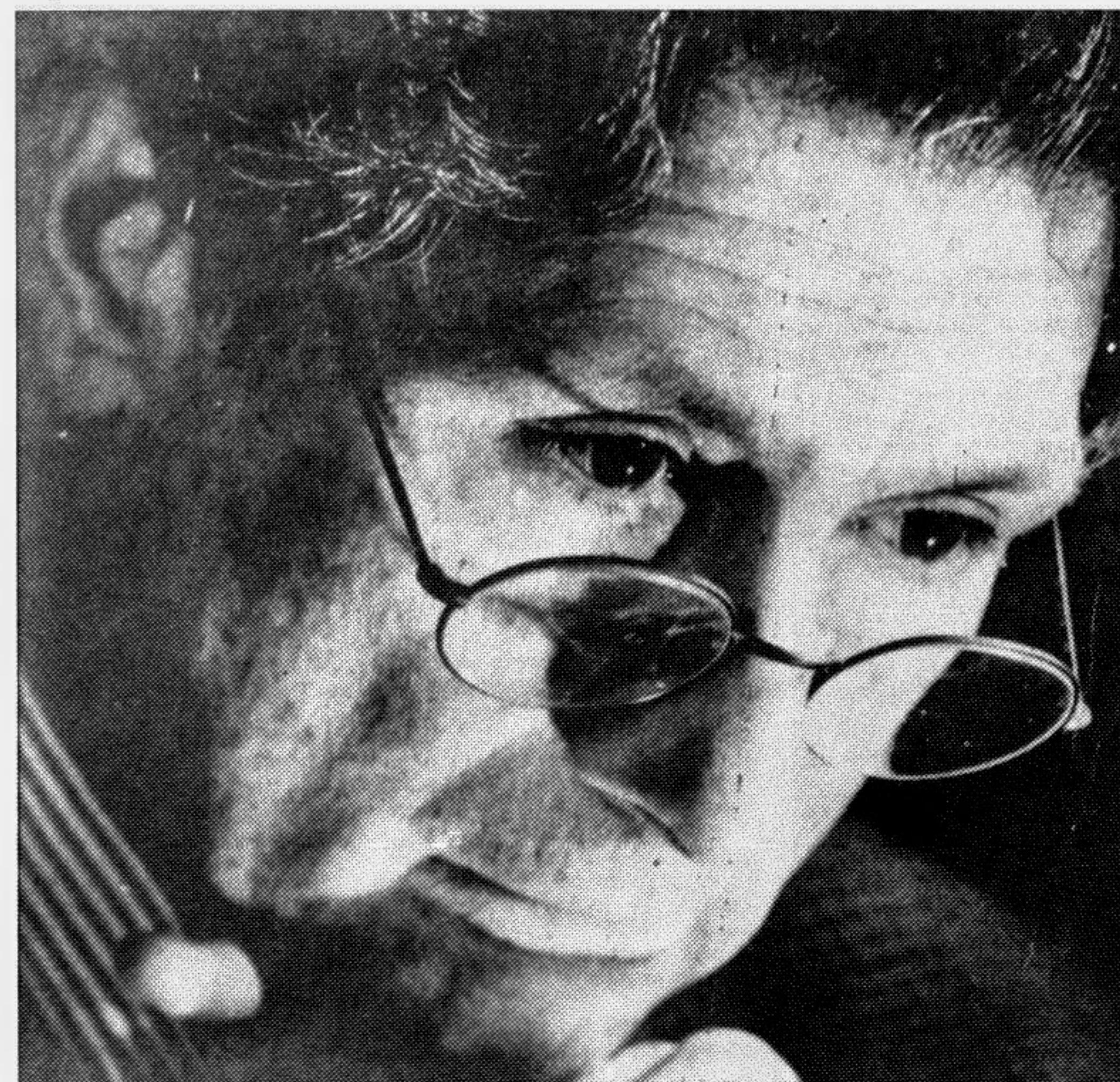
## essay

# An Exemplary Intellectual: Edward Said - I

by Fakrul Alam

BY NOW, THE PALESTINIAN American critic Edward Said and his work should have become widely known in Bangladesh, but I have no doubt that a lot of us are still in the dark about his achievement as a critic, a theorist, and as a Palestinian intellectual. Certainly, we need to know more about this exemplary intellectual, who has in practice as well as in theory advocated resistance to coercive powers and hegemonic systems and has exposed the continuing links between culture and imperialism. To date, Said has published thirteen books on such varied topics as literature, music, cultural criticism, and Middle Eastern issues, and for many years he has been in the forefront of the Palestinian struggle for independence, even while being the Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. I would like to use this column to introduce the readers of the "Literary Star" to at least two of his most important books, *Orientalism* (1978) and *Representations of the Intellectuals* (1993), before making a point about his relevance to our intellectual life at the end of this piece.

Said's thesis in *Orientalism* is easily stated: in studying Orientalism, Western scholars have for a long time been putting their knowledge to the service of power and have been involved in a "discourse" for "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient". In other words, Western scholars writing about the Orient have been implicated, willingly or unwittingly, in an act of appropriation and subjugation. Moreover, they have constituted the Oriental as the "other" and have helped perpetuate stereotypical notions about the people they had helped to dominate. Recognizing that there is a will to power, affirming that Nietzschean insight that the truths of language are nothing but "illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are," and borrowing from Foucault the idea of discursive formations, Said has powerfully enlisted recent work in theory to suggest that cultural programmes are restrictive, knowledge hegemonic, and "truths" nothing but rhetorical conventions embedded in desire.



Implicit in *Orientalism* is the belief that the role of the critic is to be oppositional, that one goal of criticism is to study the representation of other cultures, that socio-economic categories and politico-historic positions matter, that one must always be wary of "national" truths, and that if intellectuals are not to commit treason to their calling, they must forever hold on to the ideal of "an independent critical consciousness, an oppositional critical consciousness". Said is convinced by his study of Orientalist discourse that scholars must be alert to the fact that there can be no such thing as "pure" scholarship and that the scholar cannot detach him or herself from the circumstances of life and the manifestations of power. Another lesson embodied in *Orientalism* is that the literary critic should apply explicative techniques to non-canonical as well as

canonical works to reveal the hegemonic tendencies of certain discourses and the links between imperialism and culture. As far as Said is concerned, literary critics must be by contrast secular. The best that a critic can do is try to be ironic, self-aware, and resistant to the power of systems.

It should not come as any surprise that a critic advocating an oppositional stance, self-reflexivity, and ideological unmasking should also be something of a moralist. In fact, *Orientalism* reveals Said as someone committed, unfashionably for these times, to value judgments and a version of existential realism, to such age-old beliefs as the possibilities of "personal, authentic, sympathetic and humanistic" knowledge. This is why Said can say that a really sensitive Orientalist such as Louis Massignon can be guided by the idea of "un esprit humain" to almost go

past the discursive, systemic pressures exerted on all Orientalists. Said sees Massignon as a complex figure whose humanistic impulses enable him to rise above his situation and "this surely is what finite human being must aspire to if he is not to be content with his merely mortal presence in time and space". James Clifford, who has perhaps written the most acute critique of *Orientalism* to date, has noted the theoretical inconsistency through which Said has Massignon escape the rigorous determinism governing Michel Foucault's law of discursive formations, but in his retrospective comments on this problem area of his methodology Said makes it clear that if *Orientalism* is theoretically inconsistent he had wanted it to be that way; he didn't want Foucault's method, or for that matter that of anyone else, to obscure his point "that there is a kind of non-coercive knowledge". In *Orientalism* itself he states his case more positively: "I would not have undertaken a book of this kind if I did not also believe that there is scholarship that is not as corrupt, or at least as blind to human reality, as the kind I have been mainly depicting." To put it somewhat differently, individuals can make a difference, some writers are to be valorized for taking exemplary positions in choosing to be outside the "anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like *Orientalism*"; we can disabuse ourselves of long-held beliefs and choose to have values which affirm our humanity.

Said can make use of Foucault's insight into discursive formations and yet resist the French theorist's pessimistic premise that there is no escape from the tremendous systemic force of a given discourse because of his situation as an extra-territorial writer. Turning the weakness of his situation of exilic marginality into a position of strength, Said has made use of contemporary theory and yet managed to stay outside the dominant systems that have exerted such disciplinary pressures on most academics in the West. As a result, Said has found himself not only in the vanguard of recent critical enterprise but also an heir of the humanist tradition of exiled/emigre scholars best represented by Eric Auerbach. In *Orientalism*, the example of Auerbach leads

Said to declare: "The more one is able to leave one's cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision". Not unlike George Steiner, a critic who had been a moral presence as well as an outrider of thought throughout the sixties and the seventies, receptive to theory but sceptical about its claims to exist in a hermetic, value-free world, Said uses his extraterritorial status to good effect to present in *Orientalism* an independent, ironic, but essentially humanistic vision of critical activity.

But if *Orientalism* is a critique of Western scholarship which has enabled imperialism, and if it upholds an alternative tradition of independent scholarship as an ideal, Said's committed, impassioned, polemical tone in the book comes from his view that he is in a very specific sense a post-colonial writer, writing back, highlighting past injustices and exposing the persistence of the will to power still inherent in some areas of Western scholarship. James Clifford makes this point most fully in his review-essay of *Orientalism* when he places Said amidst those "Asians, Africans, Arabs, Orientals, Pacific Islanders, and native Americans [who] have in a variety of ways, asserted their independence from Western cultural and political hegemony, establishing a new multivocal field of intercultural discourse." Or as he puts it somewhat differently elsewhere in his essay: "Said writes as an Oriental, but only to dissolve the category." In this context, it is worth pointing out that Said does not see himself as a solitary voice but part of a counter-discourse and takes every opportunity to highlight the work of others who have given themselves to the task of decolonializing. In *Orientalism*, for instance, he refers to the work of such post-colonial writers as the historian K M Pannikar and the political scientist Anwar Abdel Malek.

In the last analysis, however, Said's polemical, passionate voice comes out of his personal experience as a dispossessed Palestinian. Sensitive to the misrepresentation and marginalization of his kind, angered by the cultural stereotyping of Arabs in some fairly re-

cent works about the region, aware that as an educated Arab Palestinian in the West he must bring to world attention the way scholarship has oppressed his people, Said made *Orientalism* the inaugural work of a trilogy produced to demonstrate that while "too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent; it has regularly seemed otherwise to me." Like *The Question of Palestine* (1979) and *Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1982), the two other books of the trilogy, *Orientalism* must be seen as part of a larger project to indict a specific form of repressive scholarship and to help his readers "a little in the process of what Raymond Williams has called the 'unlearning' of the 'inherent dominative mode'" so that they can see Arabs, Islam, Palestinians and, of course, "Orientals" in a truer and more sympathetic light.

To sum up Said's aim in writing *Orientalism*: (a) the work was undertaken to show how an academic field had become a means of imperialist activity and a distorting mirror; (b) while tracing the careers of Orientalists who had put their knowledge in the service of power, Said took pains to uphold an alternative role for academics — that of the oppositional, secular critic, open to theory but resistant to systems of thought, skeptical, but intrepid enough to go beyond conventionally delimited fields and unexamined assumptions; (c) Said wrote *Orientalism* conscious that critics must be guided by a sense of values and must not abandon the humanistic vision of literature and its possibilities; (d) Said was showing in the book how a critic can derive strength from his or her extraterritorial status and how one can be in a discourse and yet not of it; (e) Finally, *Orientalism* was produced to be part of a project to direct attention to the wrongs done to Arabs and Islam and to display unequivocally Said's commitment to Palestinian causes through his scholarship.

About the writer: Fakrul Alam is Professor and Chairman of English at Dhaka University.

## poem

### When We Two Shall Meet

(An Antithesis to Byron's *When We Two Parted*)

by Arifa Ghani

When we two shall meet  
In apprehension and delight  
Our hearts shall be lit  
At each other's sight.  
A warm glow of happiness  
Shall o'erspread thy cheek;  
No more, no less  
May we ever seek.



A bright shining sun  
Shall light up the day—  
All doubts shall far run  
For thou shall be here to stay.  
Thou shall be true  
To every word ere said;  
But thy name shall win a tear or two  
Before a happy meeting is made.

They name and my name  
Shall be sounded together :  
No more shall I feel shame  
For we shall be together.  
They know what I loved thee  
But never did tell.  
Long years did pass me  
Yet rung not thy bell.

In silence I loved thee—  
In secret I cried.  
That thou could forget me  
And from my sight hide.  
But when we two shall again meet  
In apprehension and delight.  
Will our hearts be lit  
At each other's sight?

About the writer: Arifa Ghani is Lecturer in English at Jahangirnagar University.

## profile

### Andre Malraux, the Adventure of the 20th Century

by Wilma Levy

ANDRE Malraux led his life and his work with passion and frenzy. He said little about his childhood which he hated, as revealed in *Les Antimemoires*. He was born in Paris on 3rd November 1901 in a ruined middle-class family. He went the Lycee Condorcet school but he did not attach any importance to his studies. He already knew "that between the age of eighteen and twenty, life is like a market in which one buys values, not with money, but with acts. Most men do not buy anything." He frequented the Guimet Museum, studied at the School of Oriental Languages and the Louvre School and worked in an old bookshop where he hunted for rare books and took pains to meet painters and writers. His first writings, including "Lune de Papier" (Paper Moon) were published in 1920 and Andre Gide opened the doors of the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* (the prestigious NRF) to him.

When he was barely out of adolescence, this self-taught man won over Emmanuel Berl, Drieu la Rochelle and Andre Gide, speaking about the fate of men or nations, and subjugated those present at literary gatherings by the extent of his knowledge, his prodigious memory and his uncommon vehemence. Malraux was unpredictable and added action to words. Shortly after his wedding, he set off on an archeological expedition to Cambodia with his wife, Clara Goldschmidt, and the result was the burlesque episode of the pillaging of the Bentai-Srei low-reliefs, in which he was sentenced to three years in prison and

finally set free after a manifesto signed by all the great literary personalities of the time.

In Saigon, Malraux founded the Jeune Annam movement and published "Indochine", a daily newspaper which unambiguously condemned corrupt capitalism. Then he went to China, met Borodin, the Soviet delegate of the Komintern with the Chinese revolutionaries and was present at the civil war in Canton and Shanghai. "La Tentation de l'Occident" (The Temptation of the West), a dialogue between the two western and eastern cultures, came out in 1926 and the following year "D'une Jeunesse Europeenne" (Of a European Youth) threw light on the decline of western civilisation. "Les Conquerants" (The Conquerors) (1928), the story of the Chinese revolution, made him known to the general public at the age of 27. In 1930, he published "La Voie Royale" (The Royal Way) which tells the story of a tragic raid in the heart of the Cambodian jungle and, in 1933, "La Condition Humaine" (Man's Estate) which was awarded the Goncourt prize. This book remains the symbol of Malraux's work. In it, the obsession with death and the sense of human dignity are superimposed over the fascination of adventure. He travelled in Persia,

Afghanistan and India and, during a mad expedition by air in Yemen, he tried to find the kingdom of the Queen of Sheba. Immediately after the rise of prisoner after the armistice, and he escaped, crossed over into the free zone and fought from the Lot to the edge of the Rhine, heading the famous Alsace-Lorraine brigade. Malraux's life and his fight against fascism in the name of human dignity led him to the Resistance. At the age of 40, he rediscovered French reality and western culture. It is in art that he finally found that transmission of the eternal part of man, which he had first sought in the revolution. In "Le Temps du Mepris" (The time of scorning) (1935), he wishes that art could "make men Hitler, he joined the World Anti-fascist Committee and drew closer to the Communists, without ever really joining them and, at the first Soviet writers' congress, he did not fail to denounce the inadequacies of an already frozen Marxism.

In 1936, the Spanish war broke out and Malraux headed a squadron of the International Brigade. "L'Espoir" (Days of Hope) (1937) is not a report but then it is not exactly a novel either. His works of fiction are like "chronicles of shattered ambitions". Curtis Cate notes. In 1940, he was taken to prison and



they are ignorant of in themselves". "Les Voix du Silence" (The voices of silence) replace action with creation. Meditation about art was to dominate the last

period of his work with "La Psychologie de l'Art" (1950), "Saturne" (1950), "Le Musee Imaginaire" (1956) and "La Metamorphose des Dieux" (1957). Art gives man the

power of lasting which transcends history.

Malraux met De Gaulle on the front in Alsace and, after briefly being Minister of Information in 1945, followed him into retirement. By all appearances, nothing called for Malraux to join De Gaulle except for the same solitude and the same thirst for action and grandeur. It was a friendship between the prince and the poet. Thirteen years later, Malraux was once more to join De Gaulle in their meeting with history when he was appointed Minister of Cultural Affairs until 1969.

Malraux lived through the tragedy of the violent death of those close to him, that of his father, his two brothers, his two sons and his female companion Josette Clotis. His last works, "Lazare", "Hotes de Passage", "Les Antimemoires" and "Les Chenes qu'on abat", are memories mixed with meditations in which he talks about everything: life, death, illness, history, civilisations and the sacred, and conjures up a life in which the relation to oneself would, as far as possible, be suspended. "What does what only matters to me matter?" Malraux would only like to have been what he did. He died on 23rd November 1976. He missed writing his funeral speech, which would have been read in the big Cour Carré courtyard of the Louvre where the important personalities in French politics, arts and literature paid him a final homage. As a visionary, he had charged the next century with re-establishing God. For Malraux, the agnostic, "the 21st century would be religious, or would simply not be at all". — L'actualite en France