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Author(s): Gaston Criel

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Surrealism

By GASTON CRIEL

SHOULD we call it a dead thing, or is it still alive? Neither one nor the other. The answer comes from a wonderful concept: man projected into the reality of his dream, a desire as young and as old as human thought. The merit of Surrealism consists in systematizing this concept, in establishing the reason for its existence. It is not a question of art or of literature, but of an "immediate" realization of the deepest part of one's self. It is difficult to bring out the black light: the dream, the unconscious, the poetry. Nevertheless we shall try to approach its secrets.

Before attempting this perilous voyage we should like to take a glance at those men who lived through one of the most extraordinary adventures of this half-century. The most important of these are André Breton, Paul Eluard, Louis Aragon, Benjamin Péret, Philippe Soupault. Surrealism, which had been preceded by Cubism and Futurism, was born out of Dadaism after the First World War. Dadaism originated at Zurich on February 3, 1916. Its father was the Romanian poet Tristan Tzara; the baptismal formula of Dadaism is: "Thought takes place in the mouth." This emphasis on the mouth anticipates the automatism of Surrealism. For the moment, the aim is simply to destroy the old literary temple. Tzara makes a clean sweep. From this clean sweep came Surrealism.

At first attached to Dadaism, the surrealists mounted their own horse about 1922. From one horse they expanded to a stable.

That did not always go on without kicks. Quite a few left the paddock bruised and wounded. In what race did our favorites enter? They returned disillusioned from the First World War. Their minds, though poetic, could not go back to "N'y touchez pas, il est brisé." They wanted to get to the heart of men and of things. The surrealist formula was to be offered as the perfect way to knowledge which would allow men to pass beyond literature in order to reach that self-realization, that communion which Lautréamont, one of the leaders, recommended in his aphorism made famous by André Breton: "Poetry must be made by all. Not by one." The war had proved that reason is less reasonable than the dream; make room therefore for onirism, the search for a reality deeper than appearances.

At the same time a psychiatrist from Vienna, Sigmund Freud, was busy finding the same supreme truth. It is an expression of this age which is aroused by kicking out logic and determinism to discover relativism and the omnipotence of the subconscious. The surrealists, basing their theories on this parallel current, reinforced their position and advanced with renewed ardor into a world which they had revealed by a systematic process. André Breton says: "The methods of logic today are no longer to be employed except for the solving of secondary problems. . . . Absolute rationalism, which remains in vogue, allows us to consider only facts closely dependent on our experience. . . . It is useless to add that limits

have been set to experience itself. It turns in a cage from which it is more and more difficult to release it. It is dependent also upon immediate utility and is guarded by common sense. . . . On the strength of the discoveries of Freud a current of opinion is taking form by means of which the explorer of the human mind will be able to push his investigations further, no longer considering merely the harsh realities. But it is important to point out that no method is prescribed *a priori* for carrying on this undertaking, that until further orders it can pass for being just as much within the province of poets as of scientists and that its success does not depend upon the more or less capricious paths that will be followed. . . .”

Knowledge turns up its nose at reason. In its turn poetry will bring to light the unknown man. It is sufficient to let it act. The poet had been a seer, he has become a magician, transforming the world and life. No longer are there barriers between the world and reality. Everything is fused into a superreality which is projected upon the wonderful. This projection is obtained by automatic writing: “Secrets of the magic surrealist art. Written surrealist composition, or first and final draft: Get writing materials, after settling down in a place as favorable as possible for the concentration of your mind on itself. Put yourself in the most passive or receptive mood possible. Disregard your genius, your talents and those of all others. Tell yourself that literature is the dreariest road which leads anywhere. Write quickly without any preconceived subject, quickly enough so as not to hold back and not to be tempted to read what you have written. The first sentence will come of itself. . . . It is rather difficult to express one’s opinion on the following sentence . . . It should not matter much to you anyway. Continue as long as you like. Trust in the inexhaustible character of the murmur. . . .” (André Breton).

This does not imply that all automatic writing is equally valuable. Subconscious minds are not all of the same quality and

show very different characteristics. It appears that the surrealist manner depends essentially upon the “inner” world. The painter, for example, will project on a canvas a model, an interior landscape. André Breton defines Surrealism as follows: “Surrealism, masculine noun. Psychic pure automatism by which one proposes to express, either verbally or in writing, or in any other manner, the true operations of thought. A dictation of thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason or ethics. Ency. Philos. Surrealism depends upon the belief in the higher reality of certain forms of associations previously neglected, in the total power of the dream, in the unprejudiced thought process. It tends to destroy all other psychic mechanisms and to replace them in the solution of the principal problems of life. . . .” It is the formula which would allow one to explore to the marrow a meaning (*sens*) latent since the origin of literature: “Heraclitus is a surrealist in dialectics . . . Lulle in definition . . . Baudelaire in ethics . . . Rimbaud in the practice of life. . . .” (André Breton).

In order to work the surrealist mine more deeply, the group founded a “Bureau de Recherches” at 15, rue de Grenelle. Discoveries from the most diverse sources were “to result in a new declaration of the rights of man.” The bureau had its newspaper: *La Révolution Surréaliste*. One could find in it important texts on dreams, automatic writing, stimulating photographs of a revolutionary nature. Later came the *Minotaure*, an expensive magazine with lavish illustrations. Finally, in 1938, came the International Exposition of Surrealism at which Germany, England, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, the United States, France, Italy, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan and Czechoslovakia displayed paintings, sculpture, books, engravings, photographs, drawings in a completely new setting. For a long time the group prolonged its youth by the virulence of its manifestations. Scandals, stinging pamphlets demonstrated the vitality of a bewildering school.

"Surrealism arose from an affirmation of faith in the genius of youth," said André Breton.

The vitality of Surrealism was so pervasive that it is the only group which may rightly be called a school during the period between the two wars, and it continues to make itself felt in the more popular fields. Its influence reached and still reaches all the arts and all countries. In all fields even today there is no means of expression which has not been greatly affected by Surrealism. Fashions, posters, displays, finally advertising, the movies, decoration, all show traces of it and the latest variety of Existentialism is not beyond its reach. In 1934, André Breton could already say, and it has since been confirmed: "Surrealism, pursuing its course, has tumultuously invaded not only art, but life; it has developed states of conscience, upset walls behind which from time immemorial it was thought impossible to see, and more and more people agree that it has modified sensibility; it has brought about the taking of a decisive step towards the uni-



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fication of the personality, of that personality which it had found closer and closer to decomposition. Surrealism is at the opposite pole from the theory of art for art's sake, it is a new way of living which makes use of the 'daily-wonderful,' the 'precious-wonderful' in a mosaic which is sometimes scatological."

It is upon these facts, which seem contradictory to cruder minds (our contradictions must be considered as the sign of that abnormality of the mind which may pass for our highest dignity. Let us repeat that we believe in the power of contradiction; of an internal prescription for the service of all; of the wonderful, based upon the human substrata; of light and darkness), that Surrealism gives us back our childhood and its dreams. It plunges us naked into a purifying bath to remove the grime of literature. Where the conventions are broken, "essential" nature reappears. The morbid character which sometimes seems inherent in Surrealism is due to the repression caused by centuries of lies, hypocrisy, crimes, exploitations, war, all exploding into this liberation. The liberated soul can recover its original freshness and the splendors of primitivism.

People talk about the death of Surrealism. It is interesting to note that some likewise talk about a death of freedom. Surrealism is a dangerous thing for men who champion oppression. Certainly the surrealist bomb is not lacking in power. "Above all we must make men despair of themselves and of society. This massacre of hope will give birth to a hope that is bloody and pitiless: the hope of enduring by our very refusal to want to endure. Our discoveries are those of the bursting and dissolution of all that is organized. . . ." Moving straight ahead, resolutely neglecting to guard its rear, Surrealism leaves an uninteresting country behind to push forward into a world where every desire is realized. The eternal wish of man who does not live by bread alone.

These indefatigable explorers ask: "What has been the decisive encounter in your

life?" "Why do you write?" "Is suicide a solution?" "What do you hope from love?"

The reply:

Anti-culture: primitivism.

Black-humor: stupid explosion of a world which mocks at itself.

Mad-love: exclusive love, resistless power of desire against the conventions. Enlistment of our spiritual reality in the service of the external world.

Paranoia: that which tends to the total discredit of the world and of reality.

Collective-poetry: made by all, not by one.

Objective-chance: news items, unusual combinations of circumstances that escape logic but reveal the key to intimate problems, objectifying conscious and unconscious desires, so that desire and reality are "communicating vessels." According to Breton there is "a common denominator situated in the mind of man and which is nothing but his desire," in other words, "chance is the meeting of an external causality and an internal finality, a form of manifestation of exterior necessity which forces its way into the human subconscious."

Daily-wonderful: "The whole fauna of the imagination and their marine vegetation, as if by a hair of shadow, is lost and perpetuates itself in the dimly lighted zones of human activity. It is there that the great

spiritual lighthouses appear, close in form to impurer signs. The door to the mystery is opened by a human weakness, and now we are in the kingdoms of shadow. One false step, one mumbled syllable reveal the thought of a man." (Aragon.) From this solution bursts forth total freedom in all fields.

Sexual freedom: Freudism, mad love.

Freedom of style: automatic writing; interpretation of dreams; projection of the subconscious.

Social freedom: permanent revolution; abolition of the conventions; liberation of man.

Freedom of thought: Glorification of madness; paranoid criticism; onirism.

This powerful advanced post of total freedom is the surrealist springboard from which leaps "desire," its great act of faith. Surrealism is the expression of a period that rejects the debris of a bankrupt civilization which, from disasters to wars, from oppression to the charnel-house, has found no solution but the atomic bomb. Surrealism strives to liberate man from dictatorships, no matter where they come from, tyrannies of the mind, the body, of man, of money or of steel. Liberation of man by man, Surrealism marks the loftiest attempt of the mind toward freedom.

Paris



Plans have been made in many parts of the world to honor the five hundredth anniversary of Leonardo da Vinci's birth on April 15, 1952, but naturally Italy has a program extending to all the major cities and to the town of Vinci itself which gave its name to his family. The celebrations there include complete restoration of Leonardo's birthplace and of the Castle, establishment of a permanent center of studies to promote research on Leonardo's life and works, erection of a monument, and an exhibition of documents.

Jean Cocteau to the Americans, as quoted by Peter Broich in *Die Deutsche Rundschau*: "Neither weapons nor wealth will save you. You will be saved by your minority of thinkers. Your salvation will come from your hidden hearts, from your slender purses, from the madness of your Edgar Allen Poes—in short, from your poets, no matter what ink they write with."

A conference of Renaissance scholars living in the South-Central region of the United States will be held on April 26, at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, Okla. This will be part of a celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of Edmund Spenser.

Miss Marianne Moore, who recently won the Bollingen Poetry Prize of \$1,000, was also one of the winners of the third annual National Book Awards. She shared the latter honors with James Jones and Rachel L. Carson, the former for *From Here to Eternity* and the latter for *The Sea Around Us*. The awards are offered by the American Book Publishers Council, the American Booksellers Assn., and the Book Manufacturers Institute.

The Prix Fémina for 1951 has been awarded to Anne de Tourville for her novel *Jabadao*.