

Explosive charge: surrealism as a revolutionary romantic movement

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What is romanticism? It has been reduced to a literary school of the 19th Century, or to a traditionalist reaction against the French Revolution—two propositions found in countless works by eminent specialists in literary history or the history of political thought. Rather, it is a form of sensibility irrigating all fields of culture, a vision of the world which extends from the second half of the 18th Century up to today, a comet whose incandescent “core” is the revolt against modern industrial/capitalist civilization, in the name of certain social or cultural values of the past. Nostalgic for a lost paradise—real or imaginary—romanticism opposes itself, with the melancholic energy of despair, to the quantifying mind of the bourgeois universe, to commercial reification, the platitude of utilitarianism, and above all, to the *disenchantment of the world*.

Surrealism is the most striking and the most fascinating example of a romantic current in the 20th Century. Of all the cultural movements of the era, it is the one which has carried to its highest expression the romantic aspiration to re-enchant the world. It is also the one which has incarnated, in the most radical fashion, the revolutionary dimension of romanticism. The revolt of the mind and the social revolution, change life (Rimbaud) and transform the world (Marx): these are the two polar stars which have oriented the movement since its beginnings, driving it in the permanent investigation of subversive cultural and political practices. At the cost of multiple secessions and defections, the core of the Surrealist group, around André Breton and Benjamin Péret, has never abandoned its intransigent refusal of the established social, moral and political order—nor its jealously-guarded autonomy, despite affiliation or sympathy with different currents of the revolutionary left. This started with Communism (Breton’s entry into the PCF in 1927), was followed by Trotskyism (Breton’s visit to Trotsky in Mexico and the collective drafting of the call “For An Independent Revolutionary Art”) and ended with anarchism (the collaboration of the Surrealists, from 1951 to 1953, on the journal *The Libertarian*, organ of Georges Fontenis’ Anarchist Federation).

The Surrealist Movement’s opposition to modern capitalist civilization is neither reasonable nor moderate: it is radical, categorical, irreducible. In one of their first documents, “Revolution First and Always” (1925), the founders of Surrealism proclaim:

“Everywhere that Western civilization rules, all human connection has ceased, with the exception of anything motivated by economic interest, ‘payment in cold, hard cash.’ For more than a century, human dignity has been reduced to the level of a value of exchange...We do not accept the laws of Economy and Exchange, we do not accept enslavement to Work...” [1]

Much later, remembering the very beginnings of the movement, Breton observed, *“At that time, the Surrealist refusal was total, absolutely unable to let itself be channeled into the political arena. Every institution on which rested the modern world, and which came to its logical outcome in the First World War, was scandalous and aberrant in our eyes.”* [2]

That visceral rejection of social and institutional modernity did not stop the Surrealists from referring to cultural modernity—that which derived from Baudelaire and Rimbaud.

The favorite targets of the Surrealist attack on Western civilization were abstract and narrow-minded rationalism, realist conventions, and positivism in all its forms. [3] In the *First Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), Breton denounced the attitude which is shown in the banishment, "under the guise of civilization, under the pretext of progress," anything that hints at the chimerical; faced with that sterile cultural horizon, he affirmed his belief in the omnipotence of dream. [4] The search for an alternative to this civilization would remain present throughout the full history of Surrealism-including the 1970s, when a group of French and Czech Surrealists published (under the direction of Vincent Bounoure) *La Civilisation surréaliste* (Paris, Payot, 1976). [5]

Breton and his friends had never hidden their profound attachment to the romantic tradition of the 19th Century-whether German (Novalis, Arnim), English (Gothic novels) or French (Hugo, Pétrus Borel). What does romanticism mean for the Surrealists? To them nothing is more detestable than the petty academic approach which made it a "literary genre." Here is how Breton put it in his conference in Haiti on "The Concept of Liberty of the Romantics" (1945):

*"The image of Romanticism imposed upon us by scholars is a **doctored** image. The use of national categories and absurd pigeonholes which only separate literary genres serves to impede the consideration of the Romantic movement as a whole."* [6]

In fact, romanticism is a *vision of the world* -in the sense of a *Weltanschauung*- which cuts across nations and eras:

*"It must be observed that Romanticism, as a specific state of mind and **mood** whose function is to everywhere instill a new general conception of the world, transcends those fashions-very limited-of feeling and speaking which were proposed after it (...). Through the swath of works produced by or deriving from it, notably through Symbolism and Expressionism, Romanticism imposes itself as a **continuum**."* [7]

Surrealism even places itself within this long temporal continuity of Romanticism as "state of mind." Critiquing the pompous official celebrations of the centennial of French Romanticism in 1930, Breton comments in the *Second Surrealist Manifesto*:

*"We ourselves say that this Romanticism, which today we are willing to conceive of as the tail **-but a very prehensile tail-** by its very essence, even in 1930, remains uncompromising in its negation of these bureaucrats and their festivals; its century of existence is only its youth, which has been wrongly called its heroic epoch, and can only honestly be taken for the first cry of a being just beginning to make its desire known through us."* [8]

One cannot imagine, in the 20th Century, a more categorical proclamation of the currency of Romanticism.

Nothing would be more false than the conclusion, from that explicit allegiance, that the romanticism of the Surrealists is the same as that of the poets or thinkers of the 19th Century. It forms, by its methods, its artistic or political choices, its outward behavior, something radically *new*, which applies fully to the culture of the 20th Century, in all its dimensions, and which cannot be considered only as a simple re-edition, or even worse, as imitation of the first Romanticism.

Of course, the Surrealist reading of the romantic heritage of the past is highly selective. What attracts them to the "gigantic facades of Hugo," to certain texts of Musset, of Aloysius Bertrand, Xavier Forneret, and Nerval is, as Breton writes in *Le merveilleux contre le mystère*, the "will to the total emancipation of man." It is also, in "a good number of Romantic or post-Romantic writers"-like Borel, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Daumier or Courbet-the "completely spontaneous hatred of the

bourgeois type," the "will to absolute non-compliance with the ruling class," whose domination "is a sort of leper against which, if one would prevent the most precious human acquisitions from being stripped of their meaning and contributing only to the daily-worsening debasement of the human condition, it is no longer enough to brandish the whip, but to which one day we must apply the branding iron." [9]

The same is true for the German Romantics. Breton knew nothing of the "fairly confused but ultra-reactionary doctrine" espoused by Novalis in his essay *Europe, or the Christian* (1799), or the hostile position taken by Achim d'Arnim against the French Revolution. But that did not prevent their works, veritable *bombshells*, from shaking the foundations of the bourgeois cultural order, through their questioning of the separation between real and imaginary. [10] Their thinking thus took on a profoundly utopian/subversive dimension, as for example when Novalis, in his philosophical fragments, "reclaimed as his own what was the magical postulate par excellence-and he did it under a form which barred any restriction on his part: 'It depends upon us that the world must conform to our will.'" [11]

The Surrealist passion for pre-Modern cultural forms and traditions would also be selective: Unhesitatingly, the Surrealists would bury themselves in alchemy, the Kabbala, magic, astrology, primitive art from Oceania or America, and Celtic art. [12] All their activities on this terrain are aimed at exceeding the limitations of "art"-as separate, institutionalized, ornamental activity-to enter the limitless adventure of the re-enchantment of the world. Nevertheless, as revolutionaries inspired by the spirit of the Lumières, of Hegel and above all of Marx, the early Surrealists were the most resolute and uncompromising adversaries of the values at the core of romantic-reactionary culture: religion and nationalism. As the *Second Manifesto* states: "Everything must be done, every method must be available to destroy the notions of family, nation, religion." At the gates of the lost Surrealist paradise can be found, in fiery letters, that well-known libertarian inscription: Neither God nor Master!

Let's examine two examples of this Surrealist re-interpretation of "archaic" or pre-capitalist elements: *magic* and *primitive* arts. [13]

André Breton, in *L'art magique*, defined magic as "the whole of human operations having as their goal the imperious domination of the forces of nature through the use of secret practices of a more or less irrational character." It "implies protest, imagines revolt;" pride too, in its assumption that man "controls" the forces of nature. Religion, in contrast, is the domain of resignation, begging and penitence: "Its humility is total, because it leads (man) to pray for his very unhappiness to the power which has refused to answer." [14]

The sacred, in its religious, hierocratic, clerical, institutional forms, can only inspire, as a system of authoritarian prohibitions, an irrepressible desire for *transgression*, profanation and de-sacralization on the part of the Surrealists, through irony, scorn or black humor. Sacrilege or blasphemy are the highest forms of courtesy when faced with holy monsters.

Breton borrowed the concept of *magical art* from Novalis. It was that "very great romantic spirit" who chose those words to describe the art form he hoped to promote, both rooted in the past and shot through with a "strong tension toward the future":

In the sense in which he understood them, one could expect to find not only the established product of a millennium of experience, but also its supersession owing to its conjunction into a being of the most brilliant lights of the mind and heart. [15] For Breton, all art originated in magic; he proposed the designation of *specifically* magical art for that which "re-engenders to some degree the magic which engendered it." What did the ancient magician and the modern Surrealist artist have in common? In his inquiry into magical art, Breton declared that they "both speculate on the

possibilities and the methods of *enchaining the universe*" [16]

First of all, magic had been condemned, persecuted-the witch hunts!-and banished by institutional religion, which had in its place imposed the holy, the sanctified, the venerable as separate and inviolable realms. It had been subsequently effaced by capitalist/industrialist civilization, which rejected or systematically destroyed whatever was not calculable, quantifiable or capable of being transformed into merchandise. The enterprise of the total *disenchantment of the world* which, according to Max Weber, characterizes bourgeois modernity, has driven from human life not just magic, but everything that might escape the rigid and narrow-minded confines of instrumental rationality.

If magic attracts the attention of the Surrealists with an irresistible strength, it's not because they want to control the forces of nature through ritual acts. What interests them in so-called "primitive" magical practices-as with alchemy and other hermetic arts-is the immense *poetic charge* borne by these activities. That charge-in the explosive sense of the word-helps them to sap the established cultural order and its sensible positivist conformity. Different forms of magic give off sparks which can ignite the fuse and thus aid Surrealism in its eminently subversive enterprise of the poetic *re-enchantment* of the world.

The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for *primitive art*. The attraction of "primitive" cultures is a recurring theme in romanticism, where it can inspire, as for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the revolutionary critique of modern civilization. Marx and Engels did not hide their admiration for the egalitarian, democratic way of life of those still living at the stage of "primitive communism," like the indigenous peoples of North America. Engels was greatly inspired, in *The Origins of Family, State and Private Property* (1884), by the work of the American anthropologist Lewis Morgan, whose writings celebrated the free and interdependent universe of primitive *folk*, represented by the Iroquois Confederacy. Here is a passage from Morgan's work, cited by Engels, and in turn cited-in reference to the two preceding authors-by Breton in his presentation on romanticism in Haiti (1945):

*"Since the beginning of civilization, the accumulation of wealth has become so enormous, its forms so diverse, its application so extensive and its administration so skillful in the interests of the property-owners, that this wealth has become, in the eyes of the people, a **force impossible to master**(...). Democracy in its administration, fraternity in society, the equality of rights, and universal education will inaugurate the next, superior stage of society (...). **This will be a revival-but in a superior form-of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient tribes.**"* [17]

Still, the early Surrealist interest in primitive civilizations was not limited to their ways of life, but was also, and more, focused on the spiritual quality of their artistic works. Oceanic art represents, according to André Breton-in his famous 1948 article "Oceania"-*"the best-ever effort to understand the interpenetration of the physical and the mental, to triumph over the dualism of their perception and representation."* He goes so far as to suggest that the Surrealist path, at its beginning -that is, throughout the 1920s- *"is inseparable from the seduction, the fascination"* exercised by the works of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the North Pole, or New Ireland. Why such a strong attraction? Here is the explanation proposed by Breton in the same text:

"The marvelous, with all its assumptions of surprise, luck, the fulgurant vista of something other than what we can fully grasp, has never, in plastic art, known the triumphs which it is afforded by such high-quality Oceanic objects." [18]

The extraordinary charge of *subjectivity* in primitive arts also seduces the Surrealists. Here's what Vincent Bounoure-Surrealist and expert in primitive arts-has written regarding the surprising flash, the "piercing rays," of the eyes of Oceanic figures:

"The power of subjectivity (the **mana** of old-fashioned ethnological vocabulary) expressed by the gaze; it's not reality to which Oceania had really been most sensitive. The incitement which had been completely destroyed by Greece-Hegel ceaselessly reproaches (Greece) for its marble eyes, the vacant stare of its gods. It's quite remarkable that the expression of the gaze had suggested to the Oceanic peoples the use of methods foreign to the art of sculpture, powerless by itself-always according to Hegel-to express the interior light. Oceania had innumerable materials at its disposal to intensify that strength. Inserted in the orbit of the eye, cowries, seeds and berries, pearls and shell each in turn animate the Oceanic subjectivity." [19]

For those inclined to doubt the intrinsically revolutionary nature of Surrealist romanticism, a particularly striking example illustrates the explosive charge of the message transmitted by Breton and his friends, and its capacity, in favorable circumstances, to raise the insurrectionist spirit. We must again turn to André Breton's discourse, in Haiti, during his stay there in 1945-46.

First, the (little-known) facts of that episode: Breton's conference (December 1945) on Surrealism in Port-au-Prince-which included the ardent formula, "We hold the *liberation of man* as the condition *sine qua non* of the *liberation of the mind*"-had raised a passionate interest among Haitian students and youth. In January 1946 they published a special issue of their review *La Ruche* -founded by the poets René Depestre, Jacques Stéphane Alexis and Gérard Bloncourt- dedicated to Surrealism, which included the text of Breton's speech. The publication was interdicted on the orders of President Elie Lescot-a puppet of the USA-who arrested certain of its editors, provoking a student strike which became, in the insurrectionist climate of Haiti at that time, a general strike, overthrowing the president. Commenting on these events, several observers, among them René Depestre, have corroborated the role of Breton's conference, which had acted as a kind of spark on the powderkeg. [20]

Certainly, the revolutionary ambition of the Surrealists-like that of certain Romantics-is greater and more vast than just the transformation of social or political structures. But it integrates nothing less than the insurrectionist action, the act of breaking chains, as an essential moment of emancipating hope.

Notes

1. *La Révolution Surréaliste*, No. 5, 1925. The text was signed by a large number of artists and intellectuals of the group, including Breton, Aragon, Eluard, Leiris, Crevel, Desnos, Péret, Soupault, Queneau, etc.

2. André Breton, "La Claire Tour" (1951), in *La Clé des champs*, Paris 10/18 and J.J. Pauvert, 1967, p. 42.

3. As Marie Dominique Massoni, editor of the review *SURR* (Surréalisme, Utopie, Rêve et Révolte), published in Paris in the 1990s, has stated quite well, the Surrealists share with the Romantics "the refusal to see the world as existing only on a logical, mathematical, useful, verifiable, quantifiable basis-in sum, a bourgeois basis." M.D. Massoni, "Surrealism and Romanticism," in Max Blechmann, *Revolutionary Romanticism*, San Francisco, City Lights, 1999, p. 194.

4. André Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967, p. 19, 37.

5. An insistent rumor, which over time has taken on the crushing weight and the granitic consistency of dogma, insisted that Surrealism had disappeared, as a collective movement and activity, in 1969. In fact, if certain members of the Surrealist group in Paris (around Jean Schuster) thought it well to

announce the group's dissolution that year, others (around Vincent Bounour) decided to continue the Surrealist adventure. Today, in 2003, collective Surrealist activity exists not only in Paris but in Prague, Madrid, Stockholm, Leeds and Chicago as well.

6. André Breton, "Evolution of the Concept of Liberty Through Romanticism," 1945, *Conjonction: Surréalisme et révolte en Haïti*, No. 194, June 1992, p. 82.

7. André Breton, "Perspective Cavalière," 1963, *Perspective Cavalière*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, p.227.

8. Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, p. 110.

9. André Breton, "Le merveilleux contre le mystère" (1936) in *La Clé des champs*, op. cit. p. 10 and "Position Politique de l'art" (1935), in *Position politique du Surréalisme*, Paris, Denoel-Gonthier, 1972, p. 25-26. There is an interesting analysis of the relationship between the Surrealists and German Romanticism in the recent book of K.H. Bohrer, *Die Kritik der Romantik*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989, p. 48-61. On the link between Surrealism, Romanticism and the student revolts of the 1960s, see R. Faber's essay, "Frühromantik, Surrealismus und Studentenrevolte, Oder die Frage nach dem Anarchismus," in *Romantische Utopie, Utopische Romantik* (ed. R. Faber), Hildesheim, Gerstenberg, 1979, pp. 336-358.

10. André Breton, "Introduction" (1933) to Achim d'Arnim, *Contes Bizarres*, Paris, Julliard, 1964, p. 18, 20, 21.

11. André Breton, "Sur l'art magique," 1957, *Perspective Cavalière*, p. 142.

12 As Marie Dominique Massoni observes, "the power of desire and the marvelous inclines them (the Surrealists) toward hermeticism, as with the Romantics before them. From Enter the Mediums to the canvases of Camacho or Stejskal the Surrealists follow close behind the alchemist Eugène Canseliet and the esoteric tradition, divested of its occultist hodgepodge, very often in honor of the Romantics. Breton had inscribed on his tomb: 'I seek the gold of time.' The reference to Romanticism as well as to alchemy is obvious there." *Revolutionary Romanticism*, p. 197.

13. In the same spirit, I have examined the place of myth in Surrealism, in my book (with Robert Sayre), *Révolte et Mélancolie. Le romantisme à contre-courant de la modernité*, Paris, Payot, 1994.

14. André Breton, *L'Art magique*, Ed. Phébus, 1991, p. 27.

15. Breton, "Sur l'art magique," *Perspective Cavalière*, p.140.

16. Ibid, pp. 27, 261.

17. Breton, "Evolution du concept de liberté à travers le romantisme," *Conjonctions* p. 90. For a remarkable analysis of Marx's *Ethnological Notes* and his interest in Lewis Morgan, see North-American Surrealist Franklin Rosemont's essay, "Karl Marx and the Iroquois," *Arsenal, Chicago*, Black Swan Press, 1989.

18. André Breton, "Oceania," 1948, *La Clé des champs*, pp. 278-280.

19. Vincent Bounoure, *Le Surréalisme et l'arts sauvages*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001, p. 204. Here is how Bounoure, the principal instigator of the pursuit of the Surrealist adventure after 1969, explains the Surrealist's fascination for Oceanic art: "The systematic recourse, with which the Surrealists pursue their program, to the mental functions which had been choked off bit by bit through the

course of several thousand years of pretended civilization, their refusal of that dismemberment and that mutilation, cause them to impatiently listen for the secrets which seem to them to have been preserved by the Oceanic peoples, and which their formal creations leave transparent." Ibid, p. 285.

20. René Depestre, "André Breton in Port-au-Prince," in Michael Richardson (ed.) *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, London, Verso, 1996, p. 232. The joy was short-lived: after a few days of freedom, the Lescot regime had been replaced by a military junta, which expelled André Breton from Haiti...