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Surrealism and Freedom

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The tumultuous first quarter of the twentieth century produced in bewildering succession nearly all those movements that are collectively known as "modern art"—fauvism, primitivism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, neo-classicism, neo-romanticism, purism, vorticism, constructivism, dadaism, surrealism—each with its flaming manifesto and restless experimentation.

The second quarter of this century, though equally tumultuous, has produced scarce a single new art movement. Most artists of today are developing and modifying the contributions of their revolutionary elders. Of all the "isms" that were hurled forth in those hectic days, the only one that remains today as a coherent movement is the one that is least coherent in the public mind—surrealism.

As with modern art generally, surrealism has its ramifications in psychology, politics, social philosophy, literature and the other arts. Its proponents explain that surrealism is a point of view in all these fields more than it is a movement. And a serious point of view it is, though the immediate precursor of surrealism was a very *un*serious "anti-art" movement —dadaism.

After World War I, some *avant garde* artists gathered together and formed the dada movement. Its leaders were Max Ernst, Tristan Tzara, Man Ray, Picabia and Marcel Duchamp. An "international" movement, its headquarters were New York, Paris and Cologne. Disgusted and disillusioned with the chaos and misery brought on by the war, the dadaists declared their own war against society. In revolting, they repudiated all the conventions that went with that society—tradition, even reason. Their defiance took the form of scandalous exhibitions and exasperating pranks. Meetings were announced at which dada poetry was to be read. The "poetry" consisted of reading stock market quotations while bells were clanging; or two performing dadaists would shout each other down. Dadaist art exhibits were calculated to shock. Often these meetings and exhibits provoked the enraged spectators to riot, and in more than one case the police had to intervene. All this, of course, was regarded as a "complete dada triumph."

The dadaists ended by mocking themselves. Any attempt by a more serious-minded dadaist to formulate aims was laughed out of court by the

others. Such a self-contradictory movement could not last more than a few stormy years. By 1922 dada was dead.[1]

Adventure of the Spirit

THEN CAME ANDRÉ BRETON. Not a dadaist himself, Breton felt that dada had accomplished something in spite of itself. It had pointed the way to a new adventure of the spirit and revealed certain forces which could no longer be disregarded.

In Paris, Breton gathered around himself a few intellectuals, and on the debris of dada founded a new movement—surrealism. The aims of this movement were defined in Breton's first Manifesto of Surrealism (1924): In the present "crisis of consciousness," as Breton termed it, human thought needs to be recreated. For this task, untapped human resources must be explored, the processes of pure thought must be understood. These resources and processes are inhibited by tradition, convention, conscious " reason." To release the energy that lies deep within us and that alone has value, is the aim of surrealism. The word itself means above, or beyond, realism—beyond ordinary objective realism and into the human spirit.

Immediately, the surrealists conducted experiments to realize their aims. In various ways—through automatic writing, hypnotism, unpremeditated conversations—contact with "pure thought" was sought. This was the "heroic period" of the movement. Then questions arose as to the scope and possibilities of surrealism, and the movement entered its "analytic period."

The question of the literary expression of surrealism was answered by such poets as Paul Eluard and Louis Aragon who joined the movement. (Breton himself is also a poet.) We shall discuss the political position of surrealism later. The question as to whether there could be a surrealist art, since the expression of pure thought would require spontaneous and unpremeditated application, was answered by Breton himself. He stoutly defended the possibility of a surrealist art, and presently all but the most irreconcilable of the ex-dadaists were attracted to the movement. More talent was added with the appearance of Yves Tanguy, André Masson, René Magritte, Salvador Dali[2] and others.

With their new scale of values, surrealists rediscovered heroes of the

[1] A history of dadaism is usually included in works on the history of surrealism, a brief bibliography of which will be found at the end of this article.

[2] Dali's notorious and fashionable antics in New York were looked upon with disfavor by the surrealists. Breton dubbed him "avida Dollars." When Dali showed himself sympathetic to Franco, he was expelled from the movement.

past—Poe, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Bosch, Goya, Moreau. These were men who probed the human spirit for their inspiration. Edgar Allan Poe in one of his essays[3] reveals himself as a prophet of surrealism: "The *pure Imagination* chooses, from either *Beauty* or *Deformity*, only the most combinable things hitherto uncombined. . . . But, as often analagously happens in physical chemistry, so not infrequently does it occur in this chemistry of the intellect, that the admixture of two elements results in a something that has nothing of the qualities of one of them, or even nothing of the qualities of either. . . . Thus, the range of Imagination is unlimited."

There we have a perfect surrealist formula; for one of the characteristics of surrealist expression is the creation of an image which brings about the fusion of two distant realities upon a plane equally unrelated to either. Lautréamont gave the classic example of the "chance meeting, on a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella."

The features of surrealism are: a flow of pure thought uninhibited by reason; non-conformity; disinterestedness. The methods of surrealism are: *a priori* images fully developed; automatism through compulsion; spontaneity; free association.[4]

And the indispensable prerequisite of surrealism is—absolute freedom of the spirit. Breton speaks of it as the first condition. Nadeau explains that the end of surrealism is "total liberty of being in a world liberated."

Such concern with liberty would lead not only to a study of the conditions of spiritual freedom but also of freedom in the world at large. And the surrealists did indeed turn their attention to the problem of a free society. They extended their revolt to a protest against the forces of social oppression. In their view, the iniquitous system that prevailed and that led constantly to wars, crises and misery, was supported by sacred traditions, conventions and "reason." Down with them!

The Turn to Freud and Marx

FOR THE KEY to personal freedom, the surrealists turned to Freud; for social freedom they turned, curiously enough, to Karl Marx. Without going into it too deeply, they simply assumed that the communist revolution was the way to a free world. It, too, was a revolt against conditions which the surrealists hated, and so it must be going in the same direction.

Another reason for surrealist sympathy with Marxism may be found in some of André Breton's statements wherein we detect overtones of Marxian dialectics. In proposing to "give mankind an understanding of its latent

[3] *Marginalia XXXI.*
[4] *Cf.* Sidney Janis, "Abstract and Surrealist Art in America."

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possibilities," Breton says[5] "There is a hint in all this that there exists a certain spiritual plane on which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low are not conceived of as opposites. It would be vain, therefore to attribute to surrealism any other motive than the hope to determine that plane." And again, "Construction and destruction should no longer be flaunted against each other."

Here we have, translated into surrealist aims, the Hegel-Marx concept of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

With this background, the surrealists placed themselves "at the service of the Revolution." They wanted to be the intellectual wing of the Revolution; their contribution was to be the liberation of the mind.

But the alliance was one-sided and the "service" of the surrealists was regarded with suspicion by the Communists. All this concern with "total freedom" was, to be sure, of doubtful value to Communism!

The surrealists first proffered their good offices to Lenin and were politely rejected. With the incumbency of Stalin their services were again offered and again they were rejected, this time less politely. No doubt they were being discussed in Moscow, for shortly afterwards they received a telegram from the U.S.S.R.: "In case of an imperialist war against the Soviets, where would the surrealists stand?" Their prompt reply was, "We await your orders." But no orders came.

The first sign of a rupture appeared when Aragon attended an international conference of Communist intellectuals in Moscow. Whatever transpired, Aragon returned to Paris a stauncher-than-ever Party man, publicly and loudly repudiating surrealism. Ill feeling was increased when surrealists spoke of "the wind blowing cretinism from Moscow."

Then in 1935, Ilya Ehrenburg, cultural spokesman for the U.S.S.R., decisively joined the issue in an angry article[6] denouncing surrealism. It was accused of being a decadent movement—"bourgeois," of course—wrapped up in trivia and morbidity. The surrealists had criticized conditions in Russia as being precisely what they were protesting against—the forcing of men into a pattern that denied freedom of expression. This more than anything was the occasion for Ehrenburg's furious attack.

The final break came after World War II, with the surrealists at last convinced that the "Revolution" was *not* the road to freedom. Such a

[5] André Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," 1929.

[6] *The Surrealists*, translated and published in *Partisan Review*, October-November, 1935.

break was bound to come. As early as 1924, Breton had misgivings about developments in Russia, but at that time his idealism won out. He wrote[7]: "I believe with all truly free men that the Revolution, even with its abuses, remains the highest and most moving expression that can be given to that love of Good in which the universal will and individual wills are united."

This is a tremendous thought, but it has little to do with the realities of the "Revolution." It has become evident that the "abuses" are in fact a repudiation of the ideal of a union of the universal and individual wills, which can be realized only in an atmosphere of "total liberty."

The Road to Freedom

IT IS NO SMALL IRONY that the surrealists were rejected by the society they had heralded and that whatever acclaim they received came from the society they had despised. But we still have to account for the fact that they originally turned to the communist revolution as a revolt against the social and economic maladjustments of the world they lived in—and we are forced to admit that these conditions have not radically changed since the appearance of the manifestos of surrealism.

What then? Simply this: that a "world liberated" remains to be achieved; and if it is to be achieved it must be in a way that removes the abuses of our present social system, avoids the abuses of communism, and realizes equal opportunities and full personal freedom for all.

What are the prospects of surrealism? In Paris, the post-World War II *succès de scandale* of existentialism has overshadowed the surrealism of post-World War I. But surrealism has survived, and in America it is still a vital movement. Many of its European practitioners are now in this country and are leaving their mark. While few American artists have actually joined the movement, a very large number of the younger Americans have been profoundly influenced by it. Typically, they practice surrealism independently, assimilating rather than adhering.[8]

How long surrealism will continue as a movement is conjectural. But it has made its contribution and pointed a direction that is only beginning to be realized. As the surrealists remind us, most of our unpremeditated conversations, thoughts, dreams and inspirations are surrealistic, and they deserve to be explored and expressed. In this sense, surrealism will live so long as there are human beings—and so long as they are free.

[7] In "The Surrealist Revolution," December, 1924.

[8] This trend was noted recently by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, when new acquisitions of works by American artists were exhibited.

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Agrarian Land Reform in Poland

POST-WAR CHANGE and development have both retarded recovery in Poland and boosted it, the Polish Research and Information Service said in a report on Poland's recovery issued in October, 1948. Among the factors retarding recovery is listed: "Social readjustment attendant on basic land reform."

In a section of the report devoted to explanation of this, the official agency of the Communist-dominated Government of Poland says:

> Besides special obstacles already mentioned such as unusual frost and drought, agriculture has faced others as well. Restoration of soils and livestock is intrinsically a slow job. Further, land reform and the distribution of large estates in small parcels to peasants necessitated many temporary readjustments. Accordingly, farming has a less successful record to show than other activities. . . .
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> Because of agrarian reform, about 3,000,000 acres were distributed to 402,000 families in the period 1945–47. This is an average of 7.5 acres per family.
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> Before 1939, 64 per cent of all farms occupied but 15 per cent of all arable land, averaging 12.3 acres each, against 43 per cent of arable land owned in estates larger than 247.1 acres. Farms of sizes between these two held 35 per cent of the land.

The Polish land distribution scheme is referred to as a "basic" land reform, but it is not. There is no evidence that socialization of the rent of agricultural land was introduced, either by taxation or leasing. Forced grain collections of the Soviet type are not taxes upon differential (economic) rent, but upon income. Poland's experience is another datum in support of the thesis of Soviet Academician Eugen S. Varga that land division in eastern Europe set its agriculture back roughly ten years.

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