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Aaron H. Esman

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PSYCHOANALYSIS AND SURREALISM: ANDRÉ BRETON AND SIGMUND FREUD

The relation between psychoanalysis and Surrealism, a movement that played a dominant role in art and culture in the Western world for at least a generation between the wars, is an episode in the history of psychoanalysis that has been of greater interest to art historians than to psychoanalysts. A very few references appear in the psychoanalytic literature (e.g., Kaplan 1989; Davis 1973), while the field of art history is replete with articles, books, and passing observations; Freud’s name is scattered through them like autumn leaves on the grass. In his classic History of Surrealist Painting, for instance, Marcel Jean (1959) cites Freud five times, while Peter Webb (1985), in his book on the multimedia artist Hans Bellmer, refers to Freud on eleven occasions. Polizzotti’s biography of André Breton (1995) has over thirty such references, and Mundy (2002), in Surrealism: Desire Unbound, refers to him twenty times, cites eighteen of his writings, and provides a listing of French translations of his works from 1896 to 1969.

The Surrealists’ romance with Freud and psychoanalysis began with the litterateur André Breton, who, at a time of enormous literary and cultural ferment in Europe (exemplified by the iconoclastic Dada movement founded in Zurich in 1917), worked during his youthful service in World War I as a psychiatric aide in a military hospital. Breton had long been partial to German literature and philosophy, and under the tutelage of one Dr. Leroy, a psychiatrist with whom he worked, discovered and became fascinated by Freud’s writings, particularly The Interpretation of Dreams.

Thus by 1919, then under the influence of Dada, Breton wrote (a few years later), “Completely occupied as I still was with Freud at that time, and familiar as I was with his methods of examination . . . I resolved to obtain from myself what we were trying to obtain from [patients], namely, a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible, without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties . . . unencumbered by the slightest
inhibition . . .” (Polizzotti 1995, p.104). This was the beginning of Breton’s advocacy of automatic writing, which he mistakenly thought of as equivalent to free association and which became central to the Surrealist enterprise as an entrée to the wellsprings of creativity in the unconscious and, ultimately, to the liberation of the individual from the constraints of bourgeois society.

Breton’s relations with Freud were, to say the least, complex. In October 1921 he traveled to Vienna for the sole purpose of obtaining an interview with Freud. Here is Polizzotti’s account of that meeting:

During his first days in the capital Breton could not find the courage to make the planned visit . . . . He finally contacted the analyst who, although “having very little free time in these days,” sent a note of invitation to his hotel on the 9th. At three o’clock the following afternoon . . . Breton rang at the door of Berggasse 19.

The meeting was a disappointment. Breton first had to sit in the waiting room alongside a dozen patients . . . . When he was finally ushered into the famous study, the interview proved hardly worth the anticipation: despite Breton’s expectations, Freud considered his visitor a poet rather than a scientist, and saw little relation between his research and the young Frenchman’s literary interests. Breton, whose knowledge of the theory and practice of psychoanalysis was, in reality, superficial, had little to interest the Austrian. In addition, the two were clearly speaking at cross-purposes: Freud considered the practical techniques and raw materials of psychoanalysis the means to a therapeutic end, where for Breton their primary aim should be “the expulsion of man from himself.” Finally, there were insurmountable differences in age . . . culture and taste in literature, which for Freud meant the classics. Busy, bored, and eager to move on to his next client, Freud soon drew the conversation to a close. Breton, who had looked forward to the meeting with excitement, returned to the café . . . sad and discouraged.

. . . [Breton] vented his disappointment in a short article, “Interview du Professeur Freud,” describing the pioneer analyst as a “little old man with no style, who receives clients in a shabby office worthy of the neighborhood . . . . I try to make him talk by throwing names such as Charcot and Babinski into the conversation, but either because the memories I’m calling on are too distant [!!] or because he maintains a posture of cautious reticence with strangers, I can only get him to speak in generalities.” Years afterward, Breton dismissed his “interview” as “a regrettable sacrifice to the Dada spirit,” but the sacrifice had less to do with Dada than it did with Breton’s own feelings of spite and disappointment. As the future would show, these feelings died hard [pp. 162–163].

Throughout, Breton’s primary interest in psychoanalysis rested in the theory of dreams and their interpretation. This preoccupation reached its zenith in 1932 in Les Vases Communicants (Communicating Vessels), in which he spelled out the theory of Surrealism as a solution to the problem
of despair or “miserableness,” using, as his translator Mary Ann Caws (1990) puts it, “the enabling ‘capillary tissue’ between the exterior world of facts and the interior world of emotions, between reality . . . and the imagination” (p. ix). In this book he described and analyzed, in extensive detail, some of his own dreams, emphasizing their meaning in respect to recent events and conflicts in his everyday life. He was bitterly critical of Freud—“a relatively unlearned philosophic mind” (p. 22)—for his reticence about personal matters in his own dream interpretations: “I certainly have no intention . . . of reducing the importance of sexuality in unconscious life, since I think it is nearly the most important acquisition of psychoanalysis. On the contrary, I reproach Freud for having sacrificed all that he could have drawn from this, as far as he was concerned, to commonplace self-interested motives” (p. 22).

It was in this context that he engaged in an epistolary exchange with Freud that reveals the ambivalence of his idealization. Breton’s letters are lost, but Freud’s remain, as does Breton’s commentary on the correspondence.² Apparently in 1932 Breton had sent Freud a copy of Les Vases Communicants. Following is Freud’s reply (Davis 1973), dated December 13, 1932:

Dear Sir:

You may be assured that I will read with care your little book . . . in which the explanation of dreams plays a prominent part. . . . I am writing to you because I find on p. 19 one of your ‘impertinences’ that I cannot really explain to myself. You reproach me that there is no mention in the bibliography of [Johannes] Volkelt who discovered the symbolism of the dream, although I have used his ideas. This is serious, for it is contrary to my usual practice. As a matter of fact, it is not Volkelt who discovered the symbolism of dreams, but [Karl] Scherner. . . . Both authors are mentioned many times in . . . my text. . . . Both names are also contained in the bibliography. Thus, I have the right to an explanation from you. In your defense I notice at this moment that the name of Volkelt is not to be found in the bibliography of the French edition.

Yours faithfully,

Freud

¹Whitebook (2010) spells out in detail Freud’s early fascination with philosophy and the extent of both his reading and his Gymnasium and university education in the subject.
²With regard to the Freud-Breton correspondence in the appendix to the translation of Les Vases Communicants, the publishers state that that material is “available only in this book.” They appear not to have known of Davis’s publication, which anticipated theirs by seventeen years.
This letter was followed the next day (December 14) with a longer letter, in which Freud explains that the French edition was taken from the seventh German edition, and that after the fourth German edition he had handed over the care of the bibliography to Otto Rank, who made an excusable error, “in view of the fact that Volkelt is not the one whose authority is to be considered in the matter. . . .” Finally, on December 26, Freud wrote again:

I thank you very warmly for your detailed and kind letter. You could have answered more succinctly. . . . But you took into consideration my particular susceptibility about this matter, which is no doubt a form of reaction against the unbounded ambition of childhood, successfully overcome. I cannot take exception to any of your other critical remarks, although I can find in them many causes for controversy. Thus, for example, I think that if I have not pursued the analysis of my own dreams as far as that of others, the cause is only rarely due to timidity toward sexual matters. The fact is that I would have had to discover that the secret basis of all the series of dreams had to do with my relations with my father who had just died. I maintain that I had the right to set a limit to the inevitable exhibition. . . . Although I receive so much evidence of the interest that you and your friends show toward my researches, for myself I am not in the position to explain what Surrealism is or what it is after. It could be that I am not in any way made to understand it. I am at such a distant position from art.

Very cordially yours
Freud

Breton’s response bespeaks the ambivalence of his involvement with Freud. On the one hand, he invokes The Psychopathology of Everyday Life to propose that what he insists was Freud’s “error” was a “symptomatic act” that could not be denied by defensively passing off the responsibility to someone else (Rank), “who is no longer among your friends.” On the other, he ends by affirming his “respect and admiration” for Freud’s “ever vivid and marvelous sensitivity” (Caws 1990, pp. 154–155). Clearly Breton was out to catch Freud in both a factual error and an ethical lapse, and Freud’s somewhat defensive reply did not serve to clear the atmosphere between them. Four years later, Breton suffered another disappointment when Freud refused to submit, in the absence of the dreamers’ associations, interpretations of a number of dreams Breton had collected from friends and was readying for publication. Still, when Freud came under threat from the Anschluss in 1938, Breton was active in efforts
to rescue him from the Nazis, urging that “a symbolic guard of honor be organized around him . . . to secure his immediate and complete liberation . . .” (quoted in Polizzotti 1995, p. 452).

Needless to say, Surrealism had a strong influence on the developing work of Breton’s countryman, Jacques Lacan. He was a friend of Breton, and one of his earliest papers, “The Problem of Style and the Paranoiac Forms of Experience,” was published in the first number of the Surrealist magazine *Minotaure* in 1933. It was a “psychiatric” response to an essay by Dali (1933) in which the painter proposed a “paranoid-critical” theory of art rooted in Surrealist concepts. Lacan’s ultimate emphasis on the central role of language in psychoanalysis was consistent with that of Breton with respect to creativity in general and to literature in particular.

Unlike Freud, Breton conceived psychoanalysis as the foundation of a weltanschauung, one that would favor psychic reality over “common sense,” and that would promote revolutionary action against a sick and repressive society (Kuspit 1988). Such action would be based on feeling rather than reason, limited only by those societal rules that would keep one from being judged “mad” and forced into an institution. Indeed, as his passion for Freud abated, he became increasingly enthusiastic about Marx, Lenin, and especially Trotsky as guides to revolutionary action, turning against them only later when, at the time of the Popular Front, the French Communist party sought to dictate the content of art and literature.

Surrealism was predominantly a literary movement, insofar as it expressed itself through automatic writing and its analogues. Breton thought of himself as, among other things, a poet, and many of his closest associates in the movement—Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, René Char, Tristan Tzara—were poets too. But a number of visual artists were associated with it as well, most prominently Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Man Ray, and René Magritte, with Miró, Giacometti, and even Picasso on the edges (Picasso designed the cover for the first edition of *Minotaure*). Ernst was very familiar with Freud’s writings, having studied them at university in Cologne between 1911 and 1913, even before his involvement with Dada. Dali made a big deal of his admiration, actually succeeding in visiting Freud in London in 1938 and presenting him with a portrait sketch. Freud was impressed by Dali’s technical skill but, as always, said he couldn’t understand what the artist—or Surrealism in general—was trying to say. Each of these artists, in his own way, sought to render dreamlike experiences using
primary process–like imagery and erotic and symbolic representations to create auras of mystery and ambiguity (for examples, see Figures 1–3).

Characteristically, Dali combined (condensed) distortion, eroticism, and strange juxtapositions to create an aura of mystery enhanced by his exceptional technical skill.

Breton and Freud suffered a mutual incomprehension. Yet in many ways their life paths converged. Each was the founder and intellectual leader of a movement that first gained a body of dedicated local followers but that, in time, spread its influence over much of the Western world.
Beyond Ernst’s obvious blasphemy, he has created a blatantly sadomasochistic image, with three voyeurs (himself, Breton, and Paul Eluard) peeking though a window at what clearly is a variant of a primal scene.

Each was something of an autocrat, expecting adherence to his system of ideas and excommunicating those who insisted on deviating from them (Breton was known as the “pope” of Surrealism). And each was forced to leave his native soil and emigrate (in Breton’s case temporarily) in the face of the Nazi onslaught. Each was vehemently antireligious, yet each (or
at least some of his followers) nourished somewhat utopian, even revolutionary hopes for his movement as a source of liberation for the human spirit and the evolution of a better society.

In the end, neither movement succeeded in its utopian aims. As Kuspit (1988) complains, Freud’s psychoanalysis betrayed its originary fervor, settling for a melioristic program that emphasized individual emotional growth over social revolution, while Breton’s Surrealism played itself out in internecine conflicts, to be supplanted in the postwar years by other art movements and literary styles. The page was turned, the chapter closed.

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115 East 86th Street
New York, NY 10028
E-mail: ahesman@earthlink.net