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The Kingdom Farfelu Paper Moons Book Preview

The first English translations of Andr © Malraux's two most surprising works of fiction: the voluptuous surrealist novella *The Kingdom of Farfelu* (1928), and "Paper Moons," a ferociously absurdist story from 1921. Translation by National Poetry Series winner W.B. Keckler.

We tend to remember Andre Malraux ™s life in four stages: as the engaged novelist of the 1930 ™s, the 1940 ™s resistance fighter, the multicultural art historian of the 1950 ™s, and as Charles de Gaulle ™s innovative Minister of Culture in the 1960 ™s. And it is not always easy to reconcile these masks, nor to assimilate into those roles Malraux ™s

continuing theme, his obsession with the meaning of death.

With the first-ever translation of these two novellas, however, written at the outset of Malraux's extraordinary career, the English-speaking world can for the first time see this body of work in perspective. These seminal pieces are the one place among all Malraux's writing where his major conflicting concerns: war and aestheticism, action and contemplation, politics and fraternity, art and death, are joined behind an unexpected and little-known mask, the one guise that could contain them: Malraux as surrealist.

“Paper Moons,” the earlier work, is a fable of mysterious beings that come to earth and hatch a scheme to “kill death” itself. It is told in a lush, luminous comic style, sensuous and dreaming. Through its manner of narration it embodies Malraux's obsession with death in a way that none of his later writing did: as a force that inhabits the art object. Rather than his later reference to museum art as “the presence, in life, of what ought to belong to death,” whereby the creator can indirectly speak to his audience over the head of his mortality, this story as painting struggles directly against death. Both stories are paintings, with the static gaze and byways of attention, the focus on the object; they are the most purely aesthetic objects Malraux created.

The Kingdom of Farfelu, an even more lush, more surreal work (yet written at the same time as his spare, exciting novel *The Conquerors*), delineates the concept of the farfelu that occupied much of Malraux's fancy throughout his life—the Absurd, blossoming into a kind of gorgeous fatality. The story itself depicts the meaningless siege of a city, where the attacking army is finally routed by its own futility and by its fear of death, in the form however not of a politically motivated enemy but of waves of mindless scorpions. As antiwar statement the story is transcendent, unlike anything in surrealism, and is imbued with Malraux's effortless multiculturalism, for example in its capsule evocation of the atmosphere of literally dozens of Asian cities on a single page, always avoiding mere

exoticismâ€”here it is the Frenchman who is exotic, who is a fog of contradictions, while Asia sits still in the depth of its millennial cultures.

Malrauxâ€™s later explication of the Imaginary Museum, his opening up of the arts of Asia and Africa as a kind of simultaneous human brush stroke, was for many First World artists and intellectuals the first moment they heard the Third World speaking in its true voice. As he once said, the Renaissance was but a small prelude to this greater Western awakening. These two stories are foundational texts in the adventure of that awakening.

They also provide a surprise. To readers of *Manâ€™s Fate* or *The Voices of Silence*, this will be their first encounter with a *funny* Malraux, his hair down, irresponsible, sidetracking and subverting the readerâ€™s expectations again and again, and yet beneath the humor keeping that intensely serious gaze, a gaze that is one of the treasures of the twentieth century.