Art and freedom

André Breton and problems of twentieth-century culture

Part 2

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See part one of this essay.

This brings us back to a central project of Surrealism—the resolution of the contradiction between dream and reality. Freud's influence on the Surrealists—especially his interpretation of the meaning of dreams and discovery of the unconscious mind—is crucial here. Indeed, Breton was among the first intellectuals in France to appreciate and draw attention to the significance of Freud's work.

He was more, however, than a mere admirer of Freud's; he believed that psychoanalysis could be used not only to treat mental illness, but to transform life generally. This radical interpretation of Freud is one of Breton's major themes in the first Surrealist manifesto: "If the depths of our mind contain within it [*sic*] strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or of waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them.... Can't the dream also be used in solving the fundamental questions of life?" [21]

Freud, it should be noted, did not return the Surrealists' admiration despite their stated devotion to his ideas. Not only were his own tastes in art conservative, but he considered Breton and his colleagues to be making use of psychoanalytic concepts in a completely inappropriate way. It made no sense to Freud to use dream-imagery in a poem or painting, since dreams had no meaning for him apart from their psychological context, that is, apart from the mind and life-history of the individual who dreamed them.

Furthermore, the whole point of psychoanalytic therapy was to make the unconscious conscious and, in Freud's opinion, the same held true for art—it shouldn't be a matter of going back to the unconscious, as the Surrealists were doing, but just the reverse. "What interests me in your art," Freud told Salvador Dali who had come to visit him in 1938, "is not the unconscious, but the conscious." [22]

Trotsky, as it happened, was making the same point to Breton in Mexico at the very same time: "You invoke Freud, but does he not do the opposite? Freud raises the subconscious into the conscious. Are you not trying to smother the conscious under the unconscious?" [23]

It was a point well taken and there were any number of Surrealist works that could have been used as examples—works filled with associations so incoherent or images so impenetrable as to amount to a kind of artistic solipsism. What is more, Surrealism tended to encourage the production of such works by transforming spontaneity into a principle of creative practice through its promotion of techniques such as "automatic writing," which we will discuss below.

Artistic production does depend, however, far more on intuition than either science or philosophy. Idealists (and that would include the early Surrealists) conceive of intuition as the pure absence of reason, i.e., as pure subjectivity. But from the standpoint of materialism, the subjective is itself objective, which is to say both that the unconscious mind has its own underlying logic—which can be rationally comprehended—and that the conscious and the unconscious form a dialectical unity in the mental life of the individual.

Trotsky, in his autobiography, provided one of the most lucid descriptions of this unity, drawing an analogy between its operation in social life and in the realm of individual creativity: "The creative union of the conscious with the unconscious is what one usually calls 'inspiration.' Revolution is the inspired frenzy of history. Every real writer knows creative moments, when something stronger than himself is guiding his hand; every real orator experiences moments when some one stronger than the self of his every-day existence speaks through him. This is 'inspiration.' It derives from the highest creative effort of all one's forces. The unconscious rises from its deep well and bends the conscious mind to its will, merging it with itself in some greater synthesis." [24]

Thus, dreams and imagination are not necessarily an escape from reason and reality. On the contrary, when fused with consciousness, they open up enormous creative possibilities that deepen our understanding of the world and of ourselves.

This is evident in art; the artistic image, arrived at in part through intuition, is not an empty hallucination, but at its best, a prophetic vision because the artist can see with his mind's eye certain aspects of reality far more acutely than his contemporaries—or indeed he himself—can rationally understand.

While Breton had been wrong to seek in dreams a substitute for reality, he later came to see the problem in a new light: he now defined the imaginary as being that which "tends to become real" [25] and the aim of Surrealist activity as being "to cast a *conduction wire*" [26] between the waking and dream states.

Prevailing, bourgeois forms of consciousness express the tyranny of what is, in other words, the acceptance of the accomplished fact, and are inimical to the development of class consciousness. On the plane of individual psychology, in the subjective experience of each person, a similar process takes place: conscious thought contains the adjustments, compromises and frustrations imposed on the individual by the demands of the external world, which means above all the denial of human need and desire. Though blocked to a large extent from fulfillment in reality, these needs and desires do not disappear: they find an outlet in the unconscious, i.e., in dreams and imagination.

This outlet can also be an aspiration—the dream itself can affirm a belief that life could be better than it is, that the restrictions imposed by existing reality on freedom and happiness could and should be overcome. As

Breton once put it beautifully, “Resignation is not written upon the moving stone of sleep. The immense dark cloth daily woven bears in its center the transfixing eyes of a clear victory.” [27] Herein lies its value in solving the fundamental problems of life: to use the image of the conduction wire, the imaginary can be a means by which reality is charged with hope.

It is hope that is the key to the Surrealist concept of beauty. For Breton beauty was identical to what he called the marvelous. Though he never defined it precisely, he provided countless examples of these experiences: meeting a young woman on a Paris street whose eyes fascinate him and who tells him that she calls herself Nadja “because in Russian it’s the beginning of the word hope, and because it’s only the beginning”; [28] returning in Guadalajara early in the morning to a wonderfully ornate and dilapidated building which Breton had dubbed the Tumbledown Palace and finding, in a “dark and immensely empty” room with a piano, a young girl, with disheveled hair, sweeping the floor in a ragged white evening gown and “smiling like the dawn of the world.” [29] The marvelous is a moment of the dream breaking into reality, a luminous presentiment of desire fulfilled.

Surrealist poetry and art

Is it possible, or advisable, to make an assessment of Surrealism—in painting, photography, poetry, prose, filmmaking, etc.—as an artistic movement? Such an undertaking is vast and outside our present purpose. Certainly there are legitimate questions to be raised.

One is obliged to take issue with Breton’s early fixation on *psychic automatism*, artistic effort free from conscious control, which he maintained was an indispensable element of Surrealism. The suggestion that by entering into a trance- or dream-like state the artist’s unconscious is revealed in a pure and unfiltered fashion simply appears naive today. That the “spontaneous” products Breton and his colleagues turned out took the form of highly-evolved poetic images, inconceivable without an extensive knowledge of literary technique and history, might have offered a hint that the states they entered into were hardly free of conscious suggestion.

In concentrating on the inspirational sources of art, Breton frequently forgot that a work of art is the product of a complex relation between the spontaneous and intuitive, on the one hand, and the rationally-conceived, on the other, in which neither side of the equation can be neglected. The artist creates within him- or herself an equilibrium between these elements, a tension that is constantly in question, constantly recreated. No significant work can simply be the act of “fleshing out” a preconceived purpose, but a conscious purpose must emerge from the act of creating every significant work.

When Breton’s insights, particularly in regard to the practice of artistic creation, were on the mark, they possessed profound truth. He was absolutely right to insist on the indispensable function of states “of expectation and perfect receptivity,” the need to cultivate states of mind characterized by a willingness to receive impulses from every possible source. [30]

No serious artistic work is accomplished without the *astonishing* arrival, which can be encouraged, of material emanating from deep within, that floats to the surface only under definite conditions, moments at which “a very delicate flame highlights or perfects life’s meaning as nothing else can.” Breton celebrates these conditions beautifully: “Still today I am only counting on what comes of my own openness, my eagerness to wander *in search* of everything, which, I am confident, keeps me in mysterious communication with other open beings, as if we were suddenly called to assemble.” [31]

Breton was not merely a theoretician, he was a poet. What is one to make of his own work? “To compare two objects as far distant as possible one from the other,” he insisted, “or, by any other method, to confront them in a brusque and striking manner, remains the highest task to which poetry can ever aspire.” [32] Is this true? Is this method inevitably fruitful? Might it not also produce results that seem merely arbitrary or trivial?

In examining Breton’s poetry, one comes upon remarkable images and a great many that are entirely inaccessible. His insistence that the appreciation of beauty could entirely bypass the intellect does not stand up under scrutiny. Feeling and thinking are not realms separated by a Chinese wall.

Anyone interested in Breton’s verse would do well to begin with *Earthlight*, which includes seven volumes of his poems. *Free Union* (1931), *The Pistol with White Hair* (1932) and *The Air of the Water* (1934) seem the most interesting.

The poem *Free Union*, perhaps Breton’s most emotionally powerful and direct, concludes: [33]

My woman with her eyes full of tears
With her eyes of violet armor and a speedometer needle
My woman with her savannah eyes
My woman with her eyes of water to drink in prison
My woman with her eyes of forests forever beneath the axe
With her eyes of sea-level air-level earth and fire

Almost inevitably Breton seems a poet of extraordinary lines, rather than entire poems: [34]

I dream I see you endlessly superimposed upon yourself
or
In the beautiful half-light of 1934
The air was a splendid pink the color of red mullet
or
The first explorers searching less for lands
Than for their own origins

It is also possible to agree with Breton’s claim that beauty must be convulsive or disturbing without that settling a priori the question of form or style. His attacks on the novel as a form and on realism as a tedious and mediocre trend “hostile to any intellectual or moral advance” finally themselves become a little tedious.

It is Breton’s great weakness that he tended to detect the qualities he valued only in a preselected group of works. Emotional and intellectual disruptiveness are as present in the novels of “traditionalists” such as Theodore Dreiser and Thomas Hardy as they are in the paintings of Surrealists Tanguy or Masson. This is not to say that form is a matter of indifference, or that certain forms do not exhaust themselves historically, but Breton often presented the matter in a one-sided (and somewhat self-serving) fashion.

Surrealism certainly *can* claim credit to being the most intellectually provocative artistic movement of the twentieth century. It persistently asked the most searching questions about humanity and its destiny. Surrealist works abound with images that jolt consciousness instead of “smothering” it. For instance: Rene Magritte’s portrait of a woman’s face in which her breasts take the place of her eyes, her navel the place of her nose and her sex the place of her mouth (*The Rape*), or a line of Breton’s fusing the description of a girl’s parents with the apartment they live in: “Her father a stake solidly driven into his shadow her mother a pretty pyramid of a lamp-shade.” [35]

Our expectation of what is normal and reasonable is disrupted by such images, precisely for this reason—they open up for us a deeper sense of what is real. Magritte’s painting doesn’t reproduce a woman’s face, but rather her facelessness, and thereby evokes for us an idea of what it can mean to be a woman in this world.

In the visual arts, in particular, all one has to do to gauge Surrealism's impact is list the names of those who were directly involved in or deeply influenced by Surrealism: Giorgio di Chirico, Francis Picabia, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Hans Arp, Masson, Max Ernst, Man Ray, Salvador Dali, Joan Mir-, Luis Bu-uel, Alberto Giacometti, Magritte, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Tanguy, Arshile Gorky, Joseph Cornell. New vistas of artistic imagery and activity were opened up by Surrealism, so much so that it completely altered the popular notion of *what art is*. Perhaps the best indication of Surrealism's influence is simply the fact that the word itself has become a part of everyday language.

The internal life of the movement is an issue that deserves some consideration. Breton's reputation as the "pope of Surrealism" has gained wide currency. It stems from the numerous splits and expulsions that the movement experienced and, not surprisingly, many of those thrown out blamed Breton personally. Admittedly, he could on occasion be unfair, arbitrary, even cruel, but any objective assessment of these disputes demonstrates that political, not personal, questions predominated, specifically the issue of Surrealism's adherence to the socialist revolution. In virtually every case Breton's position has been vindicated. (It should also be noted that the internal life of the Surrealists was not unaffected by the degeneration of the labor movement. Breton's *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), in its violent excoriations of opponents, shows definite traces of "Third Period" Stalinism.)

In 1929 Breton broke with a group including the actor and poet Antonin Artaud and the writer Robert Desnos primarily because of their objections to the political radicalization of Surrealism; in 1932 Aragon walked out of the movement to assume a career as the leading cultural spokesman of French Stalinism; six years later Eluard took the same route, becoming the Communist Party's de facto poet-laureate, churning out occasional verse on demand; and Dali was expelled because of his hero worship of Hitler, not to mention his flagrant commercialism and publicity-seeking which prompted Breton to turn his name into an acronym, "Avida Dollars."

What really bothers Breton's many critics isn't so much the specifics of these disputes as the fact that he actually insisted on holding his colleagues accountable for their positions and actions. "The intellectual trade," Breton once wrote with evident exasperation, "is plied with such impunity." [36]

The writer Georges Bataille, whose falling-out with Breton had been particularly embittered, recanted his criticism years later: "Today I believe that BRETON's exigencies ... were basically justified. BRETON harbored a desire for shared devotion to one supreme truth, and a hatred of every concession when it came to this truth, of which he wanted his friends to be the expression, or to stop being his friends." [37]

Surrealism and Marxism

As is already evident from the present discussion, one cannot seriously consider the history of Surrealism without bringing up the name of Leon Trotsky. Breton first developed an admiration for Trotsky in August 1925 after reading the latter's book on Lenin's early life, about which he commented, "I find nothing lacking, either in grandeur or perfection." [38] The style and substance of Trotsky's work stood in sharp contrast to the efforts of the increasingly Stalinized French Communist Party (PCF). Although Breton applied to join the PCF in late 1926, along with fellow Surrealists Aragon, Eluard, Peret and Pierre Unik, he had no illusions about the organization.

In *Legitimate Defense* (September 1926) Breton had written: "I do not know why I should abstain any longer from saying that *L'Humanite* [the PCF's daily newspaper]—childish, declamatory, unnecessarily *cretinising*—is an unreadable newspaper, utterly unworthy of the role of proletarian education it claims to assume. Beneath these quickly read articles, clinging to actuality so closely that there is no perspective to be had ... it is impossible not to remark in those who have written them an extreme weariness, a secret resignation to what exists, with the concern to keep the reader in a more or less generous illusion as cheaply as possible." [39] He was, needless to say, never a favorite of the party leadership.

Breton was expelled from the PCF and its cultural organizations in 1933. Two years later the Stalinists used the excuse of a confrontation between Breton and Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg on a Paris street (Ehrenburg had written a scurrilous attack on the Surrealists; Breton confronted him and slapped him in the face) to exclude Breton from addressing its Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture. Eluard was only permitted to read Breton's statement, one of his most remarkable efforts, late in the evening in front of a hostile crowd. "From where we stand," Breton had written, "we maintain that the activity of interpreting the world must continue to be linked with the activity of changing the world. We maintain that it is the poet's, the artist's role to study the human problem in depth in all its forms...." [40]

In his assessment of the Congress, "On the Time When the Surrealists Were Right (1935)," Breton noted the "veritable bath of useless repetitions, infantile considerations, and toadying: those claiming to be saving culture chose an unhealthy climate for it."

He denounced the opportunism of the intellectuals who accepted Stalinist dictates: "Whether in the field of politics or in the field of art, two forces—the spontaneous refusal of the conditions of life offered man and the imperative need to change them, on the one hand, and enduring fidelity to principles or moral rigor on the other—have carried the world forward." [41]

Breton served on the French Committee of Inquiry into the Moscow Trials. In September 1936, according to Polizzotti's *Revolution of the Mind*, "Breton addressed a large rally to demand 'the truth about the [first] Moscow Trial': 'We consider the staging of the Moscow Trial to be an abject police undertaking,' he declared. Stalin had become 'the great negator and principal enemy of the proletarian revolution ... the most inexcusable of murderers.' Breton made a special plea on behalf of Trotsky, the largest of Stalin's targets, who had been condemned to death in absentia during the trial: 'a first-rate intellectual and moral guide, whose life, as soon as it is threatened, becomes as precious to us as our own.'" Breton never retreated from this position. In 1951 he commented about the show trials: "I persist in thinking that they opened, and inevitably let fester, the most horrific scourge of modern times." [42]

Breton's respect for Trotsky was so great that it produced difficulties when it came to their collaboration on the 1938 manifesto. Breton, who had known or met many of the significant figures in European intellectual and artistic circles and was not an individual readily impressed nor, every bit of evidence would indicate, easily left dumbstruck, found himself paralyzed in the Bolshevik leader's presence.

In a letter to Trotsky written immediately following his departure from Mexico, Breton tried to explain this phenomenon: "This inhibition is mainly a product ... of the boundless admiration I have for you.... Very often I've wondered what would happen if, by some impossible chance, I found myself facing one of the men on whom I've modeled my thinking and sensibility.... All of a sudden I felt oddly stripped of my abilities, prey to a kind of perverse need to hide. It's what I call for my own personal use, in memory of King Lear, my 'Cordelia complex.' Please don't laugh at me; it's utterly innate, organic. I have every reason to believe it is ineradicable." [43]

Unlike many others in the postwar period, Breton never repudiated the general ideals of socialism or his association with Trotskyism. In an interview he once scathingly suggested that a "truly clinical study" be made of the "specifically modern malady" which makes such repentant

intellectuals “radically change their opinions and renounce in a masochistic and exhibitionist manner their own testimony, becoming champions of a cause quite contrary to that which they began serving with great fanfare.” [44] (A “malady” which has reached epidemic proportions in our day!)

In a message he sent to a 1957 meeting commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution organized by the PCI, at that time the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, Breton expressed his continued fidelity to the cause “of human emancipation.” He declared: “In spite of everything I remain among those who still find in the memory of the October revolution a great part of the unconditional *elan* that drew me to it when I was young and which implied a total gift of one’s self.” [45]

On January 29, 1962, four and a half years before he succumbed to heart failure at the age of 70, Breton delivered a moving eulogy in honor of Natalia Sedova-Trotsky, who had died a few days before in Paris. He declared that Trotsky’s widow “must have known that the evolutionary process would at last impose a radical revision on the cynically counterfeited history of the last forty years, which at the end of its irreversible process will not only render justice to Trotsky but will be called to accept, in all their vigor and amplitude, the ideas to which his life was given.” [46]

In his support for Trotsky’s ideas, Breton was not alone among the Surrealists. Pierre Naville broke from the Surrealist group in 1926 and threw himself into Communist Party activity. He later became a leading figure in the French Trotskyist movement. Peret, one of Breton’s closest collaborators, played an active role in the Brazilian Left Opposition and in 1931 was appointed its Regional Secretary for Rio de Janeiro. Following his expulsion from Brazil for those activities, he joined the French Trotskyists, later fighting in the Spanish Civil War. Gerard Rosenthal, who as “Francis Gerard” had been one of the original Surrealists, served as Trotsky’s lawyer. Maurice Nadeau, the chronicler of Surrealism, also participated in the Trotskyist movement. Nor should the backing of Breton’s artistic *and* political initiatives throughout much of the 1930s by a number of the most extraordinary visual artists of the interwar period—Ray, Ernst, Tanguy, Masson, in particular—be forgotten.

Marxists, confronted with this history, might want to ponder the following related questions: Why is it that an artistic tendency whose concerns, on the surface, appeared to be far removed from those of the working class came to identify so closely, more closely than any other, with the proletarian revolution and the Fourth International? Why is it that so much of Breton’s work produced in the 1930s seems urgent and contemporary, while so many of the efforts from the same era to “realistically depict working class life” strike one as dated and even puerile? This article has been an attempt to offer at least a partial answer: that the Surrealists carried out a truly radical critique of what is, in both its external and internal dimensions.

Breton was the finest representative of an extraordinary generation of petty-bourgeois artists; a poet who moved toward Marxism, while retaining his poetic eye, on the basis of deep and abiding convictions; an intellectual, in short, who went farther than anyone else. His best writings exhilarate because of their combination of violent criticism and tenderness; their revolutionary zeal and devotion to beauty; their indefatigable energy and confidence; their exercise of the imagination to the highest degree.

In the 1938 manifesto, there is a striking passage (apparently written by Breton) that makes clear why the artist is “the natural ally of the revolution.” Evoking Freud’s theory of sublimation, the declaration explains that the artist must marshal “the forces of the inner world” against the unbearable reality of repression and alienation within capitalist society, but those inner forces are not unique to the artist as an individual but are “common to all men.” This is why the artist’s own struggle for his art merges with the struggle for the liberation of all humanity: “The need for the emancipation of the mind has but to follow its natural course to be brought to reimmerse itself into this primordial necessity: the need for the emancipation of man.” [47] It would be hard to think of an artist who better exemplified this than Breton himself: at the outset of the Surrealist movement he had written that “freedom” was the only word “that still excites me,” and he kept on pursuing the quest for freedom, following “its natural course” no matter where that took him or what forces were trying to stop him. [48] Therein lies the greatness of his accomplishment and the enduring significance of his life.

Notes

21. Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, pp. 10, 12. [back]
22. Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art* (New York: Random House, 1985), vol. 4, *Naturalism of the Film Age*, p. 223. [back]
23. Jean van Heijenoort, *With Trotsky in Exile: From Prinkipo to Coyoacan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978], p. 122. [back]
24. Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), pp. 334-35. [back]
25. Andre Breton, *Earthlight*, trans. Bill Zavatsky and Zack Rogow (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1993), p. 90. [back]
26. Andre Breton, *The Communicating Vessels*, trans. Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey J. Harris (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p. 86. [back]
27. Ibid., p. 145. [back]
28. Breton, *Nadja*, p. 66. [back]
29. Breton, *Free Rein*, p. 28. [back]
30. Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p. 180. [back]
31. Andre Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 25. [back]
32. Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, p. 109. [back]
33. Breton, *Earthlight*, pp. 84-85. [back]
34. Ibid., pp. 142, 148, 153. [back]
35. Ibid., p. 123. [back]
36. Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, p. 318. [back]
37. Ibid., p. 336. [back]
38. Rosemont, ed., *What is Surrealism?*, p. 30. [back]
39. Ibid., p. 32. [back]
40. Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p. 240. [back]
41. Ibid., pp. 245-46, 248. [back]
42.Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, pp. 436-37. [back]
43. Ibid., p. 462. [back]
44.Rosemont, ed., *What is Surrealism?*, p. 202. [back]
45. Ibid., pp. 297-98. [back]
46. Ibid., p. 308. [back]
47. Breton, *Free Rein*, p. 31. [back]
48. Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p. 4. [back]