The Theoretical Backgrounds of Surrealism

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SURREALISM has now led an uninhibited and boisterous adolescence among us for twenty years. As the exploration of a particular point of view which is in revolt against the accepted traditional standards of art and criticism, surrealist art has faced the general snobbism of aesthetician and critic. Yet, because it is a phenomenon whose rise and importance in inter-war culture is both interesting and astonishing, this new movement demands sympathetic study. Though Surrealism, being of such a vexing and anti-rationalistic nature, seems recalcitrant to analysis, its proponents have issued numerous manifestos and theoretical expositions of its point of view which the aesthetician would do well to regard more closely than he has heretofore. The study of these would reveal the complex of intellectual antecedents which the surrealist has drawn together in his point of view thereby giving the critic a better perspective of judgment, and would also place before the aesthetician certain questions on the nature of his science which he should candidly face if his science is to be of any value. It is with these ends in view that I intend to inspect briefly the scriptural texts of the two leading surrealists, André Breton and Salvator Dali, to extract the fundamental propositions of their theory.

The fundamental turn of thought distinctive of Surrealism is first described by André Breton in his Manifeste du Surréalisme of 1924. Here he contrasts the "realist attitude" and the "materialist attitude." By the first he means an absolute rationalism which has the fixed limits of discursive reason, is always in agreement with common sense, and hence confines itself to the tautological possibilities of traditional logic. It is inspired by the tradition of Positivism from St. Thomas to Anatole France and as such is hostile to flights of the imagination. Its error is that "under color of civilization, under pretext of progress, all that rightly or wrongly may be regarded as

1 Cf. A. Breton, Manifeste du Surréalisme, pp. 15-16.
fantasy or superstition has been banished from the mind, all uncust
ommary searching after truth has been proscribed.\footnote{Ibid., p. 21; translate by David Gascoyne in \textit{What is Surrealism?} (Criterion Miscellany No. 43), London, 1936, hereinafter referred to as \textit{CM}.} Contrasted with this is the materialist attitude, ruled by the true logic which attempts to burst out of "immediate utility" and to realize unrestricted ends. Its pathway for the discovery of truth is that of the imagination. The domain of the imagination is identified with the psychic life itself as distinguished from the reality of ordinary appearance which is the raw material for the action of our rationalization. The analysis of Freud is recognized as a great step in the opening up of this vaster field and his contention that "the depths of our minds harbor strange forces capable of increasing those on the surface, or of success-
fully contending with them\footnote{Ibid., p. 22, tr. \textit{CM}.} is accepted by the surrealists. The world of the imagination is identified with the subconsciousness and is most easily apprehended in the dream stage. Since the stage itself "is continuous and carries traces of organization" and the waking state is only "a phenomenon of interference" obeying the suggestions which come to it from our unconscous depths,\footnote{Ibid., pp. 24, 25 and 26.} a methodological examination of the first should yield the explanation for both. Thus we are brought to the central thesis of Surrealism which M. Breton expresses: "I believe in the future transmutation of those two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, or surreal reality, so to speak.\footnote{Ibid., p. 27; tr. \textit{CM}.} The logic of Surrealism is the logic of Hegelianism; the two contradictory states are synthesized into a new conception which contains them both. The mental world of veridical data and the world of the imagination, of dreams and illusions, are both absorbed by a deeper mental realm named the surreal. Such is the philosophical position of Surrealism. The things of the outer world, though real in the sense that they have their own independent existence, lose this reality in our thoughts and enter into new relationships which are psychical, not physical. To the surrealist "a tomato is also a child's balloon" and in this relationship the word "like" is "suppressed."\footnote{A. Breton, "Exhibition X......Y......," \textit{CM}, p. 25.} Certainly by such a program our suspicions of the world of the marvelous and the strange are put in disrepute, and the world known by common sense and reason is "surclassé."

Having found a point of reference between the conscious and the un-
conscious which defines the nature of their relationship to each other, Surrealism is next faced with the problem of how one reaches the surreal, how does he discover it. It is the problem of knowledge applied to a special context. Surrealism as a philosophical position now gives way to Surrealism as an activity. The important thing is to get rid of any semblance of rational control over our activity, for how can we get to the surreal which is beyond the rational if we cannot free ourselves from the rational? Breton describes the first method of activity freed from rational control, that of psychic automatism. This is the attempt to record the stream of uninhibited verbal imagery for oneself as a psychoanalyst would that of a patient. One places himself in as passive a state as possible and writes down rapidly his irrational flow of thought. The method is easily transferred to a form of drawing, where it becomes "doodling." The chance pasting of collage pieces or the fortuitous creation of a surrealist object or of an exquisite corpse are simply extensions of this method. The place of the artist as an impartial investigator of the surreal is thus assured in Surrealism. Truth and reality are open not alone to the scientist and the experimenter. The Romantic notion of the artist as seer is continued by these latter-day Romantics but with a strange and ironic twist. Since the surrealist point of view and surrealist activity are possible in all fields, paintings, poetry, and experiment merge and the essential differences between the various arts ceases to be of any consequence. Surrealist works are not important as poems, as pictures, as objects, but as being the residue left when we have stript down our souls to the bare framework of the unconscious which is beneath all our selves and from which we never escape.

The problem of expression, as M. Breton says in his second manifesto of 1930, is the principal problem of Surrealism. It can only be through expression (freed of the controls of reason) that one can pierce to the depths of surreality. Yet, since one must look within for this surreality, it becomes clear that it is a psychic, hidden "real" self, a Freudian "id." It is a synthesis that exists within our own spirits. Down in this inner psychic life of each one of us we come to the human crucible itself which is an overindividual state. Here is not only the man himself but mankind. By surrealist activity we get "a key to go on opening indefinitely that box of never ending drawers which is called man." Here is the foundation upon which we must build our morals,

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7 A. Breton, Second Manifeste du Surréalisme, p. 42, also pp. 26-27.
8 Ibid., pp. 51-52.
9 Ibid., p. 55.
our art, our ways of thought, our life of actions, here exists not only the surreality we seek but the sur-truth and the sur-beauty, the new reclassified values, that are opened to our gaze. If the foundation is shifting sands instead of rock all the values by which we judge the house we build will be different from what we have held before.

In *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture* of 1928, M. Breton presents the purposes and problems of surrealist activity as expressed in the plastic arts. In art the realist attitude becomes academicism and naturalism. It is the art of exact narration, of photographic external appearances, stemming from the belief that artists "are only capable of reproducing more or less fortunately the image of that which moves them . . . The mistake lies in thinking that the model can only be taken from the exterior world . . . The plastic work of art, in order to respond to the undisputed necessity of thoroughly revising all values, will either refer to a purely interior model or cease to exist." Such is the full statement of the surrealist philosophy of art. All art other than surrealist is an art of imitation of some thing which exists in the real world and which does not need the work of art to insure its existence. A work of art should not be a mere substitute for a thing, but should be the vehicle by which the artist and spectator are brought before a sign which is the thing itself, that is, up against the center of the world where thought and things meet. A work of art derives its value not from its language symbols but from the surreal which is behind them. The model for the work is in the psychic life of the artist himself. A complete reversal of critical values is thus entailed. The value of a work of art does not lie in biographical detail or formal elements, but in the fact of its being an object in which the surreal comes to light. The surreal object demands the surrealists activity if we are to be brought face to face with it.

The beauty of surrealist art will be "convulsive," it will produce in the spectator "a state of physical disturbance characterized by the sensation of a wind brushing across my forehead and capable of causing me really to shiver."

Surrealist artistic activity is no different from other surrealist activity in its purpose. Its aim is to probe the depths of man, to find the Freudian "id." This is the realm of the erotic and the marvelous which has occasionally escaped into our daily life through dreams, and through actions performed when we refuse the restrictions of rational reflection. Surrealist art

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11 A. Breton, "Beauty will be Convulsive" *CM*, p. 37.
investigates this realm and sets up a pathway which will connect it as directly as possible (by a short circuit) with the world of daily life.

For Salvator Dali the whole ambition of the artist is to "materialize the images of concrete irrationality." 12 He must record the interior model as faithfully and as clearly as any realist or academic painter would copy his exterior model. If the artist at the moment he paints his pictures does not understand them it is not because they have no meaning, "on the contrary, their meaning is so profound . . . that it escapes the most simple analysis of logical intuition." 13 One cannot analyze the language of the unconscious. Dali says:

"The subconscious has a symbolic language that is truly a universal language, for it . . . speaks with the vocabulary of the great vital constants, sexual instinct, feeling of death, physical notion of the enigma of space—these vital constants are universally echoed in every human. To understand an aesthetic picture, training in appreciation is necessary, cultural and intellectual preparation. For Surrealism the only requisite is a receptive and intuitive human being."14

This passage, more clearly than any other, shows the great shift in values presupposed by Surrealism, and declares the overindividual content of the surreal.

He also points out another kind of surrealist activity to add to the original one of psychic automatism of André Breton. This he calls "paranoiac-critical activity." 15 The images of reality are susceptible of false interpretations in terms of some mental delusion. A picture of a horse may be seen as that of a woman also, or even further as a lion. Which of these it may be, or how many such images an individual may see depends upon his degree of paranoiac capacity. The images of reality depend upon this capacity as well, 16 for reality may be as easily dissociated and put in question as illusion. As Breton has said, "a tomato is a child's balloon" and in this relationship the word "like" is "suppressed." Such a world is ego-centered, and however much one may claim the objective and the subjective are telescoped, it is the subjective element which is in the ascendency. The rational is brought into line with the irrational, the world of common sense with that of illusion.

13 Idem.
When a work of art is a paranoiac phenomenon it is no longer the aesthetic object of the older beauty but is purely a psychiatric index of one's unconscious activity.

The theoretical backgrounds of the philosophical position of Surrealism lie in the principle of dialectic, and of surrealist activity in psychoanalytic method. By an indiscriminate confusion of metaphysics, a dubious logical method, and a radical psychological position, Surrealism becomes a structure of serious and homicidal nonsense creating for itself a position of artificial respectability.

The principle of dialectic is applied to synthesizing the opposition between the real state and the dream state; it is a search for the surreality in which the two are joined. But this is not the dialectic of Hegel. Reality and rationality do not logically generate their antithesis. There is no necessary movement from a given thesis to its opposite, and given both of them there seems no reason for supposing that there is possible any synthesis between them. The synthesis is one in name only, it is the giving of a new label for the antithesis of reality and rationality. Though in surreality the rational and the irrational, the mental and the material are identified, all supposedly aufgehoben by the magic of a name, all that we can find there are the irrational, the marvelous, the illogical, the unreal. Though the whole theoretical polemic of Surrealism debunks the intelligence and discursive reason, it fails to distinguish on the other hand between surreality and the irrational. If the surreal were a true dialectical synthesis it would not be coextensive with the antithesis from which it proceeded. "Liquidating" the rational is not "dialectizing." Furthermore, surreality is always assumed to be something which inheres in mental life and consequently cannot be the bridge between the mental and the actual worlds. The surrealist activity by which one tries to reach the surreal is always a psychical probing.

An examination of surrealist activity would seem to be the best approach to offer us some enlightenment as to the nature of surreality. Here the theoretical background is entirely in psychological theory, for the activities are altogether psychical. These activities may eventuate in material objects, pictures, poems, etc., but the existence of these as material objects is always disregarded by the surrealists. They are reinterpreted as signs of the mental. In 1924 M. Breton had admitted his interest in Freudian psychology, and Surrealism is indebted to the influence of the Viennese physician for its fundamental viewpoint, that the center of mental life is the surreal, which is identical with the unconscious of the psychoanalysts and which includes
the conscious. The method of psychic automatism for the exploration of the psychic life is common to both theories. Surrealist freedom in artistic expression is the removal of the censorship which prevents unconscious thoughts from rising into consciousness. Both play variations on the theme that ordinary life in its errors and dreams is not so very different except in degree from the symptoms that one meets in psychosis and neurosis.\(^\text{17}\) The general correlation between these symptoms in civilized life and in pagan and primitive practices might conceivably suggest the surrealist's supposition that the unconscious surreal is a center common to all men.\(^\text{18}\) This theory of the surreal as the superindividual, however, is more closely akin to that of the "collective unconscious" put forth by C. G. Jung and the Zurich school of psychoanalysis, who maintain that the important characteristic of the unconscious is that it contains the heritage of all races.\(^\text{19}\) The surrealist distinction between rational thought and irrational surrealist activity is found exactly in Dr. Jung's distinction between "directed thinking" and "phantasy thinking," as well as the theory of the dependence of the rational upon an irrational foundation.\(^\text{20}\)

Now when the surrealist says that unless one can see the tomato as a balloon he is a cretin, or that one's paranoiac capacity accounts for the number of multiple images he may find in a picture, he has not removed the balloon or the image from the private world of the spectator, and he has just as much on the other hand left the tomato and the picture as public property. The tomato has become a balloon for the individual who sees it as such, and that individual is not concerned whether the object is a tomato or a balloon to anyone else. It is a balloon in his imagination. The rational world is denied as far as he is concerned and his own mental constructions are put in its place. The surrealist artist may conceive of his tomato as a balloon; a spectator may conceive the same tomato as something very different. Each is within his own imaginative world and the two are independent of each other. If the unconscious were the source of what is common to man, and if surrealist activity explores that unconscious, it is difficult to understand how so individual an activity as that by which a tomato becomes a balloon to one who looks at it, can open up to him the overindividual depth of his nature. If the spectator


\(^{18}\) Cf. S. Freud, \textit{Totem and Taboo}.


ever feels any kinship with others before a work of art it is insofar as he can rationally interpret that work.

Non-logical phantasy thinking is another name for the process we usually attribute to the imagination, and for the surrealist the important part of this thinking is that undetermined amount which is unconscious, that is, irrational, for it is here one meets the psychic fictions to which discursive reason never brings us. Truly Surrealism is the "prehensile tail" of Romanticism.

But most important of all about Surrealism is the fact that it rejects all the old values and norms of aesthetics and morals. Its truth, beauty, and goodness have the qualities of utter confusion, unmotivated action, and disjunct relationships. The surrealist takes Nietzsche's revaluation of values as his practical program and makes his own values by his irrational activity. Hence surrealist art, stripped of much of the theoretical claptrap which it calls upon to support itself becomes nothing more than an art of nonsense.

The aesthetician and the art critic, to say nothing of the moralist and the philosopher, are presented with a problem by this strange and heterogeneous theory which comes into their field with its destructive doctrines and perplexing works of art. They may scoff at it and deny its entrance into their world, turning it over to the psychiatrist as a case of mental abnormality. Or they may accept its artistic activity, its works of art, and its theory as phenomena to be absorbed within a more general aesthetic. It seems that the important place which Surrealism occupies in the world today and the influence which it has had on traditional forms of art and on many artists who do not accept its principles, justify its consideration at least as a special case within a general theory of aesthetic and philosophy of art. It is the business of the aesthetician to systematize or explain as far as he can the material which is presented to him by artistic activity and not to prejudge this material on principles drawn up a priori or in the light of selected material. Wild data must be admitted in aesthetics as much as in epistemology. If it does nothing else for the aesthetician, surrealism should make him look to the grounds of his science.