Surrealism Study Guide

Surrealism

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

The strength of the surrealist movement can be attributed in large part to one man, French poet André Breton, who helped found the movement after World War I in France. Surrealism was a reaction to Dadaism, which was itself a reaction to the "logic" that dadaists believed had caused the war. Surrealism, however, sought a more constructive way to rebel against rational thought than the more negative Dadaism. Drawing on the psychoanalytic studies of Sigmund Freud, the surrealists tried to expand the mind's potential by reconciling the apparently contradictory states of dream and reality. In a series of sometimes dangerous experiments, Breton and others attempted to put themselves in a hallucinatory state, in which they believed they could tap directly into their subconscious minds and extract pure thoughts, untainted by the conscious mind and its rational constraints. Since the surrealists prized individual revelation over conscious forms, themes varied among the poets, although many wrote about some form of love or nature.

While Breton and Phillipe Soupault wrote *The Magnetic Fields*, considered by many to be the first truly surrealist text, in 1919, it was not until 1924, when Breton published his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, that the movement was officially founded. Breton ruled the group like a dictator, and his strict adherence to surrealist principles led to many expulsions and defections from the group. Nevertheless, the surrealists, who also included Paul Eluard and Robert Desnos, flourished for the next two decades, until the outbreak of World War II. Although the majority of the group's members were poets, some tried their hand at prose as well. Breton's novel *Nadja* was one of the most successful attempts. Surrealism inspired related movements in painting, sculpture, drama, and film, and has had a lasting influence on the creative arts as a whole.

Themes

Love

One of the favorite themes of the French surrealists was love, particularly the ability of love to overcome reason. One of the most striking examples of this is in a scene from Desnos's prose work *Deuil pour Deuil*. Desnos places the narrator in a desert city of uninhabited ruins along a river. "Despite our anxiousness, no one, no one at all, came to us," the narrator says. The "us" implies that somebody is with him, although later in the poem he admits that he "was always alone in reality." The narrator blindly searches for love. "Strange sicknesses, curious customs, bell-tolling love, where have you led me? In these stones I find no trace of what I seek." He cannot find the love for which he is looking and is trapped by the "curious customs" of love, which overcome his reason.

The narrator has mirage-like visions of caravans of beautiful women, whom he "waits for . . . tormented," but they turn out to be "old dust covered women," if they even exist at all. One suspects not, especially when he later sees "planes without pilots encircled with rounds of smoke." The planes land and three women get out, but at the end of the scene the women are gone, and the narrator repeats a variation of the opening lines of the scene, implying that he is in fact imprisoned in this dream world, where love is driving him mad.

The Human Body

Surrealists were noted for their descriptions of the human body, particularly the female body. Although these depictions are sometimes done graphically in a sexual manner, at other times, the surrealists describe parts of the body that are completely innocent. A good example of the latter is Breton's poem "My Wife with Her Wood-Fire Hair." In the poem, Breton starts at his wife's hair and slowly works his way down her body, through her "thoughts of heatsparks" and "eyebrows like the edge of a swallow's nest," to her "champagne shoulders" and "fingers of cut hay." Each example is a vivid picture of a particular part of his wife's anatomy, and with rare exception, each image is a unique creation that sets up a picture in the reader's mind. One can envision his wife's thoughts, for example, as literal "heatsparks" that flare with electricity around her brain.

Nature

The surrealists also incorporate nature-related images in their poetry. These generally take one of two forms: isolated images representing various aspects of nature, or larger images of nature's elements. Both types can be seen in Eluard's poem "You Rise Up." An example of the first type appears halfway through the poem when the poet writes, "You sing night hymns on the strings of the rainbow." A rainbow is a positive symbol of nature, which is consistent with the overall tone of the poem, in which Eluard sings the praises of women.

As for the second type of nature, Eluard includes three of the four elements□water, earth, and fire□elsewhere in the poem. He starts off with the two lines: "You rise up the water unfolds / You lie down the water opens." The elemental image of water often implies life, and in this case, the poet is remarking about how women are part of the process of creating life and so are one with the lifegiving water, which closes and opens to accommodate the woman in the poem. This idea is reinforced in the rest of the poem first through the use of earth: "You are the earth taking root / And on which everything is built," then through fire:

You sacrifice time
To the eternal youth of the exact flame
Which veils nature in reproducing it.

In the earth image, the woman takes root, providing a solid foundation from which to build humanity. In the fire image, the woman sacrifices the majority of her life to the bearing and raising of children, a cycle that repeats itself eternally. It should be noted, however, that even though this poem seems to make use of traditional contexts for images, in many cases, the word a surrealist uses does not always match its traditional meaning.

Style

Automatic Writing

In his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, Breton laid out the methods of the would-be surrealist, including a technique called automatic writing, which the surrealists used to try to obtain the most pure information, free from the bindings of rational thought. "Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can," says Breton. He advises people to "write quickly" about whatever comes into their minds, and "fast enough so that you will not re- member what you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written." Breton also notes that of all of the surrealists, Desnos was the group's best practitioner, and that "Desnos *speaks surrealist* at will."

Imagery

Poets use language in their works to create different kinds of images, in a literal or figurative manner. An image can represent physical objects, emotions, metaphysical ideas, and virtually anything else that can be experienced in the real world through one or more of the five senses of sight, smell, touch, hearing, or taste. A literal image is conveyed in straight language that does not imply a hidden meaning. For example, in Paul Eluard's poem "What the Laborer Says Is Always Beside the Point," the second line reads, "A man on a bench in a street who avoids the crowd." There is nothing ambiguous about this image. As each separate part of the line is read, the image in the reader's mind becomes more concrete. Much of surrealist poetry relies on figurative images□images conveyed by metaphors, similes, or other forms of figurative language□all of which employ ordinary words in a manner that imparts a new meaning. For example, from the same poem by Eluard:

There are demolitions sadder than a penny
Indescribable and yet the sun moves away from
them singing
While the sky dances and makes its honey.

Eluard's language has specific meanings when looked at in context. The "demolitions" caused by war are more depressing than a penny, which represents the lowest monetary value in currency, and so is almost worthless, as are these demolished buildings. While the buildings are so destroyed that they are "indescribable," their darkness does not effect the sun. The sun, a bright object that is usually given positive connotations□in this case it sings□continues to move away, or rise and set, as it always has, taking no notice of the demolished buildings. Likewise for the dancing sky (also a positive feeling), which continues to make its honey, or rain, as it always has. Eluard uses figurative language to personify□or attribute human feelings to□inanimate objects like buildings and natural objects like the sun and sky, conveying a sense of the inevitable nature of war and its ineffectiveness in the grand scheme of things.

Juxtaposition

In addition to imagery, the surrealists relied heavily on the positioning of their words to create the effects that they sought. In many cases, poets would place unrelated, often contradictory words next to each other in an attempt to achieve an image that reconciled dreams with reality. This device led to some very bizarre images. For example, in Robert Desnos's poem "Meeting," he writes:

A very learned doctor sews the hands of the pray
ing woman
assuring her she will sleep.
A very skilful cook mixes poisons in my plate
and assures me I will laugh.

These words are obviously juxtaposed so that they contradict each other. Doctors normally heal, so if they sew somebody's hands together, that person will likely cry out in pain, not go to sleep. Likewise, if somebody is poisoned, they are not likely to laugh, they are likely to die. However, even though the lines do not make sense, they create images in the reader's mind and convey a sense of betrayal. The speaker of these lines is being illtreated, although he or she is assured by the respected professionals that everything is going to be all right. One possible interpretation is that the speaker, like those who were asked to support World War I, is being duped by the government the learned doctors who rely on logic and being fed poisonous lies that the war will be over quickly and that citizens will rejoice when that happens.

Historical Context

World War I

On June 28, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, made a fateful trip to Sarajevo, capital city of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where he and his wife were assassinated. The occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary led to growing unrest among people in the region who wanted to become part of Serbia once again. The assassination was staged with the help of Serbia, which also wished to reclaim Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Norman Davies notes, in *Europe: A History*, the quick consequences of the assassination, and the revelation that Serbia was involved. "Within four weeks, the gunshots of Sarajevo brought Europe's diplomatic and military restraints crashing to the ground," Davies writes. On July 28, exactly one month after the assassination, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. An extensive system of preexisting alliances swiftly pulled most other European countries into the war, escalating the conflict. Eventually, Europe, parts of Asia, and the United States joined the war, aligning themselves either with the pro-Serbian Allies or with the Central powers, which supported Austria-Hungary.

When World War I began in August 1914, both sides believed that with their modern weapon technologies like hand grenades, tanks, long-range artillery, and poison gas, the war would be over quickly and with minimal casualties. Davies notes the prevailing logic that dominated people's thinking: "It was going to be over by Christmas. Conventional wisdom held that modern warfare would be more intense than in the past, but more decisive." In reality, however, the war raged for four years, leading to an estimated eight million dead and even more wounded.

One of the two main lines of fighting, the Western Front, ran through France, which experienced some of the bloodiest battles in the war. The front was defined by the extensive trench that ran along its entire length on both sides. Allied and Central soldiers occupied their respective trenches□which were often close to each other□ and with a series of battles, each side attempted to drive their opponent out of his trench and force the line back, with a flurry of grenades and machinegun fire. The results were horrific. Davies observes of the three most bloody battles, "the loss of life could be counted in tens of thousands per hour or hundreds per square yard."

For years the battle in the trenches was a virtual stalemate, and the body count rose as both sides added reinforcements to maintain the trenches. "Here was a mindless tragedy which no one had foreseen, and which no one knew how to stop," says Davies.

Dadaism and Sigmund Freud

After World War I, the dadaists tried to fight fire with fire. They believed that logic and other organized systems of thinking had created the horrors of war and responded to

the war's meaningless slaughter with literature and art that was equally meaningless and created intentionally without logic. The dadaist movement, which had been founded in Switzerland in 1916 by a group of European artists and writers, spread to other areas in Europe, including France, where Breton became one of the willing converts.

As a medical student drafted to work in the psychiatric wards during the war, Breton had seen firsthand the effects of war on the human mind and wished to rebel against the logic that had caused the war. However, Breton soon became tired of the negative, meaninglessness of Dadaism, and sought a more positive and constructive means to stage his rebellion. Breton had studied the work of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, and was particularly interested in Freud's theories of the unconscious mind. Drawing on Freud's studies, Breton and others formed the surrealist movement. In 1924, Breton defined the group's guiding principles in his *Manifesto of Surrealism*.

Communism and World War II

Although the surrealist movement initially began as a form of literary expression, political unrest in Europe forced many sociopolitical and cultural groups to align themselves with other groups. In 1930, Breton announced the surrealists's decision to join the French Communist Party in his second *Manifesto of Surrealism*. It was his hope that the greater Communist Party, which had its headquarters in Moscow in the Soviet Union, would adopt the surrealist way of thinking and apply it to politics, creating a totally liberated society. However, five years later, most of the surrealists left the Communist Party after witnessing the bloody acts Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin perpetrated in the name of communism.

Davies claims many of these acts were part of Stalin's political strategy: "Innocent victims were rounded up in their homes and villages; others were charged with imaginary offences of 'sabotage,' 'treason,' or 'espionage,' and tortured into confession." As part of Stalin's scare tactics, many of these victims were put on trial to discourage others from rebelling against him. Breton and others were some of the first to publicly denounce these trials.

With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, another dictator, Germany's Adolf Hitler, invaded and conquered much of Europe. When Hitler's Nazis invaded France, the surrealists broke up, and many of them fled to other European countries or overseas.

Movement Variations

Surrealist Art

Surrealist painters and writers shared a number of influences, including Dadaism. However, one of the most important art influences was the early work of Giorgio de Chirico—an Italian painter who helped found a style of metaphysical painting with his famous series of unique, barren city landscapes, which he started painting in 1910. Through his use of contrasting light and shadow and his juxtaposition of objects, Chirico's paintings suggested a dark, unknown evil.

Breton supported surrealist art as well as literature. In issues of his magazine *La Révolution Surréealiste*, Breton routinely published illustrations from such artists as Max Ernst and André Masson. The biggest promotion of the surrealist artists, however, came through exhibitions. In 1925, the surrealists staged their first collective exhibition in Paris, which included work from Ernst, Masson, Joan Miró, and Man Ray, founding members of the surrealist art group. Chirico's early metaphysical work was also included. It was characteristic of surrealist art that each artist had a unique style, as each painter chose to explore the ideas of Surrealism in different, personal ways, leading to many different and exciting works. The exhibition was a success, and more soon followed.

The Surrealist Gallery, a joint venture that opened in 1926, gave many Surrealist artists a permanent exhibition space. In addition to French artists like Max Ernst, André Masson, and Joan Miró, the gallery also attracted the attention of international artists. Like the French surrealist poets, Dalí was influenced by Freud's writings. To tap into his subconscious, he induced hallucinations in himself before he began to paint. From 1929 to 1937, he created a series of dreamlike, fantastical landscapes featuring realistic objects in bizarre configurations. One of his most famous works is "The Persistence of Memory," which depicts clocks melting on tree branches in an otherwise desolate landscape. His bleak landscapes are his best-known works. After Dalí switched gears and began creating more traditional paintings in the 1930s, Breton— who expected strict adherence to surrealist ideas—expelled Dalí from his surrealist group.

Surrealist painting flourished until the outbreak of World War II. Periodic exhibitions were later seen in the 1960s and 1970s, as many of the original surrealist artists died and their work was shown in retrospectives. Surrealist art is still exhibited in the twenty-first century, and its influence continues to be seen.

Surrealist Film

The surrealist movement first expressed itself in film in the 1920s. Surrealist films embodied the concepts of its literary counterpart and featured oddly juxtaposed and often contradictory images, which were sometimes disturbing. The most famous film

from this time period is *Un Chien andalou* (An Andalusian dog), released in 1928 from first-time director Luis Buñuel and painter Dalí. One of the more graphic images in the film is that of a woman slitting her eye with a razor. As English surrealist poet David Gascoyne notes in his *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, the film "caused much scandal and sensation at its first showings." The first of several surrealist films that eventually achieved widespread critical acclaim, *Un Chien andalou* continues to be viewed as a classic of surrealist film.

For the next five decades, Buñuel continued making films depicting surrealist images and worlds, culminating in the 1977 film *That Obscure Object of Desire*. The surrealist influence of Buñuel and others has survived into the twenty-first century. For example, the ideas of Surrealism were modernized in *Vanilla Sky*□director Cameron Crowe's 2001 film starring Tom Cruise as a magazine publisher who slowly loses his hold on reality and experiences a number of surrealist visions. At the end, he realizes he has been living in a selfinduced, virtual reality dream.

Surrealist Drama

Although some surrealists wrote plays, their greatest influence was not through their individual works but in the movement's influence on the theatre of the absurd, a dramatic movement in the post- World-War-II 1950s and early 1960s. The theatre of the absurd, a school informally founded through the works of a number of foreign playwrights living in Paris, was a reaction against the horrors of World War II. Like the surrealists, the absurdists valued dreamlike images over logical, rational thought. Unlike the surrealists, however, who attempted to create a positive and constructive reaction to the horror, the absurdists believed that human life was meaningless and that humans were helpless creatures, having fallen into a state of absurdity. Absurdist plays mimicked this feeling, introducing unpredictable situations or contradictory images that did not seem to make sense. Some of these plays, like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, first produced in 1953 in France, are considered classics of world literature. Other celebrated absurdist playwrights include Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, and Edward Albee.

England

Just as Breton did much to promote the surrealist movement in France, English poet and novelist Gascoyne did the same in the 1930s in England. In addition to translating some of the surrealist poetry from French to English, he also wrote *A Short Survey of Surrealism* in 1935. In this book, Gascoyne analyzes the development of Surrealism, offers commentary on Breton's first and second manifestos of Surrealism, and discusses the work of other major surrealist poets.

Along with publicizing the movement through his works of history, criticism, and translations, Gascoyne's own poetry reflects the influence of the surrealists. His book of poetry titled *Man's Life Is This Meat*, published in 1936, was one of the most important

surrealist works in England. However, Gascoyne was not as interested in the subconscious as Breton and others, instead focusing on more mystical elements. His poems in the late 1930s and early 1940s show his increasing interest in religion, which dominated his later poetry.

Representative Authors

Louis Aragon (1897-1982)

Louis Aragon was born October 3, 1897, in Paris, France. As one of the leading proponents of Dadaism and Surrealism, Aragon helped Breton and others to inspire creative freedom in the arts. Like many other surrealists, Aragon's poetry was initially published in the journal *Litterature*, which Aragon helped found and edit with Breton and Soupault. However, Aragon's most famous works are his novels, including *Paris Peasant*. Aragon and the other surrealists joined the French Communist Party in 1930. Although the surrealists left the party five years later after witnessing Stalin's bloody atrocities, Aragon rejoined the party, renounced Surrealism, and produced mainly political works for several years. He attempted to write other works later in his career, but at that point, most critics only knew him for his politically oriented fictions. Aragon died December 24, 1982, in Paris.

André Breton (1896-1966)

Although he had help founding the Surrealism movement, in many ways André Breton acted alone. Born February 19, 1896, in Tinchebray, France, Breton was a medical student when he was drafted into World War I. There he served in the psychiatric wards, where he began his studies in neurology and psychology. Disillusioned by the horrors of war, Breton joined the dadaists at the war's end but left to start the surrealist movement, which he saw as a more constructive response to the war than Dadaism. He experimented avidly with automatic writing and other self-induced hypnotic and hallucinatory states attempting to reach the subconscious mind. Although he had founded and edited the journal *Litterature* with Aragon and Soupault in 1919, it was not until 1924 that he published his first of three manifestos of Surrealism. In the first manifesto, he laid out the rules that would-be surrealists should follow to tap into their subconscious. Breton was the movement's main promoter and he ran the group with a dictator-like control, expelling anyone who did not play by his rules. With his influence, surrealist painters like Dalí achieved greater recognition through exhibitions. In 1930, Breton led the surrealists in joining the French Communist Party, although they did not stay long once they saw the atrocities Stalin was committing in the name of communism. When World War II broke out, Breton was interrogated by the Nazis over his activities, at which point he moved first to the French colony of Martinique, then to the United States, where he spent most of the war years. Breton died of a heart attack on September 28, 1966, in France.

Robert Desnos (1900-1945)

Robert Desnos was born July 4, 1900, in Paris, France. He was published as a poet in his teens, but as an adult, he originally worked as a journalist before joining the

surrealists in the 1920s. Of the entire group, Desnos was recognized as having the best ability to put himself in the trance required for automatic writing, a fact that Breton noted with pride in his first *Manifesto*. Desnos, like some other surrealists, pursued a flamboyant lifestyle that included sexual promiscuity and experimentation with drugs. He was also in love with a well-known singer, Yvonne George, and he wrote about her in various romantic poems. However, he is most remembered for his novel *Liberty or Love!*. Following the publication of this novel, Desnos began to pursue a more stable life. He got married, reduced his involvement with the surrealists, and even wrote his own manifesto in an attempt to win control of the surrealist movement from Breton, attempting to break Breton's formal structure. The coup failed, Desnos was expelled from the group, and he went back to his former job as a journalist. He also began writing essays, radio scripts, film critiques, and even more traditional forms of poetry, which were looked upon with disapproval by the surrealists. Desnos died of typhoid on June 8, 1945, in a concentration camp in Terezin, Czechoslovakia.

Paul Eluard (1895-1952)

Paul Eluard, the pen name of Eugène Grindel, was born December 14, 1895, in Saint-Denis, France. Eluard contracted tuberculosis as a child, and spent two years in a sanatorium, where he started writing poetry. When World War I began, Eluard joined the French military, first serving as a hospital orderly, then fighting in the trenches. After the war, Eluard met Breton and others in the dadaist movement and helped to develop Surrealism. Eluard was extremely prolific, publishing more than seventy books in his lifetime. However, it was his early volumes of poetry, including *Capital of Sorrow*, published in 1926, that helped to establish his reputation as a poet. After the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, Eluard's writings became more political, and by World War II, he had adopted a pro-socialist attitude. After the war, Eluard followed the lead of Aragon, denouncing Surrealism in favor of communism. His devotion to Stalin was so strong he wrote a poetic tribute to him. Because of his political affiliations, Eluard was denied a United States visa. He died November 18, 1952, in Charenton-le-Pont, France.

Phillipe Soupault (1897-1990)

Phillipe Soupault was born August 2, 1897, in Chaville, France. After serving in World War I, Soupault joined forces with Breton. Although the surrealist movement was not officially founded until 1924, in 1919, Soupault coauthored *The Magnetic Fields* with Breton, a work considered by many to be the first surrealist text. It is unfortunate that many people remember him for this achievement alone, since Soupault was one of the most active members of the group. Soupault was one of the coeditors on the journal *Litterature*. Also, while he still embodied the ideas behind Surrealism and incorporated juxtapositions of bizarre images into his work like the other surrealists, Soupault's poetry was noticeably more structured. Soupault left the group in the mid-1920s and traveled and wrote until 1938, when he moved to Tunisia. In the capital city of Tunis, he worked in radio and was outspoken against Hitler and the Nazis, which got him fired. Four years later, he was arrested in France for disseminating antifascist propaganda and was

sentenced to six months in prison, where he wrote a psychological study of his fellow prisoners. Soupault died March 11, 1990, in Paris, France.

Representative Works

Capital of Sorrow

Like Aragon, Paul Eluard's greatest works were written before his writings became more political in nature. *Capital of Sorrow*, originally published in 1926, is a case in point. Although Eluard had published previous volumes of poetry, this was one of his first volumes of surrealist poetry and it helped to establish his reputation as a poet and bring attention to the surrealist movement. In *Capital of Sorrow*, Eluard focuses on two, diametrically opposed ideas□love and loneliness□and expounds on each with a passion and intensity for which he became famous. Invoking images of the individual and the universal, *Capital of Sorrow* was a key formative work in the poet's career. Of all of the French surrealists, Eluard was praised by critics as the most talented, and works like *Capital of Sorrow* have continued to receive favorable attention over the years.

Liberty or Love!

Liberty or Love!, Desnos's surrealist novel, was censured by a French court because of its graphic nature and the eroticism inherent in some passages. The novel, first published in 1927, is like other surrealist novels in that it follows a loose structure. The story details a hazy series of events in which two lovers, Corsair Sanglot and Louise Lame, drift in and out of each other's lives. Characters pop in and out of the narrative as if in a dream. The novel, which was written in very descriptive detail, was noted by critics for its dreamlike qualities. It was first translated into English in 1994, at which time it received favorable reviews.

The Magnetic Fields

The story behind the genesis of *The Magnetic Fields* is one of intense, and one could say, fanat- ical commitment to a cause. In 1919, Breton and Soupault were performing a number of experiments, attempting to tap into their unconscious minds through techniques like automatic writing. At one point, they induced themselves into a hypnotic trance and began a writing session that lasted eight days. The output, a series of prose poems, was published initially in 1919 in their journal *Litterature*. *The Magnetic Fields*, considered by many to be the first surrealist text, was important to the movement's development.

Manifesto of Surrealism

When Breton's first *Manifesto of Surrealism* was published in 1924, it was met with opposition. The manifesto began by criticizing current forms of writing such as the novel in very abrasive and unflattering ways, so it is no wonder that it was not liked. Although the term "Surrealism" was coined by his deceased friend Guillaume Apollinaire, Breton

claimed (in *Manifesto of Surrealism*) the title for his movement and offered an official definition:

> Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express□verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner□the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

The manifesto featured a grab bag of other items, including a list of names of the people Breton considered surrealists, an in-depth description for how to perform the method of automatic writing, and several examples illustrating what Surrealism is. Breton followed this work with two other manifestos and several other works that further defined the goals and ideals of the surrealists.

Paris Peasant

Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* was originally published in 1926. The surrealist novel employed two of the surrealists's favorite inspirational locations: a passageway at the Paris Opera and the Buttes-Chaumont park. *Paris Peasant* was well received, especially by critics, who praised the novel's ability to mix realistic elements of the Paris locations with the surrealist elements of Aragon's created world. Much of the critics' favorable attention stemmed from the fact that they were used to surrealists who did not base their prose or novels on real places□which were harder to produce through automatic writing□and so Aragon's novel was a welcome change. The novel also contained Aragon's own definition of Surrealism, which differed from Breton's definition in his *Manifesto of Surrealism*. Aragon emphasized (in *Manifesto of Surrealism*) the use of the image in a random and passionate way and believed that each image forced him "to revise the Universe."

Critical Overview

Surrealism was a movement that sought to abandon all organized systems that normal literature followed, so it is tough to criticize the works as literature. Critic Mary Ann Caws notes this in the introduction to her book, *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism*: "Dada and surrealism, which consider themselves literature's opposite, cannot be (or should not be) theorized about, exemplified, and handled at an efficient arm's length." In addition, Caws observes that Breton himself was against criticism from outsiders: "Breton firmly believed in the principle of internal criticism, and on several occasions he brilliantly demonstrated it."

To make matters more difficult, Surrealism was intended to be a movement of individual revelation for each writer. As a result, the writings were widely different in theme, style, and form, making it hard to criticize the movement as a whole. Because of this, critics have tended to follow one of two paths. Either they have commented on the ideas behind the movement itself, or they have commented on the individual surrealist writer.

The ideas behind the movement were expressed formally in Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism*. As David Gascoyne reports in his *A Short Survey of Surrealism* in 1935, it was not well received: "It is not in the least surprising that Breton's manifesto should have aroused a considerable sensation. A great deal of animosity and blind opposition, also."

Gascoyne discusses how Breton's absolute adherence to the rigid ideals of Surrealism further alienated him personally, not just from critics, but also from members of the surrealist group, who were "unable to maintain the standards of disinterestedness and non-conformity that surrealism demands."

As for Breton's writings themselves, Balakian notes in her entry for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that even though he was an able poet, most people "associate him chiefly with his work, *Nadja*." Breton's intent with this work was to undermine novels which, as he states in his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, "are nothing but so many superimposed images taken from some stock catalogue, which the author utilizes more and more whenever he chooses." Still, as Balakian observes, "instead of destroying the novel as Breton had hoped, he contributed strongly to the shaping of the antinovel as a form."

Breton's contemporaries have received a mixed bag of criticism about their works. In the case of Phillipe Soupault, one of the original and most famous surrealists□even though he was not with the group as long as others□the criticism has been very one-sided. J. H. Matthews, one of the foremost surrealist critics, notes the peculiar situation surrounding Soupault, who in 1919 was the cowriter of *The Magnetic Fields*, considered by many to be the first truly surrealist text: "[Soupault] is remembered as having written, with Breton, a book cited by many but read by few. Meanwhile, his other surrealist publications have not been subjected to scrutiny."

The most critically acclaimed of the surrealists, at least in poetry, was Paul Eluard. Georges Lemaitre writes in his book *From Cubism to Surrealism in French Literature* that Eluard was "certainly the most richly gifted poet of the whole surrealist group." Lemaitre points out that the themes in Eluard's poetry focus on two contradictory ideas, loneliness and love: "Love is viewed by him as a mystic center of blazing forces, a fiery nucleus of passionate vibrations, diffusing energy throughout the whole world in ardent and pulsating waves."

Lemaitre is not so praising of Desnos, in whose works, "One would search vainly . . . for the abstract metaphysical quality which characterizes most of Eluard's productions." Lemaitre goes even further, criticizing the poet's use of particularly perverse forms, which "aroused from their heavy slumber, twist and turn ignominiously, releasing in their convulsive spasms an acrid and suffocating stench."

The poetry of Aragon has also commonly been viewed as negative, due to its use of particularly violent words and its spirit of protest. These elements became especially strong when Aragon committed himself to the causes of the Communist Party.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette explores Paul Eluard's use of imagery in his poem "First in the World" as an illustration of Surrealism's primary goal.

In his definitive work *Manifesto of Surrealism*, published in 1924, André Breton set the guidelines that future members of the surrealist movement would follow. Breton maintained tight control over these guidelines and promptly expelled any writer who did not observe them. Although the list of expelled members would eventually include Paul Eluard, who abandoned Surrealism for communism, Eluard was originally one of Breton's favorite writers, and one whom Breton thought exemplified the principles of Surrealism. In addition, of all the original surrealists, Eluard is the one poet praised most often by critics. For these reasons, Eluard's poetry serves as a good example of Breton's concepts. In one case in particular, the poem "First in the World," Eluard's imagery illustrates the central goal in Surrealism□the attempt to reconcile the dream world with reality.

"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*, if one may so speak." With these words in his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, Breton introduced a concept built upon both the dream research of Sigmund Freud and Breton's own self-induced, hallucinatory experiments. Over the course of his manifesto, Breton defines the various tools the surrealists used to achieve this new "absolute reality," the most important of which is the surrealist image. Although Breton admits that there are "countless kinds" of these images, he places a repeated emphasis on the words themselves: "Words, groups of words *which follow one another*, manifest among themselves the greatest solidarity." In other words, the words in a surrealist poem are connected, and follow a pattern. However, the greater meaning derived from this pattern does not always resemble reality. As Frederick Brown notes in "Breton and the Surrealist Movement," these poems create "a locked, reflexive universe where language exists, to suppose the impossible, *on its own terms* . . . conveying no feeling, no experience, no image felt, experienced, or imagined outside itself."

Inside the microcosm of the poem, the images themselves define the characteristics and boundaries of the poem's world. Like a dream, these rules often differ from the natural laws of our own world. Eluard's poem "First in the World," originally published in his collection *Capital of Sorrow*, draws conspicuous attention to the surrealists' plan of merging the dream world with reality, a transformation that takes place over the course of the poem itself. In the first stanza, or group of lines, the poem describes the real, human world:

Prisoner of the field, frenzied in agony,
The light hides on you, see the sky:
It closed its eyes to attack your dream,
It closed your dress to break your chains.

The "prisoner" is the reader, the person to whom the poem is addressed. By addressing the poem directly to the reader, Eluard grabs the reader's attention and lets him or her know what he is about to discuss is of vital importance. In this case, the poet is informing his readers that they are enslaved in the real world, and he does so in a sermon-like way. Through his words, Eluard invokes images of slavery and freedom. The prisoner is "of the field," which is a common area where slaves have toiled in the past, and is "in agony," a common condition for slaves. The hiding "light" that used to be in "the sky" would in many traditional poems mean daylight or the sun, a traditional sign of goodness. However, in this surrealist poem, the meaning is skewed, and the light becomes a symbol for reality, in which the prisoner is enslaved. When viewed in this context, the slavery imagery throughout the rest of the first stanza makes sense.

In the third line the poet discusses the "dream" of his readers, which is that the ideal life can be found in the real world. When reality retreats, however, it attacks this notion. Although this is a violent change for the prisoner, it is nevertheless for his or her own good, because the absence of reality redeems prisoners, by breaking the "chains."

In the absence of reality, or light, the poem and reader descend into the dream world, reality's opposite. As the second stanza shows, the characteristics of this world are strange to the prisoner:

Before the tied wheels
A fan laughs out loud.
In the treacherous nets of the grass
The roads lose their reflexion.

In this dream reality, all of the familiar hallmarks of civilization are gone. The "tied wheels" referred to in the first line of this stanza invoke the image of a car that cannot move. In the next line, the poet informs the reader that somebody or something the word fan can mean either the device used for cooling or a person who is fond of something is laughing, presumably at the car that is stuck. In the third line, the stuck car is revealed to be located in the "nets of the grass" that inhabit this world. This "treacherous" grass also swallows up the roads, which are now buried and so cannot reflect images or ideas.

The composite, surrealist image created by these four lines is one of nature replacing technology. In this dream world there is no place for modern technology like cars and roads which Eluard's readers would find a comforting part of their reality. Instead the prisoner, now a dreamer, must adapt to a new set of rules and must throw out the familiarities that he or she is used to if the prisoner wants to make the most of this new world. Eluard's depiction of a disoriented dreamer who has just arrived in an imaginary world follows closely with Breton's observations about most of society, which he expressed in his *Manifesto*. Says Breton, "I have always been amazed at the way an ordinary observer lends so much more credence and attaches so much more importance to waking events than to those occurring in dreams." In Eluard's hands, the uncomfortable dreamer, like society, is yanked out of the reality of everyday life, and forced to accept the strange reality of the dream world.

After the dreamer arrives in this imaginary reality on earth, one of the four elements, the poet next summons images of another element, water:

Can't you take the waves
Whose barges are almonds
In your warm coaxing palm
Or in the ringlets of your head?

In this stanza, the poet begins to challenge his readers, taunting them with the powers they could have but currently do not possess. Unlike the poet, his readers cannot harness the sea□in which another symbol of technology, the barge, or ship, has been replaced by almonds□and coax it into their hands or their hair. Without letting go of technology and the familiar reality of the logical waking world, Eluard's readers will not be able to attain the godlike powers that the poet seems to possess. These prisoners, trapped by their familiarity with the established systems of logic and reason of the waking world, fail to see that worlds where almonds float on the sea like ships and oceans can be contained in the palm of one's hand are nevertheless valid and can be dominated. In her book *Twentieth-Century French Avant-Garde Poetry, 1907-1990*, Virginia A. La Charité observes that in Eluard's poetry, "while the image may defy reason and logic in its absurdity, it is not incomprehensible and so becomes both reasonable and logical." In other words, the images that Eluard describes create a picture in readers' minds that is definable, and so is imbued with its own sense of reason and logic.

In the next stanza, Eluard continues to taunt the reader, moving to the next largest, natural arena to demonstrate his powers, the heavens themselves:

Can't you seize the stars?
Stretched on the rack you resemble them,
In their nest of fire you dwell
And your light multiplies from them.

The dreamer still has not mastered the peculiar reason and logic of this imaginary world, which allows for the seizing of the stars themselves. Be- cause of this, the dreamer is still a prisoner. In this stanza, Eluard says that the prisoner is being tortured on "the rack," a situation that once again implies captivity and domination. Like the stars in this world, which form a "nest of fire," the prisoner is immobile and therefore can be dominated by people like the poet, who have accepted and embraced the possibilities of this dream reality. In fact, lacking the ability to cope with this world, the reader becomes one of the stars, and the reader's reality, "the light," begins to be defined by them. In other words, over the course of four stanzas, the reader has traded a prison in the real world for one in the dream world, failing to recognize the possibilities that the latter has to offer.

With this stanza, Eluard completes the pattern he set up in the dream world. He starts out small on land, then goes to the ocean, which can be contained in the palm of his hand, then expands to include the universe itself. He does this in a dreamlike fashion,

without any transition other than the spaces between the stanzas. While the imagery is rather bizarre, it still follows a general pattern, an idea that demonstrates another of Breton's observations about dreams, from his *Manifesto*: "Within the limits where they operate . . . dreams give every evidence of being continuous and show signs of organization."

In the first part of the last stanza of the poem, Eluard brings the reader back out of the dream world into reality, although it is a struggle:

From the gagged dawn only one cry wants to rush
out,
A turning sun streams under the bark,
It will be imprinted on your closed eyelids.

The waking reality, which is beginning to return, is "gagged," although it wants to "cry" out to the dreamer, and begins to slowly exert its influence, marking the dreamer's "closed eyelids." However, as Eluard notes in the final line, "Sweet one, when you sleep, night mingles with day." With this pronouncement, the poet announces to the reader that the two realities□dreams and real life□are intertwined. The "night" of the dream land will mix with the "day" of reality into one surreality. In this way, Eluard states that the ultimate goal of surrealists□to reconcile dreams and reality□has been achieved, and that by fighting it, one will only end up imprisoned, either in the real world or the dream world.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on Surrealism, in *Literary Movements for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Chenieux-Gendron looks at "the massive denial of prohibition" as a driving force behind Surrealism.

Three great systems of exclusion and division allow the human word to lay claim to purity: the play of prohibitions, the strongest of which is the prohibition of desire; the division between reason and madness; and the will to truth.

> We know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything, that we cannot simply speak of anything, when we like or where we like; not just anyone, finally may speak of just anything. We have three types of prohibition, covering objects, ritual with its surrounding circumstances, the privileged or exclusive right to speak of a particular subject; these prohibitions interrelate, reinforce and complement each other, forming a complex web, continually subject to modification.

These prohibitions certainly surround the act of speech in a very powerful way. Moreover, added to them is the obligation to say *only* what is reasonable, and according to the codified modes of "non-madness." If pre-nineteenth-century Europe sometimes discerned signs of lucidity and marks of portent in the speech of the mad, this was another way of reinvesting that speech through reason, of denying its absolute *difference*. More subtly, too, as Michel Foucault shows, the very opposition between true and false defines a constraint on truth involving *power*. "Certainly, as a proposition, within a discourse, the division between true and false is neither arbitrary, nor modifiable, nor institutional, nor violent." But there *is* a will to truth, which takes different forms according to the various historical periods in the West, and which tends to exercise on other discourses, such as literature, or on other forms of expression, "a sort of pressure, a power to constrain." If we just think about the references to "verisimilitude" in Western art and literature until the naturalist period and probably beyond, we can measure its indirect force.

From the time of its foundation in France in 1919, Surrealism responded to these games of division by revolting against them. Surrealists saw these divisions with a lucidity and a violence sharpened by the postwar despair and a sense of there being no reason to go on living. After the rupture and bloodshed of World War I, in opposition to the clear conscience of Europe, which was reshaping and healing itself, the movement launched a wave of global contestation and wove a network of *other* differences. In its most far-reaching projects, Surrealism claims to mingle desire with human speech, and eros with human life□not just to tell, or to describe, desire and eros. It claims to abolish the notion of incongruity or obscenity, to let the subconscious speak, and to simulate different pathologies of language. It claims to overturn the quest for the probable in art by making an astounding bet on the imagination, presented as the central power of the human

mind, from which emerges a whole lifein- poetry. In this life-in-poetry the improbable, the extraordinary, the incongruous would grow in abundance; sincerity would no longer have an absolute referential value; what would be sought for its own sake would no longer be truth but living, living *otherwise* than in everyday mediocrity, living *outside* the track to which society assigns each of us.

This displacement of the system of moral and intellectual values on which centuries of Western culture were based has been and still is sometimes perceived as a perversion, or a biasing of human activity: an antihumanism.

Now that we can define it more clearly, differentiating it from other poetic movements that arose in Europe at the same time, the French Surrealist project once again makes possible and legitimizes all sorts of of behaviors and practices which are not completely *new*, but which had tended to become marginalized or encysted in the tissue of social life and poetic practice. Surrealism preaches the reversal of this tendency and the totalizing assumption of responsibility for all human behavior. Human violence had indeed been marginalized and neutralized by social life, by the norms of bourgeois capitalist society, but still rose up unpredictably and found an outlet in wars: in the example of the "just" war, as the French saw it, that was the butchery in Europe from 1914 to 1918. Surrealism proposes a recognition and a taking of responsibility for human violence in *revolt*, in every sense. It is on this very general if not symbolic level that we should understand the proclamation of Andre Breton's *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*:

> one can understand why Surrealism was not afraid to make for itself a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination, of sabotage according to rule, and why it still expects nothing save from violence. The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd.

But also, and without any contradiction, Surrealism tried to channel this potential energy, until then burning away "in the open air," into an action at once inventive and concerted:

> Once again, the question here is the whole problem of the transformation of energy. To distrust, as people do out of all proportion, the practical virtue of imagination is to be willing to deprive oneself at any cost of the help of electricity, in the hope of bringing hydroelectric power back to its absurd waterfall consciousness.

Also marginalized were eroticism and the powers of love in French society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Surrealism struggled constantly against the ruling hypocrisy on the double front of eroticism and the recognition of love. An article

on "research into sexuality" appears in the eleventh issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1928); daringly, clinically accurate for a time when Robert Desnos and Kra, his publisher, were brought into court for supposedly pornographic passages of *La liberté ou l'amour!* (1927). And there was a recognition of love's power to disturb the mind in the same issue of the review in which appear the answers to a "Questionnaire on Love," written in a tone of intense but unidealistic urgency. In the sixties, with no contradiction, Breton discounted "sex education" as a force for liberation in order to preserve love's power to disturb (Jean-Claude Silbermann, 1964, *Le surréalisme et la peinture*). Marginalized, too, were the practice of automatic writing and the use of dreams as the springboard of "inspiration"□both of which had fostered the writing of all sorts of great texts (from Horace Walpole's dream to Mallarmé's resonant obsession, "The penultimate is dead"), but neither of which had ever been explicitly advocated as a systematic exercise. In twentieth-century society, all sorts of magical behavior was veiled which the Surrealist group was to concentrate on exhibiting.

Surrealism therefore presents itself to us as a machine for *integration*□having refused the cultural divisions we have discussed, even the division between true and false, that have been the basis for language in the West since the nineteenth-century industrial and scientific revolution. This movement of integration implies a reversal in the manifestation of a function hitherto marginalized both in social life and in literary and philosophical tradition: I am referring here to the imagination. All Platonic philosophy shows the human being as a chariot guided by the intellect and carried along by the will, while imagination, the lead horse, tries to make the team run off its course. Before Surrealism, the "classical" and rationalist philosophical tradition in France, while insisting on the infinite character of will and its primary importance in defining human liberty, had thrust imagination to the side of life, of animation, of warmth, of vivacity, and thus "prepared our minds to recognize the primacy of the imagination, from the moment when life appears no longer as a secondary fact, but as a primary, primitive fact and as an indivisible energy." The meaning of the Romantic revolution (to which Surrealism is connected, from this point of view) was to give imagination a *cognitive* function.

But Romantic philosophy is a philosophy of being, in which imagination can rediscover paradise lost. The implicit philosophy of the French Surrealists, playing on the level of existence and not of essence, of beings and not of being, gives imagination a leading role: not to *re*cognize something that had previously been veiled, but to give existence to its own unprecedented forms. The power of (poetic) imagination becomes, by definition, practical. The play on words *must* become its own object (Duchamp), dreamed forms *must* be materialized in a tangible object (Breton, *Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité*.)

But if Surrealism is a machinery for integration, it is also, in the same impulse, or perhaps from another point of view, a machinery for negating. Surrealism negates everything implied by the divisions and prohibitions on which the majority cultural structure is founded: negating ready-made "orders," denying the pertinence of codes (social, but also stylistic, linguistic, and even logical). Surrealists therefore suspect everything that organizes the sense of things, the *direction* of things, in space and in time, especially any kind of taxonomy and any presentation of evidence that has

signification for us. Various games take shape: one consists of trying to capture the meaning of time, or of space, or of language, in the moment of their arising□in a kind of original space, with mythical evidence. The practice of automatic writing or drawing is a response to this intention: "to create a universe of words [or of forms, I should add] in which the universe of our practical and utilitarian perceptions will be completely disoriented." Is this a question of *either* refusing ready-made meanings *or* creating the conditions for the epiphany of a new meaning? What we have here is rather the two intentions at the same time, the first being the reverse side of the second. Another game (Bataille's own game, but, at one time, also André Masson's or Hans Bellmer's and the particular form eroticism takes in them) consists of negating the meaning of space and of the human body, by the introduction of all possible meanings in a dionysiac investment of space, even at the price of tearing apart and scattering the human body. The absence of "meaning" can also be seen in the practice of exhibiting as equivalent the two sides of things and of manifesting the plurality of meanings of signs: as if one had to show that "meaning" could be transparent, or that things and signs had the same value as their opposites. This is Marcel Duchamp's enterprise. For example, the *Female Fig Leaf* is the printed stamp, the "negative" of a feminine sexual organ, so that hiding the masculine organ□the role of the fig leaf in classical statuary□or exhibiting the feminine organ amounts to the same thing. In the realm of signs and letters, this is also the enterprise of Robert Desnos. And to this practice we must add the use Surrealism makes of the reverse of cultural content. I am thinking not only of Paul Eluard and Benjamin Péret's collection of updated proverbs (*152 proverbes mis au goût du jour*), but also of the reversal of the content of myths. In *Au château d'Argol*, Julien Gracq turns the myth of the Savior into a myth of the ambivalence of the mediator. Savior? Perhaps, but condemner as well.

This is a great attempt to demolish the sense of reality, stigmatized in 1947 by Jean-Paul Sartre, who put Surrealist thought in the same class as the (eternal) current of scepticism, emphasizing certain manifestations which he interprets as idealist. According to him, the Surrealists preach, particularly through automatic writing, the dissolution of the individual consciousness and also, by the symbolic annulment of "object-witnesses," the dissolution of the objectivity of the world.

But Surrealism responds to this threatening spread of idealism steadfastly with two firebreaks. One is political action, whose sparks we will see fly with some regularity in the historical part of this work; the other is the attempt, in the very heart of practical activity (ethical *or* artistic), to make *another* sense emerge, discovered by some people in and through pleasure and by others in and through the seizure of a projective desire (that is "objective chance"). Pleasure on one side, in which the body rediscovers its sense and sensibility rediscovers its comforts; on the other side, a new ethic of desire, in which time rediscovers an undeniable orientation.

Thus, the massive denial of prohibition, as it functions in Surrealism, is also a game of *displacement*. The aim□to take back the move that implicates human conduct and language in prohibitions and power structures□is turned upside down and becomes an immense confidence in "pure" desire, in "absolute" revolt, in the powers not of society but of the word. Now on the one hand this involves mythical terms ("pure" desire,

"absolute" revolt), which function as the horizon of an ever-disappointing quest, or as its completely fictional premises. But more especially, in the order of speech, this voice, which the Surrealists originally gave in its full strength to *everyone* ("Secrets of the Surrealist Magical Art," in the first *Manifesto*), has been appropriated by a *few*. Is this the necessity of experimentation or the displacement of prohibitions? It is the ineluctable ambiguity of Surrealism finally to have reinforced the privileged right of the speaking subject within an already privileged group. Surrealism has reinvented, in fact, as the privileged place in which the "miracle" arises, the *group* constituted around a dominant personality. This elective constellation reproduces, with its rites of initiation, exclusion, and rehabilitation, the characteristics of a microsociety ruled by magical thinking:

> The group never presents itself here as the picture of
> an open community, swollen with uncontrolled contagion;
> on the contrary, it is rather the idea that seems
> to have imposed itself on Breton from the beginning:
> the idea of a closed, separate *order*, of an
> exclusive companionship, of a phalanstery which tends to be
> shut in by vaguely magical walls (the significant idea
> of a "castle" is hovering about somewhere nearby).

Membership in the group, in what Jules Monnerot calls the *Bund*, is a central condition of Surrealist life in its French definition: the place in which sensibilities are exacerbated and creativity exalted. Thus the Surrealist word sometimes becomes collective, or impersonal, and does not de- pend on the power of the speaking object. It replaces this power by that of Surrealism.

Is this displacement of "divisions" and cleavages a perverse effect of preaching liberation, or is it the necessary means? The Surrealist reply is obviously the latter. Moreover, it would be inaccurate to see this displacement as parallel, or the various called-for prohibitions as symmetrical. The prohibitions linked to the functioning of the group life are explicit and artificial. The prohibitions denounced by Michel Foucault, which eternalize their own everyday immediacy, are implicit and even repressed by the communal consciousness. A language and behavior that refuse the division between reason and folly, as between truth and error, in favor of imagination, analogy, and desire are words and behaviors that insert within their process an awareness of their relativity. Their intoxicating liberty and the preciosity of their discoveries are bought by an awareness of their precariousness, which is no doubt very hard to maintain without the structuring, securing interplay of *other* divisions.

The origin of new hierarchies and new differences thus lies not only in group life but in certain Surrealist "values": the search for eros, the search for political and social liberty, the search for poetry. But the functioning of these "values" is quite different from what can be seen in a morality of prohibition. It involves, by repeated transgression, reinventing a certain orientation of the world. To be exact, for Michel Leiris, we must reinvent the sacred by transgressing the taboo, "a limit in regard to which things abandon the unoriented, amorphous character of the profane and polarize themselves into left and right." And Breton, after having incriminated Judeo-Christian religion as

both "blood-curdling and congealed," cannot help but subscribe to Francis Ponge's suggestion: "Perhaps the lesson we must learn is to abolish all values the instant we discover them." Value, poetic and practical, is discovered in the same moment in which it is transgressed.

We must therefore be wary of the oversimplified image of Surrealism as the breaker of prohibitions, a word on which Pierre de Massot puns when he calls his homage to Breton "Breton le septembriseur," the revolutionary: as a "pure" movement, free from any compromise with what has been repressed. But it is also too simple to see in Surrealism, as was fashionable in the criticism of the sixties, a locus for stubborn, confusional idealism, for the celebration of some sorts of vaguely conceived transgression□or, as those who are nostalgic for Dadaism believe, the proud fortress of a coercive morality whose high priest was supposedly André Breton. Some people think that the "fringe" figures and fellow travelers of Surrealism (expressions they use, as I do, in the least uncomplimentary way possible, to refer to figures like Georges Bataille and Antonin Artaud) should be relocated at the heart of the adventure of the avantgarde, lived by them in a *more* revolutionary way. Others believe that Bretonian hypocrisy must be unmasked, and authenticity tracked down amid the make-believe. Critical distance today permits us to relate the projects of some Surrealists to others without automatically establishing hierarchies and demarcating boundaries within and outside the historical group: in short, to weigh the differences with passion but without projecting preconceived schemas upon them.

Source: Jacqueline Chenieux-Gendron, "Prohibition and Meaning," in *Surrealism*, translated by Vivian Folkenflik, Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 1-8.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Peyre describes the importance of the Surrealist movement for the twentieth century, calling it "one of the most far-reaching attempts at changing, not only literature and painting, but psychology, ethics, and man himself."

Surrealism is likely to occupy a very considerable place in the intellectual history of the Western world in our century. Its significance as a literary phenomenon during the years 1920-1940 is unequalled. Ever since 1940, when powerful and occasionally unfair blows were dealt it by Sartre, as trenchant a polemicist as he is subtle a dialectician, Surrealism has staged a surprising comeback. It refused to concede victory to the Existentialist movement, which was impatient to bury it along with other hollow idols of an antediluvian or pre- Sartrian age. Breton returned from his American exile, shook his lion's mane in Montmartre, rallied new disciples, excommunicated others as he explained how only the mythical and magical ambitions of the Surrealists could bring any hope of salvation to a decrepit world. The release of Desire and the triumph of Love were the new levers which could move mountains of unbelief and hatred.

Several books appeared in the aftermath of World War II telling the history of the Surrealist group, delving into the intricacies of its successive negations and assertions, assessing the results of its pictorial and poetical achievements. A Surrealist exhibition at the Maeght Gallery in Paris in 1947 was more than a review of twenty-five years of Surrealist revolt; it brought home to many Parisians the tragic gravity which underlay most of the Surrealists' eccentricities and the bitter confirmation which their blasphemies had received from the war. Surrealism, which has received inadequate attention in this country, is one of the most far-reaching attempts at changing, not only literature and painting, but psychology, ethics, and man himself.

A span of fifteen years, *grande mortalis aevi spatium*, as Tacitus said of old, was enough to shift the emphasis from the turbulent aspect of the Surrealist movement to its deeper and lasting significance. In 1925, there were few indeed who saw in it anything more than a return to infantilism and nihilism. In 1940, its hoaxes and pranks were almost forgotten; one had to acknowledge that to Surrealism we owed one of the greatest prose writers of our age, André Breton; three or four of the purest poets□Eluard, Char and Desnos; and even an impure but occasionally brilliant one□Aragon; and several gifted painters. Surrealism was always more than a strictly literary and artistic movement; it influenced interior decoration and the film, our sensibility, our imagination, perhaps even our dreams. It left an imprint upon psychology and metaphysics; it spread to five or six European countries and to other continents. It may be that the adjective Surrealist will remain affixed to the whole era between the two World Wars as best describing its boldest ambition. It would be neither more nor less appropriate to that age than the word Symbolist as applied to the years 1880-1900.

For many a name may rightly be associated with Surrealism which never was actually on the select list of the initiates. Several of the early adepts broke away from the sanctum, or were rejected from it. Others, like Reverdy and Michaux, never actually

joined the group. But posterity will disregard such fine distinctions. It calls "Romantic" men like Balzac and Michelet who never belonged to any Romantic *chapelle*, others like Delacroix who vehemently rejected the label and would have nothing to do with Balzac and Baudelaire, others still like Vigny who soon estranged themselves from the *cénacles*. In spite of their probable protests, which death will some day silence, insuring the triumph of those modest but inevitable victors, the literary historians, we may consider as Surrealists the following men: Breton, Aragon, Soupault, Péret, Hugnet, Desnos, Crevel, Artaud, Naville, Tzara, Eluard, Michaux, Reverdy, Bataille, Prévert, Césaire, Gracq, Monnerot, Leiris. The list is far from exhaustive as J. H. Matthews points out in his article printed elsewhere in this issue. Among the painters are Miró, Max Ernst, Chirico, Tanguy, Picabia, Masson, Man Ray, Magritte, Matta, Arp, etc. And, of course, Salvador Dali□*quantum mutatus ab illo*! He has, since the heroic age, become the butt of Breton's most venomous arrows and, among the faithful, has assumed the mock scrambled name of Avida Dollars. Nonetheless, the number of other talents is impressive.

Iconoclasts, in France at least, take good care to find illustrious predecessors who posthumously sponsor their audacity. One of the most considerable achievements of Surrealism was its discovery that many writers and painters of the past had been Surrealists without knowing it: Sasseta, Hieronymus Bosch, Blake, Achim von Arnim, E. A. Poe, and others. They renovated the perspective in which some of the intercessors, or exciters, of Surrealism were henceforth to be viewed. It is now impossible, and hardly desirable, to deprive Sade, Nerval, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Jarry and Apollinaire of the new stature that Surrealism has lent them. They will eternally remain as precursors of Surrealism, as Rousseau is a forerunner of Romanticism and Baudelaire a herald of Symbolist experiments.

Among the ancestors whom they worshipped, the first place belongs to Lautréamont; for, at the beginning, the Surrealists remained strangely reticent about Rimbaud. The rehabilitation of that forgotten prose-poet is one of their durable achievements. "To that man belongs probably the chief responsibility for the present condition of poetry," Breton declared, implying that the condition was Surrealist, hence admirable. Maldoror, Lautréamont's hero, was hailed as "the one name flung across the centuries as an unadulterated challenge to all that on earth is stupid, base, and sickening." From him they learned a lesson of courage, finding guidance perhaps in a statement he had prophetically announced in 1869 before his mysterious disappearance at the age of twenty-four: "At this very hour, new flashes of lightning race through the intellectual atmosphere; what is wanted is only the courage to face them steadily." With Lautréamont as their *duce e signore* they descended into vertiginous pits of hell, wandered among devilish nightmares, systematically cultivated monstrous hallucinations. Jarry's bitter buffoonery took on a new meaning when the Surrealists reinterpreted it as a derision of the old bourgeois ramshackle structure which collapsed with the war of 1914. Ubu Roi was, for Breton, "an admirable creation for which I would give all the Shakespeares and the Rabelais in the world." Apollinaire's message, expressed less in his verse than in his *Cubist Painters* and in a masterly article on "Poets and the New Spirit," published three weeks after his death in *Mercure de France* (1st December 1918), was bequeathed to the Surrealists who were the first to divine its

significance. The role of the artist is to become inhuman; he must look for what in art has "most energy," scorn facile charm, leap forward and assert the claims of poetry and painting to explore the world of the future, claims which are prior to those of philosophy, psychology, and science. The enigmatic Jacques Vaché is the last patron saint of Surrealism; his influence on Breton was chiefly through conversation and the strangeness of his personality. For Vaché did not condescend to write anything, except a few striking war letters to his friend; he lived with a woman to whom he never said a word, only kissing her hand in noble silence after she had poured tea; he derided literature as a vain occupation ("aiming so conscientiously in order to miss the mark") and asserted that all was vain in life. He renounced it in 1919 when, along with two young Americans, he absorbed an inordinate dose of opium.

We shall not be concerned here with the history of the Surrealist sect, with its confused political affiliations, with its painters, nor with any attempt to define the claims of the Surrealists as they would themselves view them or wish to see them defined. We would rather, with the help of a few quotations and some acquaintance with the essential Surrealist texts, endeavor to point out the deeper significance of Surrealism. Eccentricities, excesses, childish mysticism, an obsession with fortuitous coincidences in life, and sheer mediocrity in paintings, films, and poems are to be found in abundance in Surrealism; they will be forgotten. The credit side of the movement is important enough for us to disregard some ephemeral littleness and to forgive some adolescent provocations.

Every literary or philosophical movement may be said to include a negative and a positive aspect. The two are developed simultaneously, but may be envisaged separately for clarity's sake. The young men who rally under some new banner agree with relative ease on what they negate; their hunger for destruction is all-embracing. They joyfully trample under their feet the legacy of previous generations. It is harder for them to find a common ground for their positive assertions. If they have any personality, they are likely to listen to their own temperaments and to plunge into heresy if a set of positive dogmas is proposed to their literary faith.

The negative side of the Surrealist revolt was stressed by the adepts of the group with a ferocious and systematic intransigence which, in the third decade of the century, caused the hair of many a bourgeois to stand on end. Yet even then it took no exceptional clearsightedness to sense that a desperate search for a new faith lay beneath the vehement blasphemies of Breton and his friends. Their uncommon energy would not long be satisfied by mere fist-shaking. The Surrealist revolt is to be compared to the Cartesian *tabula rasa*, or brushing aside of previous confused growth in order to lay new foundations for a sounder and more ambitious structure. There always remains much logic behind any French attempt at illogic and an almost immoral passion for morals behind any Gallic denunciation of conventional ethics. The Surrealists are no exception. They are logicians and moralists primarily.

Their revolt, which appeared to be undiscriminating and universal, differed in fact from the nihilism of Dada. It concentrated on three targets which we may define as ethics and religion, the social and political realm, and literary conventions.

In the matter of religion, Breton never wavered; and extremely few, if any, of the former Surrealists ever joined the ranks of Catholic converts. There was the curious conversion to Surrealism in 1926 of the priest, Gengenbach, which provides one of the most ludicrous episodes in the movement's history. Gengenbach had previously fallen in love with an actress and consequently been unfrocked by his bishop. But the actress found him no longer attractive when he ceased to wear a cassock; the former priest, in despair, went with suicidal intentions to the lake at Gerardmer where he glanced at a Surrealist review and saw the light. This curious individual attempted to reconcile Surrealism and Christianity. He failed, ended by denouncing Breton as Lucifer, and turned again to the faith of his childhood. He is not typical, for the Surrealists' unconcern with God is even more pronounced than that of the Existentialists.

In an interview, Breton even spurned the Nietzschean phrase "the death of God" as meaningless, since "to die, one should first have existence." Yet, like many adversaries of religion, like Nietzsche himself in his tragic *Ecce Homo*, Breton is an impious rival of Christ rather than a negator. His disciple Monnerot did not err when he asserted that Surrealism aims at a total transformation such as had only been attempted by religions; and Breton liked to quote Tolstoy's words: "What truth can there be, if there is death?" A religious critic, Michel Carrouges, writing in the Dominican periodical *La Vie Intellectuelle* in November 1945, exemplifies the reactions of several latitudinarian French Catholics when he declares:

Surrealism is no empty hoax; it is not necessarily demoniacal
as is sometimes imagined; it is a great invention
of the modern world still in its infancy. . . .
It is perhaps the most extraordinary movement of the
human spirit . . . the most terrible mental explosive
in existence.

On the moral plane, too, the Surrealist pronouncements were calculated to shake our complacency; they were occasionally accompanied by determined and perverse attempts at demoralization of the youth□with lamentable success. "Morality, that weakness of the brain," a line of Rimbaud's *Season in Hell* had exclaimed. To the Surrealists, moral censorship practiced against the impulses of our unconscious had to be abolished in order that a new peace, according to Freudian therapeutics, might invade our being, and still more in order to liberate our imagination. Breton and Eluard acclaimed Sade as the prophet of the new ethical crusade. But they were soon to draw the lineaments of a new ethics, far removed front hedonist indulgence and resting on a lofty conception of desire and of love. When Breton broke with the Communists, it was clearly on moral grounds and because "moral sense was undeniably the human reality which their party trampled daily and most gleefully underfoot." Much earlier, in his volume *Les Pas perdus* (1924), that immoralist had confessed his love for all moralists, and added: "The moral question preoccupies me. . . . *La morale* is the great peacemaker. Even to attack her is to pay her a tribute. In her did I always find my most exalting inspiration."

In the field of politics, the fierceness of the Surrealist protest is best understood if one remembers that it originated during World War I. And in many ways that war shook the minds of men more powerfully than did World War II. For it burst out after a prolonged era of peace and material progress during which Europeans had become accustomed to celebrate civilization and science as undeniably beneficient. Suddenly they were faced with the glaring bankruptcy of science, of logic, of their faith in progress, of philosophy and literature which failed to protest against the great massacre and often undertook to justify it. The Surrealists were impressed by the gaping abyss which separated man's power to change the world through science and his utter inability to change himself. They became convinced that there must exist, behind what we call reality or behind the conventional layers of our minds, forces which control us. Surrealism would attempt to discover those forces and to liberate them, if they could be harnessed for man's benefit.

To the Surrealists, and especially to Breton, we are indebted for some of the most moving and intelligent denunciations of war and its glamor. The cure for the monstrous evil is to be sought in the liberation of the imagination, in fulfilling by other means the boundless needs for childhood, for joy, for risk and for play, for intense emotions, which insidiously lead men to consent to collective murder. The Russian Revolution appeared to the Surrealists, as it did to many liberals in Europe, as the great hope for a new era of justice and fraternity. Their disillusion was all the more bitter when that Revolution turned to nationalism and the worship of Stakhanovist efficiency. Their sympathies went to Trotsky, who had proved understanding toward literature and had boldly announced that "the Revolution undertakes to conquer the right of all men, not only to bread, but to poetry." "Bread and also roses," Jaurès had, before 1914, demanded for the working classes. From 1930 or thereabout, most of the Surrealists turned against Stalinist Communism and rejected a revolution deprived of idealism and "serving to improve that abominable thing, earthly comfort" (Breton). But they did not desist from their fight against any conservatism, whether it came from the right or from the left. "More than ever do I believe in the necessity of transforming the world in the direction of the rational (more exactly, of the surrational) and of justice," Breton declared in an important interview given to *Une Semaine dans le monde*. (31st July 1948).

But it is easier in France to rise in revolt against political institutions, social and ethical conventions, and, of course, against any government, than to be a literary rebel. Most liberals, from Voltaire to P. L. Courier and Anatole France, most radicals, socialists, and anarchists had always remained the most orthodox guardians of the purity of the French language and timid conservatives in matters of taste. Breton, Aragon, and Eluard have not "twisted the neck" of the French language; they have paid frequent tribute to their predecessors and have at times revived among us the shades of the Troubadours or the cadences of seventeenth century prose. But they dared attack pitilessly realism and its platitudinous dullness, eloquence always lurking behind poetical writing, above all logic which, under the guise of the detective novel, has staged an insidious offensive in the last three decades; for the detective novel is naively based upon the assumption that there is a cause or an agent for all that happens, and it banishes the inexplicable and the gratuitous from our world. Against the novel and its attraction for money-minded writers of today Surrealism restored the claims of poetry. Breton saw the novel as a

prosaic game of chess with a contemptible adversary, "man, whoever he is, being only a mediocre adversary." He added scornfully, "the ambition of novelists does not reach very far."

But Surrealism did more than restore poetry. It rebelled against the very notion of culture and revealed to many moderns the strange beauty of Negro sculpture and of African and Polynesian masks. It ridiculed the concept of good taste which tends to constitute a barrier to any innovation and systematically kills the annexation of provinces of ugliness to the realm of the beautiful. The Surrealists reveled in the epic monstrosities of bad taste "in the bad taste of our age, I endeavor to go farther than anyone else," Breton once wrote and extracted new flowers of evil from that horrifying paradise hitherto reserved for concierges, *pompiers*, and other philistines. The last stronghold of the élite, which is its conviction that its esthetic values would survive wars, revolutions, and financial loss of caste, that good taste is the one tyrannical evidence before which men will always bow, was stormed in the Surrealist attacks.

"Only the word liberty can still produce a state of exaltation in man." This famous cry of Breton provides a key to a just appreciation of the positive achievement of Surrealism. Liberty, or rather the pursuit of a total liberation, is the keyword of its doctrinal pronouncements.

Surrealism wanted to liberate the subconscious. Its direction was thus clearly parallel to that taken earlier or at the same time by Freud, Proust, and Joyce. Unlike Proust, however, it avoided superimposing a complex structure of didactic reasoning and of refined analysis upon an attempt to capture those mysterious moments when man, escaping the inexorable flow of time, reaches the "peak of sovereignty." Unlike Freud, to whom Breton owed much, the Surrealists did not advocate bringing to the light of clear consciousness, and dissipating eventually, the strange growth of complexes in our turgid depths. Much was made, in the early stages of Surrealism, of automatic writing, uncontrolled by reason or by critical spirit, which gave itself out as spoken and written thought seized in its spontaneous immediacy. In fact, the leading Surrealists never abused that perilous device. Their verse and their prose give evidence of elaborate composition, of skillful combination of effects, of a restrained choice made among the riches of the unconscious. But their originality lay precisely in having first proceeded to a courageous clearing of all that was worn out and effete in literature, and in having made a fresh selection from a new and vast accummulation of materials hitherto unexplored. Literature tends to utilize passively only the stones already quarried, hewn and polished by robust predecessors; it must periodically spurn such tempting and neatly arranged materials and carve out its own rock. In so doing, Surrealism occasionally hit upon sparkling gems. Its will to innovate was not a mere effort after originality; it was a resolute attempt to explore a virgin expanse in or under man's mind and to dig into the hidden layers in which the civilized creature cannot dissemble or lie, as he does in his so-called " rational," or diligently controlled life.

The second ambition of Surrealism was to open up to literature the domain of dreams, and even of insanity, strangely neglected but for a few feeble trials by classical and modern writers to depict dreams of tragic characters, Hamlet's, Hermione's, or Tasso's

methodical madness. In the dream, the Surrealists respected what Reverdy called "a freer and more uninhibited form of thought." They reveled in its inconsistencies, in its capricious disregard of causality, in the vividness of its images. They explored its symbolic secrets as revealing remnants of a primitive mentality only imperfectly repressed in ourselves. Not a little of the beauty of Eluard's and Char's poetry is due to its dreamlike atmosphere. Breton went farther and resumed Nerval's centuryold attempt to "direct his eternal dream instead of passively submitting to it." His volume, *Les Vases communicants*, contains the most splendid description of fantastic dreams written since Nerval's record of his madness in *Aurélia*. Dreams are no longer the privilege of sleep; day-dreams are no longer mild, idyllic reveries. The realms of night and of day, sleep and wakefulness, hold a constant and fruitful interchange; the dream is respected and its luxuriance of images faithfully transcribed, while it is also interpreted and analyzed by a mystic trained in physiology and psychology. "I stand in the hall of a castle, a dark lantern in my hand, and I illuminate the sparkling armors one after the other." Thus Breton, the former medical intern, describes himself in the opening pages of his *Vases communicants*.

The twofold liberation of the subconscious and of the oneiric domain leads to a third: the unchaining of the imagination. The Surrealists are the faithful heirs of Baudelaire and Rimbaud and, beyond them, of Coleridge, Blake, Novalis, and Achim von Arnim. They have enthroned the "magical and synthetic power" as the goddess of their works; and to them, as to the English Romantics, the " renascence of wonder" became the highest achievement of the poet, recapturing the gifts of childhood in adult life.

Through an apparently spontaneous flow of images, Surrealism thaws the crust of blunted perceptions and of deductive reasoning which separates us from our deepest life and from the remnants of childhood buried in our subconscious. It maps out whole archipelagoes long submerged in a sea of dulled habit. It plunges below our intellectual vision of the world and beyond our sensory data; it seems to "see into the life of things" and to forge new and closer links between ourselves and socalled inanimate objects. The normal translation of those uncharted lands into which Blake and Rimbaud had ventured is effected through a new metaphoric langauge. One of the chief claims to greatness of Surrealist poetry lies, in our opinion, in its imagery. That poetry has replenished the threadbare stock of metaphors by which Hugo's successors and French Symbolists had long been content to live. Reverdy, a poet whom the Surrealists have always respected even though he did not join their ranks, wrote:

> An image is a pure creation of the mind. . . It springs
> from the linking of two realities more or less distant.
> The more unexpected and just the relations between
> the two realities thus linked are, the more powerful
> the image, the greater its emotive force and its poetical
> truth.

The poetry of Breton and Eluard□and even that of minor figures like Tzara and Hugnet□ abounds in rare and fresh images which seem to create the object anew for

our blunted senses and to allow a dreamworld to glide gently into our consciousness, first shaken, then voluptuously lulled, by the discontinuous flow of Surrealist metaphors.

The Surrealists' endeavor to bring about a total renewal of the very mainsprings of literature has nowhere proved more courageous, and more startlingly successful, than in their treatment of love.

Love between man and woman had almost disappeared from literature after 1920. It happened that the leading figures of that literary era□Proust, Gide, Cocteau, and even Montherlant and Julien Green□were only slightly interested in heterosexual relations or in the "promotion of woman," as sociologists were pleased to call it. The war had, moreover, created many causes of friction or of misunderstanding between the sexes, and the "virile fraternity," cherished by Malraux and Saint- Exupéry, appeared nobler to many former or future soldiers than any sentimental and intellectual union with women, with whom young men often felt out of tune. An affectation of brutality and of cynicism had replaced the former rhetorical delusions of romantic love. Women, by winning new rights and meeting men on an equal footing in many a profession, seemed to have waived their former privilege as inspirers of artists and of poets.

Surrealism rehabilitated woman and love poetry in our midst. It would be naive to present the Surrealists as Platonic worshippers of spiritual beauty, or as hypocritical enough to conceal eroticism behind romantic adoration. They had read Sade even more than Musset. There is more Petrarchist inspiration, in Eluard especially, than there is Platonism. Yet they have ceased to exile woman from poetry, as Rimbaud and his followers had attempted to do, or to worship and abuse her alternately as a vessel for all the treacheries of Satan, in Baudelarian fashion. Aragon's war poetry, more faithful to the Surrealist creed than his former friends were willing to acknowledge, sang the most rapturous hymns chanted to woman since the Romantics. Eluard may well rank among the three or four supreme love poets in the French language. His theme is a continuous transfiguration of woman in her body and in her mysterious and dreamy charm.

Toute tiède encore du linge annulè
Tu fermes les yeux et tu boules
Comme bouge un chant qui naît
Vaguement mais de partout
Odorante et savoureuse
Tu dépasses sans te perdre
Les frontières de ton corps
Tu as enjambé le temps
Te voici femme nouvelle
Révélée à l'infini.
(Une Longue Pensée amoureuse)

Breton's love poetry does not rise to such felicitousness of musical language, but one of his finest prose works, *L'Amour fou*, is devoted to a triumphant exaltation of love as the great constructive force. He does not indulge in any such mysticism of the flesh as do

intoxicated Puritans like D. H. Lawrence and inverted woman-haters like Henry Miller. But he rarely chides men for stupidly despairing of love, for imagining, once their youth is over, that love lies behind them, in their brief adolescent years, while it is there "waiting for them, in front of them." Desire, or Eros, the old Hesiodic name of the earliest of the gods, must be emancipated and become the level which will achieve men's imaginative liberation from the mechanical forces which have made him a willing slave to tyranny and to war.

Surrealism, however, was more than an exploration of new literary realms or a rediscovery of the old theme of love. Beyond its literary or pictorial claims, it was and is a metaphysical perception of the tragic sense of human life and a desperate attempt to leap beyond the bounds usually assigned to human reason. In this respect, not only is it parallel to its jealous rival, Existentialism, but it must be linked, willy-nilly, with other significant movements of our age, whether religious (Kierkegaard) or para-religious (Kafka, Malraux, Camus), equally obsessed with the all-pervading tragedy of man's fate in a world from which man had vainly tried to banish tragedy.

The originality of the French Surrealists lies here in their sincerity. For, behind their youthful pranks and their delight in mischief and mystification, they were in truth passionately intense young men, venturing to the verge of insanity and suicide. One of their former members, Antonin Artaud, who died in 1948, spent years, as did Nerval, in an insane asylum; Eluard, always lucid and one of the most classical of poets, had to take refuge in another insane asylum and to pose as one of the deranged inmates in order to escape capture by the Germans for his activity in the French Resistance. Vaché, a precursor, had ended his life in 1919; one of the young Surrealist affiliates, Rigaut, killed himself in 1929, after writing a last message to his companions: "You are all poets and I am on the side of death." René Crevel, the gifted and promising author of a disturbing book, *Etes-vous fous?*, resorted to suicide in 1935 as "the most final of all solution." Benjamin Péret, one of the earliest inspirers of the group, denounced modern society and lived in solitude. Breton tirelessly branded as cowardice the compromise which accepts the present conditions, social and metaphysical, of our existence. In "Poetic Evidence" (in *Donner à voir*, Gallimard, 1939), a remarkable essay, Eluard declared: "Somber are the truths which appear in the work of true poets; but truths they are, and almost everything else is lies."

But Surrealist literature does not wallow in pessimism. It never consents to despair, never delights in reviling man as naturalism and even Parnassian poetry had done. It plunges into the abysses of man's unconscious only in order to emerge with reasons for living more imaginatively, more authentically. It illuminates whatever may be sordid and animal in us with the rays of poetry and of dream. After opposing an inflexible *no* to the insidious temptation to accept man's fate as it is, it attempts to carry man far above his mediocre rational self into an impetuous dash of revolt. The crucial Surrealist assertion of this kind was made in 1930 in the second Surrealist manifesto. It asked man to think outside of and beyond the principle of contradiction, to break the shackles of logic, to bring out of opposite objects and contradictory concepts a deeper unity. Hegelian and Marxist dialectics was not unknown to Breton when he wrote these lines, but he leaped beyond their technical subtleties into the purer regions of poetical faith:

Everything leads to the belief that there exists a certain
point in the mind from which life and death, the
real and the imaginary, the past and the future, what
is communicable and what is incommunicable, the
high and the low, cease to be perceived as contradictory.
Vainly would one assign to Surrealist activity
another ambition than the hope to determine
this point.

Again, in *Les Vases communicants*, Breton proclaimed:

The poet of the future will surmont the depressing
idea of an irreparable divorce between dream and action.
He will offer the magnificent fruit of the tree
with tangled roots and will persuade those who taste
it that there is no bitterness in it.

There, in our opinion, lies the deeper significance of Surrealism. On one side, the movement has staged an ardent revolt against all literary conventions, and chiefly against effete images and conventional rhetoric which encumber a great mass of nineteenth century literature. It has striven toward a language deprived of eloquence and of sumptuous draperies, closely molded on reality or surreality. In this sense, Surrealism is only one aspect of the most determined attempt of French literature since Rimbaud and Mallarmé: an attempt to pierce the screen of language and to render words so transparently lucid and pure as to let objects and feelings meet us directly. Eluard, Reverdy, and Char, the supreme poets of Surrealism, have accomplished what critics like Paulhan, Blanchot, and Picon would define as the great obsession of the moderns: the creation of a literature that is nonliterary. In its form, Surrealism is thus far remote from outdated Romanticism.

In its content, however, Surrealism must be regarded as a powerful Romantic offensive. Our age fondly imagines that it has buried the illusions of the Romantics beneath its own positive preoccupations, its cynicism, its resigned acceptance of man as a creature made up of animal impulses. It has only momentarily repressed its Romanticism and is unwittingly preparing a tidal wave of Romantic revolt, which is likely to put an end to all the pseudoscientitic claims of the novel, criticism, psychology, and sociology of the last few decades. The recent evolution of Surrealism is, in this connection, prophetic. Julien Gracq, celebrated by Breton as the most brilliant new recruit of Surrealism, has revived the Romantic novel of the English pre-Romantics. Eluard's late poetry delights in sensuous litanies in praise of woman which recall the Romantic bards even more than the metaphysical poets, for irony is not among the goddesses courted by the Surrealists. Péret proclaimed Romanticism as the flint great revolutionary movement in poetry. And Breton has become the apostle of mystical union with nature as superior to any knowledge of nature:

Scientific knowledge of nature can only be valuable
if *contact* with nature through poetical, I would even

say mythical, ways is re-established. (*Le Figaro*,
October 1946).

Like the Romantics, the Surrealists, obsessed with frantic revolt, with the breaking of all moral and social conventions, occasionally attracted by suicide, have in truth aspired toward a total renewal of man. They have aimed at provoking first a grave intellectual and moral crisis in modern man, so as to shake him out of his complacency. Then they forced the locomotive of the human spirit off the rails of logic and reason and lured imagination to the heights where it can soar freely and meet the unknown, away from the mediocre and dull province of what is known and understood rationally. The impatience of Breton and his friends with ordinary, contented man springs from a boundless faith in the possibilities which man ignores or represses in himself. Their aim is not to create a Nietzschean superman, but to give noble and affirmative answer to the Nietzschean question echoed by M. Teste: "Of what is man capable?" "A man who has never tried to make himself equal to the gods is less than a man," said the creator of M. Teste. If he is right, the Surrealists have proved to be more than ordinary mortals. They have asserted most loudly in our century man's ability to change himself, and the extraordinary, almost magical, role that literature can play in effecting that change. To quote André Breton once more:

Human life would not be for many of us the disappointment
it is if we constantly felt ourselves capable
of accomplishing acts above our strength. It
seems that miracle itself can be within our reach.

Source: Henri Peyre, "The Significance of Surrealism," in *Yale French Studies*, No. 31, May 1964, pp. 23-36.

Topics for Further Study

The surrealists's core philosophy involved the use of automatic writing and other methods to attempt to bypass the conscious mind and tap into the subconscious. Close your eyes and try to clear your mind of all thought, then open your eyes and write a poem, writing down the first thoughts that come into your mind. Write a report on whether or not you think you tapped into your subconscious mind.

Communism has a complex history, involving many countries. Research three important events in the history of communism and write a short paper about these events, explaining how the events came about and what effect they had on communism and the world at large.

The horrible casualties of World War I were due in a large part to the reliance of both sides on trenches at the Western Front. Research the origins of trench warfare, including how and when each side created their respective trenches, and what effect fighting in the trenches had on soldiers. Using this information, write a few sample journal pages from the perspective of a soldier in the trenches.

André Breton was one of many writers and artists captured by the Germans in World War II and interrogated. Eventually he was let go and fled to the United States. Find another writer or artist who was interrogated by German forces during the war and write a one-page biography about him or her.

Surrealism has influenced many other arts since it was founded in the 1920s, including commercial arts like advertising. Find an advertisement from the last decade you feel has a surrealist quality and write a short report explaining why.

Compare and Contrast

1910s: Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, known to his supporters by the name Lenin, leads the Russian revolution, overthrowing the czar and instituting a dictatorship of the proletariat□or common people□led by himself. Over the next several years Lenin works to build the Communist Party into an organization that can effect worldwide revolution, and tries to get all separate communist parties to commit to the Soviet cause.

Today: Many formerly communist countries, including the former Soviet Union, currently employ democratic systems of government.

1910s: During World War I, in an effort to rally support at home, various countries on both sides rely on printed propaganda and other methods of psychological warfare that demonize their enemy.

Today: After an attack on the World Trade Center in New York City and on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., that leads to war in Afghanistan, Hollywood capitalizes on American citizens' patriotism by releasing a number of war-themed films.

1910s: American poet John Masefield accompanies the United States volunteer ambulance service in France, sending many letters to his wife that record his graphic observations of the effects of war. His writings are published in *The Old Front Line* (1917) and other books.

Today: As the United States wages war in Afghanistan, people receive up-to-the-minute updates from on-site reporters, whose video footage and commentary is transmitted to the public through radio, satellite television, and the Internet.

What Do I Read Next?

Linda Bolton's *Art Revolutions: Surrealism* (2000) features brief text overviews of the surrealist art movement, including reproductions of famous works. The book also contains a time line and museum information.

The Interpretation of Dreams (1901), Sigmund Freud's landmark book, was one of the main influences on French Surrealism. The book outlines his theory of the unconscious forces in dreams.

Surrealist Women: An International Anthology (1998), edited by Penelope Rosemont and belonging to the Surrealist Revolution series, features nearly three hundred surrealist texts by ninety-six women from twenty-eight countries. The anthology, the first of its kind, also discusses the significance of women's contributions to Surrealism and gives a basic primer on the ideas behind the movement.

Fault Lines: Cultural Memory and Japanese Surrealism (2001), by Miryam Sas, explores how the ideas and practices of Surrealism and other avant-garde styles of writing were transferred to Japan in the early twentieth century.

Further Study

Caws, Mary Ann, ed., *Surrealist Painters and Poets*, MIT Press, 2001.

This book offers a large selection of reprinted texts from surrealist painters and poets, including some rare letters and essays that are hard to find elsewhere.

Levitt, Annette Shandler, *The Genres and Genders of Surrealism*, St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Levitt places Surrealism at the center of modernism and explores the philosophical stance of Surrealism, the creative rebellion that was more than a new way of looking at things.

Rose, Alan, *Surrealism and Communism: The Early Years*, Peter Lang Publishing, 1991.

At one point, Surrealism was linked with communism. Rose explores this link between the two ideologies and how it was established and broken.

Walz, Robin, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century France*, University of California Press, 2000.

Walz focuses on the little-known influences of French Surrealism, which include fantastic popular fiction, and sensationalistic journalism□part of the darker, more rebellious, side of mass culture.

Bibliography

Balakian, Anna, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 65: *French Novelists, 1900-1930*, Gale Research, 1988. pp. 20-28.

Breton, André, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, University of Michigan Press, 1972, pp. 7, 11, 14, 26, 29-30, 33, 38.

□, "My Wife with Her Wood-Fire Hair," in *Modern French Poets*, edited by Wallace Fowlie, Dover, 1992, p. 153.

Brown, Frederick, "Creation versus Literature: Breton and the Surrealist Movement," in *Modern French Criticism: From Proust and Valéry to Structuralism*, edited by John K. Simon, University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 136.

Caws, Mary Ann, *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism*, Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 5.

Davies, Norman, *Europe: A History*, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 877, 901, 903, 962.

Desnos, Robert, "From *Deuil pour Deuil*," in *Modern French Poets*, edited by Wallace Fowlie, Dover, 1992, pp. 202-03.

□, "Meeting," in *Modern French Poets*, edited by Wallace Fowlie, Dover, 1992, p. 207.

Eluard, Paul, "First in the World," in *Modern French Poets*, edited by Wallace Fowlie, Dover, 1992, p. 177.

□, "What the Laborer Says Is Always beside the Point," in *Modern French Poets*, edited by Wallace Fowlie, Dover, 1992, pp. 179, 181.

□, "You Rise Up," in *Modern French Poets*, edited by Wallace Fowlie, Dover, 1992, p. 183.

Gascoyne, David, *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, City Lights Books, 1982, pp. 57, 91.

La Charité, Virginia A., *Twentieth-Century French Avant- Garde Poetry, 1907-1990*, French Forum Publishers, Incorporated, 1992, p. 83.

Lemaitre, Georges, *From Cubism to Surrealism in French Literature*, Harvard University Press, 1947, pp. 212-13.

Matthews, J. H., *Surrealist Poetry in France*, Syracuse University Press, 1969, p. 17.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Literary Movements for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literary Movements for Students (LMfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LMfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LMfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LMfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LMfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LMfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LMfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literary Movements for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literary Movements for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literary Movements for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LMfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LMfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literary Movements for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literary Movements for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Literary Movements for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535