

Art and freedom

# André Breton and problems of twentieth-century culture

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In June and July 1938 Leon Trotsky, exiled Russian revolutionary, and André Breton, French Surrealist poet and thinker, collaborated in Mexico on the writing of an extraordinary "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art." This declaration remains the most eloquent expression yet produced of the commonality of interests of the artist and the revolutionary Marxist.

The statement began: "Without any exaggeration one can say that human civilization has never before been exposed to so many dangers." The authors took note of the "ever more widespread transgression of those laws" that govern intellectual creation, particularly in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. "If ... we reject all solidarity with the caste that is currently ruling the USSR, it is precisely because, in our eyes, it represents not communism but its most treacherous and dangerous enemy," the manifesto explained.

"The communist revolution," it continued, "is not afraid of art. It has learned from the study of the development of the artistic calling in the collapsing capitalist society that this calling can only be the result of a clash between the individual and various social forms that are inimical to him." The declaration concluded: "Our goals: *the independence of art-for the revolution; the revolution-for the liberation of art once and for all.*" [1]

That it was these two figures, Trotsky and Breton, who authored the 1938 manifesto cannot be set down merely to the workings of chance. No individual in history has had a broader and deeper conception of the socialist transformation of society than Leon Trotsky, the living embodiment of the traditions of Bolshevism. For this very reason the official disseminators of information today universally exclude his name or falsify his role in events.

As for Breton, he has fared little better. In France he is ignored or at best treated as 'ancient history' by contemporary intellectuals; in North America, where most of his work has gone untranslated until recently, he is typically written off within academic and literary circles as a supposedly despotic leader of an avant-garde group.

We need to bring André Breton back to life. Not only is a reconsideration of the Surrealist writer timely given that last year marked the centenary of his birth, but we also now have at our disposal a major new biography, Mark Polizzotti's *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995). Even more vital to such a reconsideration is the spate of translations of Breton's works that has appeared in the last decade (many of them coming from the University of Nebraska Press): *The Communicating Vessels*, *Arcanum 17*, *The Immaculate Conception*, *Mad Love*, *Earthlight*, *Lost Steps*, *Free Rein* and *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*.

This now gives us a chance to take a fresh look at Breton—indeed, it is as if a major writer has suddenly appeared on the scene. And one who is

hugely and gloriously out of step with current intellectual fashion, whose every line is charged with the kind of passionate engagement that the coolly ironic cynics of Postmodernism abhor.

## A critical appreciation

The purpose of this article is to revive interest in Breton's writings and thought, "to stem," as he once said of utopian socialist Charles Fourier, "the current of oblivion that has engulfed him." [2] Marxists, of course, are not required to provide anyone, including leading figures in their own movement, with a special dispensation from criticism. In tackling Breton as a literary and intellectual figure, one takes on a number of the great contradictions of the century.

By any objective standpoint Breton's most productive period extended from the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s. In the end he was unable to escape the fate that befell nearly all of those intellectuals attracted to the banner of the October Revolution and repulsed by the Stalinist bureaucracy. The strangulation of the Spanish and French revolutions (in which Breton had set great store) in 1936-8, the Moscow Trials, Trotsky's death in 1940, the second imperialist war and the new equilibrium that followed it, the apparent strength of Stalinism, the difficulties of the Fourth International—all took their toll on his intellectual reserves.

(It is instructive to note the fate of the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art (IFIRA) called into being by the 1938 manifesto. Breton was able to rally fellow Surrealists such as poet Benjamin Péret, painters Yves Tanguy and André Masson; Victor Serge, Marcel Martinet, Ignazio Silone, Herbert Read [who, in turn, solicited the support of George Orwell] and others. Despite this the French section ceased operations after the publication of two issues of its journal *Clé* (Key) in January and February 1939.

Internal differences played a part in the IFIRA's failure to take root, but the greatest problem was the extremely difficult political environment: the influence within the intelligentsia of the Stalinist apparatus and the demoralized condition of many of those not under the latter's thumb, as well, of course, as the outbreak of war in Europe. In his last letter to Trotsky in June 1939, Breton wrote: "Perhaps I am not very talented as an organizer, but at the same time it seems to me that I have run up against enormous obstacles." [3] The tragic element in this should not be lost on the reader.)

In the early 1950s Breton formally rejected Marxism in favor of left protest: anarchism (whose betrayal of the Spanish Revolution was specifically denounced in the 1938 manifesto) and utopian socialism (in

the form of Fourier's work). He was not the first intellectual in a climate of political retreat and stagnation who suddenly recalled that the Bolsheviks had been responsible for carrying out the "brutal suppression of the Cronstadt uprising of 18 March 1921." [4] It would be difficult to dispute that his poetic and critical output declined, in both quality and quantity, in the last 20 years of his life as a consequence of the generally dispiriting conditions within which he worked.

Breton's attitude toward "competing" artistic tendencies is another of the complications raised by his life and work. The German philosopher Hegel maintained that the Absolute Spirit had found its highest expression in the Prussian monarchy and its state. In a similar fashion Breton tended to see Surrealism as the culminating point in the entire history of artistic and intellectual efforts. One is not obliged to accept his view or that of his coterie of uncritical admirers. In any event, there is no doubt that the difficult conditions of the 1930s and 1940s helped solidify his doctrinaire insistence that only Surrealism embodied artistic progress and that its pantheon of artistic heroes alone had embodied such progress in the past.

In other words, confronted with Breton one is obliged to do a good deal of sifting. But what gems one comes across!

### Revolution only of the mind?

Polizzotti's new biography is a conscientious account of Breton's life and work. It has its limitations. The title, *Revolution of the Mind*, makes Breton out to be more of a consistent idealist than he was. From 1925 onward the fundamental axis of his activity was forging a link between the revolution of the mind and the revolution of social reality. As he once famously declared, the two watchwords of Surrealism were Marx's injunction to transform the world and Rimbaud's injunction to change life. [5]

While Polizzotti is an intelligent biographer, he brings no apparent theoretical framework or intellectual commitments of his own to bear on his treatment of Breton. A distorted picture can emerge. Often in his work, for example, personal relationships get foregrounded at the expense of historical, artistic or political developments, giving a myopic quality to some of Polizzotti's account.

Nonetheless, for those capable of filling in the gaps (or, at times, reading between the lines), this biography, lucidly written and well-documented, opens a window on one of the great lives of the twentieth century. It is a life of enduring relevance, a life very much for our day, because Breton devoted himself to a battle that still needs to be waged-uniting the vanguard of art and the vanguard of the socialist revolution.

This "relevance" has a contradictory character. It would not be immediately self-evident to many. In large measure it exists in the form of a scathing critique of contemporary intellectual life; it highlights what is overwhelmingly absent. Many of the attitudes and views, for instance, that Breton and his comrades took for granted—a genuine nonconformism, a willingness to take on all comers in intellectual matters, a contempt for patriotism and nationalism, a hatred for the moral strictures of bourgeois society—are in rare supply today. Listen to this declaration of the Surrealists in 1925 in reaction to an imperialist incursion by France into Morocco:

"Even more than patriotism—which is a quite commonplace sort of hysteria, though emptier and shorter-lived than most—we are disgusted by the idea of belonging to a country at all, which is the most bestial and least philosophic of the concepts to which we are subjected.... Wherever Western civilization is dominant, all human contact has disappeared, except contact from which money can be made—payment in hard cash." [6]

Of course in the 1920s and 1930s the Surrealists were hardly unique

within the European intelligentsia in their opposition to capitalism and war, but if we are to properly appreciate Breton's significance we have to understand what set him and the Surrealists apart. For Breton it was not a matter of merely being "sympathetic" to the socialist revolution, as was the case with a great many of the intellectuals of the period. Such an attitude, no matter how sincere, implied a tacit acceptance of the division between art and life, between the inner world of fantasy and imagination and the outer world of everyday reality, so that one's political sympathies, even when they found direct artistic expression, had little bearing on how one felt life.

### What was Surrealism?

Maurice Nadeau, in his history of the movement, writes: "Surrealism ... is deeply embedded in the period between the two world wars. To say as some have that on the level of art it is only a manifestation of the period is oversimplified materialism: surrealism is also the heir and extender of artistic movements which preceded it and without which it would not have existed." [7]

As a sociological phenomenon Surrealism, whose first manifesto (written by Breton) appeared in 1924, no doubt contained as an element the disgust felt by many young people for the slaughter of the First World War and the society that had produced it. The Surrealists carried that over into a rejection of what was perceived as French society's dominant ideological outlook, "positivist rationalism," and into a fascination with dream states and the unconscious. In Nadeau's words: "Reason, all-powerful reason, stands accused.... Reality is something besides what we see, hear, touch, smell, taste. There exist unknown forces that control us, but upon which we may hope to act. We have only to find out what they are." [8] On the one hand, the Surrealists turned to Freud's work, and, on the other, they "returned" to Hegel and German idealism.

The preoccupation with Hegel might seem peculiar in the light of the Surrealists' professed hostility to logic. One left-wing commentator notes that Breton and his colleagues "were passionately devoted to Hegel, in whose merciless dialectic they found an admirable weapon." [9] This is a bit too easy, confusing the Breton of 1922 or 1924 with the same man a dozen years later. The case could be made that Breton was drawn to Hegel for quite distinct reasons at different points in his intellectual development.

Aside from the desire, in the immediate aftermath of World War I, to provoke wildly anti-German official France by ostentatiously esteeming German philosophy and poetry, Breton seems to have been as attracted to Hegel's idealism, to the notion of the unlimited power of thought and the thinking subject, as he was to his dialectics.

In the Surrealist rejection of positivism and empiricism, combined with an interest in Hegel, does one find an echo of Lenin's materialist reworking of Hegel's *Logic*, undertaken in 1915? No doubt the failings of 'objectivist' habits of thinking bound up with the relatively peaceful growth of capitalism from 1871 to 1914 were apparent to thoughtful people of many stripes. The point of view adopted and the conclusions drawn, however, varied according to the perspective and class orientation of the individuals or groupings in question.

One could say at the very least that the Surrealists' predisposition toward Hegel's dialectics facilitated their subsequent move in the general direction of Marxism. At a later point they played a valuable role in promoting the study of Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*. The first excerpts, in fact, from the *Notebooks* translated into French appeared in one of their publications in 1933.

As an artistic movement, in contrast to Dadaism from which it emerged

and which heaped abuse on everything created in the past, Surrealism insisted on the importance of tradition. It perceived itself as the continuator of the work of a number of individuals and trends-in particular, a select group of lesser-known French and German Romantics and, above all, Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse, author of *Chants de Maldoror*), poet Arthur Rimbaud and playwright-black humorist Alfred Jarry.

In the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), Breton declared that the new movement's defining principle was "psychic automatism," by which he meant thought freed from "any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern." Surrealism "is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought." And further: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality* [sur = "on", "above" in French], if one may so speak." [10]

What is the source of this extreme irrationalism-again, aside from the healthy, insolent desire to shock middle class public opinion? From the point of view of historical development, it no doubt expressed the position of social layers whose confidence in the stability of the existing order and its self-satisfied outlook had been deeply shaken by the calamitous world war and its political consequences, including the Russian Revolution.

A variety of trends which arose in those years celebrated the unconventional or the irrational. Some extolled "the future" or "the machine" as things in themselves; others, the most depraved, denigrated the Enlightenment and "decadent" Western democracy and venerated "blood" and "race," helping build up the ideological stockpile of future fascist movements. In the sphere of social conceptions, Dadaism and Surrealism had nothing in common with such tendencies, but their common emergence does demonstrate the crisis of intellectual life.

One is also obliged to ask: in what lay the appeal of this anti-reason to Breton, an intellectual who had served in the French army during the mad slaughter of the world war, as an individual? We can perhaps see in his particular devotion to the spontaneous and his preoccupation with dream-states a furious act of overcompensation on the part of a rigorously educated and serious French middle class youth *rejecting*, if not entirely *comprehending*, a social order officially dedicated to Reason and Logic, which suddenly seemed horrifying to him. In the fury of that rejection the distinction between "Reason" as French ruling class ideology and reason as its potential revolutionary antidote could be lost sight of.

To achieve their stated objective of joining dream and reality, the Surrealists developed various techniques such as automatic writing, games and experiments with hypnosis, seances and trance-like states; chance and spontaneity were valorized as a way of breaking down the barriers of logic and gaining access to the depths of the unconscious mind.

Such excursions, no matter how often Breton and others solemnly rejected the existence of the supernatural, led the Surrealist group at times into the swamp of spiritualism. According to Nadeau, for example, "a hosannah in honor of the East," constituted almost the entire third issue of *La Révolution Surrealiste*, edited by Antonin Artaud in the spring of 1925. Artaud, Robert Desnos and others had discovered a "new kind of mysticism" associated with "the mysterious East of the Buddha and the Dalai Lama." [11] At this point Breton reassumed editorial control of the journal and soon afterward developed an orientation toward Marxism and the Communist Party.

In the first manifesto, Breton had gone so far in his infatuation with dreams and dreaming as to suggest that the waking state was "a phenomenon of interference." [12] His views altered, for a time at least, as he made a serious effort to reconcile them with Marxist conceptions from the mid-1920s onward. In a lecture delivered in Belgium in 1934 Breton noted that he now viewed the movement's earlier belief in the

"omnipotence of thought" as "being extremely mistaken." He noted that in 1925 "Surrealist activity ... entered into its *reasoning* phase. It suddenly experienced the necessity of crossing over the gap that separates absolute idealism from dialectical materialism." [13] In one of his finest essays, "Nonnational Boundaries of Surrealism" (1937), Breton proclaimed the first of "a fundamental and indivisible set of propositions": "Adherence to all the principles of dialectical materialism endorsed in their entirety by surrealism: the primacy of matter over thought..." [14]

It would be fair to say that there was always something tentative about that 'adherence' and that he found dialectics far more convincing than materialism. He apparently held the view, shared by many Left intellectuals in this century, that Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* was a rather simplistic and vulgar work.

Breton's obsession with the nonrational was at best one-sided and at worst an unworthy descent into open idealism. (In his later years Breton's interest in the occult became a serious preoccupation. Trotsky, in their 1938 conversations, had suggested that Breton was trying to "keep open a little window on the beyond." [15] Only eleven years after his firm endorsement of materialism, in fact, he could write that its opposition to idealism was "purely formal." [16])

The entirely legitimate desire, of course, to understand the ideological underpinnings of a given artistic current must be balanced by the recognition that the latter's ultimate significance is determined by its contribution to artistic truth. Confusion is never a virtue, but its presence can be evidence of a break with intellectual inertia and routine, and in the case of the Surrealists, it was symptomatic of a tremendous creative ferment. Out of that emerged a new perspective which affected the course of Western art and, even, in some respects, pointed the way towards what culture could be in a genuinely human, classless, society. It is this revolutionary element in Surrealism that needs to be recovered and assimilated.

## Artistic life in France

To understand Surrealism, it is important to place it in its artistic as well as its historical context. Mark Polizzotti provides a list of dozens of artistic movements in France (Symbolism, Naturalism, Parnassianism, Scientism, etc.) that preceded Surrealism in the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century. [17]

It would be wrong to see this proliferation of artistic 'isms' as a sign of the vitality of bourgeois culture: on the contrary, many of these movements were febrile and abortive, soon vanishing into obscurity. But looking back on it now, what seems most striking about this period is quite simply how seriously people took art.

Of course egoism and subjectivism played an enormous role in all of this, but it is noteworthy how eagerly the personal sought to become impersonal (or, perhaps more accurately, *super*-personal), as if the sheer force of one's artistic vision couldn't be contained within a one-man show. This is what seems so far-removed from the cultural sensibility prevailing at the end of the twentieth century. The common assumption of our period is the *impotence* of art and of the artist: since art cannot really change anything, since change-in any fundamental sense-seems impossible, what point is there in artists banding together? In place of movements based on common artistic ideas and objectives, cliques abound.

Another possible way of defining Surrealism, then, is as the highest and most extreme expression of the belief in the power of art. But pushed to the limit, art can no longer be what most of us take it to be, i.e., the production of artifacts, of beautiful images in words, paint, film, etc. The Surrealists were hostile to conventional art and to the careers that went

into making it. As Polizzotti explains, "it was the sheer *vanity* of the literary enterprise that revolted them, the self-congratulatory uselessness of writing yet one more novel, publishing yet one more collection of poems, and in the end doing no more than adding to one's own petty renown. If the act of writing was to mean anything, it had to be more than just literature; creation had to yield more than mere art." [18]

Indeed, in one of the early issues of their journal, the Surrealists wittily exposed that vanity by posing a simple but telling query to members of the Paris literary scene: *Why do you write?* Most of the responses demonstrated-sometimes hilariously-not only that the authors had no worthwhile reason for their artistic activity, but that the question itself had never before occurred to them. Needless to say, this question remains as relevant in 1997 as it was in 1919.

Involved here was more than just the usual impertinences and bad manners of an up-and-coming group of artists towards their elders (although it included that element); at issue was the very reason for making art in the first place. "Beauty will be CONVULSIVE," declared Breton at the end of his extraordinary novel *Nadja*, "or will not be at all." [19] This was a declaration of war on the aesthetic notion that saw beauty as contemplative and a *refuge* from life, an oasis of perfection in a harsh and ugly world. Poetry was far less a matter of words on a page-it was, as Breton once put it, "the opposite of literature"-than of a way of living, an ethic rather than an aesthetic, one which allowed for the experience of the convulsion of beauty, even to the point of delirium. [20]

To say that beauty was in life didn't mean turning a blind eye to the misery and wretchedness of most people's lives; on the contrary, it was because they hated that wretchedness that the Surrealists eventually turned towards Marxism. But life was more than just the sum of its external manifestations and artistic tendencies such as realism and naturalism were, in Breton's view, not being realistic enough in that they largely ignored life's other dimension-the inner realm of dreams and imagination. This was the realm out of which could emerge a new conception of beauty and of the relation of art to life.

*Go to Part 2.*

## Notes

1. André Breton, *Free Rein (La Clé des Champs)*, trans. Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline d'Amboise (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pp. 29-31, 34. Back
2. Franklin Rosemont, ed., *What is Surrealism?: Selected Writings*, (New York: Pathfinder, 1978), p. 264. Back
3. Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), p. 472. Back
4. Breton, *Free Rein*, p. 266. Back
5. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 241. Back
6. Rosemont, ed., *What is Surrealism?*, pp. 318-19. Back
7. Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965), p. 43. Back
8. *Ibid.*, p. 48. Back
9. Rosemont, ed., *What is Surrealism?*, p. 33. Back
10. Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, pp. 26, 14. Back
11. Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, p. 105. Back
12. Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p. 12. Back
13. Rosemont, ed., *What is Surrealism?*, pp. 116-17. Back
14. Breton, *Free Rein*, p. 9. Back
15. Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, p. 458. Back
16. Breton, *Free Rein*, p. 109. Back
17. Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, pp. 17-18. Back
18. *Ibid.*, p. 95. Back
19. André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove

Weidenfeld, 1960), p. 160. Back

20. Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, p. 274. Back



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