

# Surrealism—Or The Reason for Unreason

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“Le premier qui vit un chameau  
S'enfuit à cet objet nouveau”

**W**ITH the lapse of time events puzzling in their day have a way of falling into line so that the most mad-cap and “unpredictable” ones will eventually, like good soldiers, goose-step with their more sedate colleagues along the orderly paths of history. The accident or fancy of yesterday is labeled and neatly shelved as quickly as a new present is begotten. Those tempted to resent the advent of surrealism as a jog to their established routine, instead of concentrating on the strangeness of the new-born might well be thankful for the way in which, simply by being, it heaped and bound together the diverse personalities and tendencies of yesterday into a coherent whole. We can refer now to this thing of the past, the art style of the first third of the 20th century, with the same pedagogical clarity with which we speak of a school of 18th century painting. Such generalizations are bound to falsify but come within the historian's right. It may become history that modern art up to 1930 partook of those sturdy common sense qualities, this squatty code of ethics which took the name of cubism.

The main creed of cubism was a belief in the existence of the picture as such, its autonomous right to live independent of its subject matter in the same way, contemporary critics would point out, that a cow does not have to look like a tree to claim a right to existence. Paint was to be appreciated as pigment, the canvas was no longer the open window of impressionism but hemp or linen, woven and primed; the stretcher itself with its four square angles and the geometric relation of

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its sides commanded the inter-relation of lines and colors that were to come into being, bound within its rectangle. Cubist painters liked to think of themselves as craftsmen whose job it was to construct out of this wood, canvas and pigments some objects called paintings, not illusive visions but possessed of a reality like that of a chair or a table; this painter-craftsman, as craftsmen will, took to soliloquizing about tools, permanency, recipes; mastering the craft of painting came to depend on technique, the respective merits of thick or thin layers, the memorizing of geometric formulas such as the "golden section." The cubist sighing for an era wherein the guild member willed to his apprentice a set of fixed rules to work by, attempted by a cool analysis of the works of the past to recover those mathematical recipes and technical turns which he believed to be synonymous with greatness. What the painter had a right to assume as craftsman was elaborated upon, swallowed bait, hook and line by the critics who in turn educated their public into this religion of art from the maker's point of view—one of fetichism in all that concerns the physical body of paint, textures that the finger can verify, proportions that a tape-measure will fathom.

The poor layman who through the centuries had appreciated pictures in terms of landscapes, seascapes, still-lives and portraits had those switched from under his nose by the cubist critic and was instead given, as object for his love, anonymous rectangles dressed in a harlequin's coat of lines and colors. At first irked by this meager fare, the public later became elated by the assumed knowledge that they were no longer mere laymen but shared the artist's most esoteric point of view. A reference to subject-matter came to be shunned as a plebeian faux-pas. A Burial of Christ by Titian, apples by Cézanne, were judged identical because they contained similar arrangements of circles and angles. It is true that a residue of subject-matter still lingered, a battered guitar or a melted bottle, but imprisoned solidly behind the cross-bars of the "abstract" design; even emotional response to line and the dramatic sugges-

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tions of color were stifled; man was allowed to react to paint in a muscular way only, as a bull does to red.

This very excess made the job of the younger men easier, gave a good platform to the reaction. Young enthusiasts found it easy to laugh at the older cubist whose eye remained glued to lines, angles and colors with the narcissist attention of the fakir for his navel. Their elders were wrong after all when they decreed that a picture was an object and a painter a craftsman. For of what use would be the physical body of paint if not as a spring-board for this most noble and by now almost forgotten ingredient of art called inspiration, this metaphysical spring without which the art object could not tick. To this wealth of correlations, emotions, moods that their elders had denied, the surrealists would give free rein. An inspiration or dæmon, the wind of whose passage had materialized a century before in the embattled wig of the bohème, would take hold of them anew. The great *leit-motive* of the romantics, life, death and love, were to be unleashed, but brought up to date within the scientific tenets of Freudian terminology: those eternal themes were now "complexes" with Greek aliases full of Germanic implications. Unlike the sibyl of old through whom the gods spoke, and unlike the artist of yesteryear whom passion swayed, the surrealist was to be dominated by his subconscious. His picture was to be a stage on which this nether world would perform.

In practice this meant that after a lapse of some 60 years during which the art-for-art slogan reigned, painting was to come back to its old purpose of telling stories. The public was by now fed up with sharing the personal failures and victories of the painter struggling within the intricacies of his craft, and sighed with relief when addressed by the painter of anecdotes who faced his public squarely, catered to the layman in his own language.

The return to subject-matter is both vital and healthy. That pigment and canvas should be transformed into sunlight, moonlight, relatives or grazing cows is magical to the utmost. That

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such an amazing fact had been taken for granted by generations of innocent-minded onlookers had dulled this truth to the point where critics of the cubist generation tabooed enjoyment of subject-matter as a show of childish ignorance. It became the surrealist's easy lot to exalt representation as being art's most magical function. That painters and critics found themselves, in so doing, singing from the same pew as all the academicians of the past did not dim their enthusiasm, for such oldsters as Meissonier and Gérôme, careful and horrid painters that they are, had been forgotten for so long and their works hidden with such shame that their rediscovery held a thrill of newness like the discovery of a Grünewald or a Greco.

Most of us have seen, in our youth or at public auctions, some of those obsolete pictures smoothly finished and entirely credible, of brightly uniformed soldiers galloping heroically to their death at a lusty shout of "Vive Napoléon!" or of pink and red cardinals at a table, or (as in the case of our own G. J. Brown) of well-washed bootblacks emoting prettily. Dissimilar as their subject may be from the pictures of a Dali, a close bond links them together. Both Meissonier and Dali paint to bring forth their subject-matter and both, through a desire to make their anecdote convincing, came to adopt this same patient style, known as photographic, which attempts to be no style at all and is eminently suited to story-telling. It is strange to realize that for generations laymen approved of it as the only reasonable way to paint. It was considered a show of common sense that Meissonier in his great thirst for objective rendering would pour, one spring, sugar by the ton on the fields of Poissy to transform them into the Russian steppes needed for his picture of the retreat from Moscow. His great renown enabled him to borrow from the Musée des Invalides the original redingote of the Emperor. On the roof of his studio he would wear it himself, climb astride a saddle propped on a carpenter's horse and, facing a mirror, carefully duplicate, palette in hand and in a storm real this time, the snow-flakes melting on the august relic. Dali copying a lamb chop perched on his

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wife's shoulder illustrates, on a pettier scale, the same love of objectivity by which man, trying to impose commonplace rendering on art, can attempt it only through uncommon antics.

The surrealist's comeback to an academic technique shows that he understands his job as a story-teller. Before him Boecklin, having selected disturbing imageries for his theme, chose also to work them out in cold blood. The more improbable the subject-matter the more impressive will be its photographic rendering, a trick already well worn out by ghost-story writers. But this problem of anecdote painting, which now faces the surrealist as it used to face the academician, involves more problems than the choice of the correct story and the correct model. A small-scale and patient rendering, quaint boxed frames with glass and plush, are successful inasmuch as they make the surrealist picture secede from the corporeal appearance of the large-scale, broadly-brushed painting that preceded it, but it sidesteps the main issue. Painting is primarily a visual art. Lines, angles, and colors are the tools with which the painter plies his trade; their qualities, affinities and oppositions are the grammar of his language. It was not laziness or lack of imagination that made Vermeer confine himself for a lifetime of study to a table, a curtain, a window and a bare wall. Rembrandt had his fill with what he saw in his shaving glass. Cézanne's life was not long enough to round an apple or erect the cylinder of a bottle. What comprehensive geniuses then would be Meissonier and Dali who far transcend the subject-matter of these masters and pour onto their canvas armies of galloping hussars or 38 bicycle riders to a three-inch square!

It is the superficial approach of such painters to objective nature which allows them to commit such involved feats. Their confusion of the natural spectacle with the endless chromos and snapshots that have molded their vision is a protective armor permitting them to deal with visual art and yet never to question their ready-made reflexes, never to deepen their knowledge of optics. Their idiom gives us the glyph or pictured idea of an object but not its weight, its texture, its relation to the world, its

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spiritual implications. They may write in paint the detailed memorandum of a plot, but the drama itself will stir us only through the language of true painting. A revelation of the problem that plagues the born painter would result in the case of those voluble story-tellers in immediate impotency. It is indeed consistent with our human limitations in other fields of research that to give the essence of things the true painter has to busy himself with few and very simple objects. Yet his is less of a failure than that of the academic painter who, though able to complete in paint an ambitious diorama, misses the inner life of his subject, gives us less than the man who recreates an apple.

In his own words the surrealist is pledged to the conquest of the irrational. This claim, by opposing the cult of the well-ordered and of the functional which marks the achievements of the 20's, is a slap to the faith of the preceding generation; and though this may not be the reason for his stand the young surrealist would be inhuman who did not enjoy the deed. His own excess in genuflecting to unreason is partly explained by the bigotry of his opponent. The idolatrous attitude towards the machine sacrificed much that was licit when it heralded the dictatorship of the streamline, this heartless rejection of all gadgets that have no discernible purpose. The modern engineer had claimed nature as his own, pointing to the mathematical precision of the curve, the clinical whiteness of an egg. It is easy to contradict his claim, for even if a progressive bird could hatch her brood in a china bowl, the array of twigs, straw, leaf, rags and mud with which he upholsters the nest would give her young a more proprietary satisfaction, a more mimetic contact with their own motley bodies. The smooth and streamlined egg of the engineer is after all only a device to bring forth a chick as stuffy with feathers as a quilt of the antimacassar days. Mother Nature may be at times partner to the purist mood of a modern house by Le Corbusier, but will lapse at others into the Victorian. Our body, which like the egg and the house happens also to be a "machine à habiter,"

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seldom uses the ruled line, the right angle, and the flat planes associated with the term "functional." The earth itself carefully clothes its mineral skeleton with blades of grass, the flutter of foliage and the mist of dew. In this sense the Albert Memorial is nearer to natural processes than a skyscraper. A surrealist picture that despises the cubist rules of surface and color composition acquires also, as a jungle will, a complicated and amorphous character, the kind of new baroque which, like the baroque of old, reclaims line and color from the too rational government of the ruler, the compass and Chevreul's rotating disc. Even the unusual subject-matter indulged in by surrealists is not irrationally chosen, for they gather to their bosom the useless things despised by their predecessors, thrown by their cruel logic on the ash-heap: a pitiful assortment of fragments—of broken watches, dead organs, crumbled pianos; of what has outlived its function; of what repels and of what stinks.

That painting is a possible vehicle for the subconscious has long been acknowledged by the Chinese who cherish historical samples of brush writing for psychological reasons unrelated to calligraphy or literary content. For the same spiritual purpose we treasure the representation of common objects in paint if they show the hand of a master. One can make use of an indifferent subject-matter to release instinctive drama and lyricism through the passionate automatism of the brush stroke; but there is incompatibility between a mechanical rendering and the free play of the subconscious. It is strange that the surrealist who stores up as treasures bits of automatic writing, words uttered in a trance, remembered fragments of dream, does not believe in the subjective virtues of direct painting. His round-about way of using paint by taming his muscular action within the intricacies of technique kills the subconscious impulses before they reach the hand.

Painters do not have the reputation of being intellectuals, nor is it their business to be such. Rarely original thinkers, they are however sufficiently sensitized to mirror the current thought of the day. But they need, if they are to be painters at all, to

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preserve a positive belief in their craft and in the world. Monet, imbued with the materialistic science of his time, shunned mythology in his landscapes but by humbling man's moods before the moods of nature he drank from the very source from which pantheism is born. Picasso, counselled by the Bergsonian quest of his own day, ripped guitars and Greek statues to unrecognition, but his zest with paint nevertheless brings forth a chaotic matter which contains, as do our very body's viscera, the disorder but also the juices of life. It may be that the Freudian analogies on which Dali props his work contain too much magic to admit of a magic handling; in this case he is less well served by his time's current thought than were his predecessors, a congenital defect which may wreck the new movement at birth. An act of simple faith remains essential to painting, be it the animal faith that the impressionist had in life or the concrete faith of the cubist in textures and lines. The Viennese haze that settles between the surrealist's eye and the world, by bringing its diversity to a shameful common denominator, disintegrates actual objects and people to such a degree that painting them becomes an artificial exercise. The saying of Poussin, "There is no painting without solid," refers both to objects and to our faith in them. The surrealist's postulate that he approaches the world with a blank mind, without the pre-ordered scaffolding that alone can hold it together, may mean an admirably impartial attitude for a scientist, but it may also mean death to that will to do without which no artist could ply his trade.

Even if the artist worships himself as a prophet or hero his approach to his material must remain that of an artisan. Most intellectual of them all, da Vinci, who did not relish this puttering with pots and pans, gave himself courage by writing that painting was a better craft than sculpture because one could indulge in it without removing one's lace cuffs or rolling up one's sleeves. Still, painting may prove too much of a manual trade to be indulged in by the surrealist if he truly wants to deal in the irrational. As soon as unreason is pitted against material laws there is breakage and hell to pay; a truly irrational archi-



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tect would see his building collapse as soon as it emerged above ground level. The knowledge of materials, pressure, resistance, elasticity, the dove-tailing of blocks or welding of metal cores are essential to the act of building. A man like Gaudi may achieve a make-believe surrealist house whose baroque curves remind one of lava flowing or muscles heaving, but the same reasonable knowledge must go into its planning, if it is to be a house at all, as into a Le Corbusier "machine for living." Sculpture and painting, inasmuch as they have a body, are, like the house, subject to natural laws and could not exist, whatever their apparent content, if they were not strictly within nature's reasonableness.

In the same way that a house, a sculpture, a painting submit to the laws of nature, the artist's body, itself one of his tools, functions on the reasonable plan of other animal bodies, even if the painter's tenets are the glorification of the irrational. "Who shall add one inch to his stature?" A lamb chop on the shoulder or the brassiere on a male chest<sup>1</sup> cannot deny the inner anatomical architecture which through the arm, wrist and fingers may communicate itself to the picture, pollute with its good health the psychopathic intentions of the author. A hand working freely, as in the case of Monet, gives to painting a healthy animal tang which would be rather at odds with the tenets of surrealism. Hence the search for safer means which will preserve a purer brand of unreason and in which the hand is no longer concerned: photo-montage, print-collages, rubbings, through which the thought or vision may somehow express itself without being straightened and strained through the sieve of organic experience. Thus Max Ernst enthrones himself amongst a hodge-podge of 19th-century wood engravings, daguerreotypes, and hardware with the same royal nonchalance as the hermit crab lodges in the shell of a deceased mollusk; and with pastepot and scissors injects unexpected meanings into those old things. The fear of autography grips even those surrealists who, somewhat suspicious of the ready-made, still produce their pictures

<sup>1</sup> Worn by Dali at a surrealist ball.

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by hand. The extremely cautious brush stroke of a Dali is truly as inert as the cut-outs of an Ernst. The fragments from old masters, from snapshots, from anatomical plates that constitute his stock in trade recur time and again in his pictures, identical but in shuffled order, reminiscent of the franker methods of a montage. One step further towards impersonal handling and we have the modified objects—furred cups and similar freaks.

Yet even if you kill the hand unreason is not saved, for the skeptical could argue that our brain itself is as much a part of nature's scheme as our hand and that, prisoner as it is of the universal logic of creation, its efforts to escape are probably inadequate. A surrealist scene can be fabricated simply by inverting the relative proportions of normal objects and situations. Our grandfathers' favorite was the painting of a cardinal eating lobster at a lavishly garnished table. If we shrink the cardinal to a size where he would fit at ease on the plate and enlarge the lobster until it fills the prelate's armchair we have a typical paranoiac picture which satisfies the most exacting standards of the good taste of tomorrow. Just as a photographic negative, though it paints nature's white black can boast of little fantasy, and just as the devil may be said to ape God, the too logical unreason which happens to be reason reversed has little claim to be an irrational process.

It would seem that the perfectly unreasonable picture could be the work of a madman only, but few such genuine creations fit easily into the surrealist bracket. Madmen go wrong at one point in their reasoning but as soon as they have branched away from the main road they follow their erroneous path with tenacious logic. The surrealist unlogic occurs rather in those relaxed moods of dream and day-dream which are typical Freudian hunting grounds. The two operations conducive to such moods are, first, a conscious state in which a store of images accumulates in us, to be released in apparent disorder in the second, subconscious stage. Consider the two operations necessary to the functioning of a mechanical toy: the grim expression and muscular effort that attend the winding of the spring, reminiscent

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of our articulate activities, contrasted with the disorderly, noisy, comical animation that attends the uncoiling of the spring, and that is similar to our dream mood. Subconscious vision proceeds, like movie fade-outs and fade-ins, by swift, unrelated changes of scenery. Its objects have a lack of tactile reality. No medium is elastic enough to describe this dream world. Cinema can approach only its tempo; words are too rigid to fit shifting meanings. Painting, with its static monumentality, is perhaps with sculpture the least fitted of mediums to describe it accurately.

The man who embarks on a voyage into the Freudian realm with the too innocent faith that the new land, however fanciful its vistas, is the wholly natural phenomenon of a release from inhibitions, is bound soon to be disturbed by an imperceptible passage into the psychic. There the soothing voice of the psychoanalyst gives way to the scratchings of automatic pencils in the dark, the fist of the expounding professor is replaced by the raps of turning tables, the text-book is superseded by visions and voices. Reason may be clumsy but it acts as a useful ballast for anchoring within the natural our humanity prone to flight. Having first divested himself of his armor of logic the super-realist comes nakedly face to face with the supernatural. To push forward with blank mind into the jungles of the irrational is to annul those centuries of bitter experience through which men at a dear cost sifted and labeled psychic phenomena, came to distinguish between what makes witches fly, were-wolves howl, John unroll his Apocalypse and Joan deliver France. Tradition, even if it be called old wives' gossip, would have been useful in charting the new country. Fra Angelico kneeled in joy when the angels held his brush but a surrealist will rejoice as much if some Ouija board entity dictates his picture. Unconcerned with the obvious implications of his own oath that he acts as medium, he views with satisfaction and profit the fruits of his labor, those representations of putrid matter, rancid bones, which to the uninitiated resemble a streamlining of the horns, tail and hooves of the devils of a less credulous age.

Schools of painting have always had their main reality on

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paper. Painters have been bunched together according to their date of birth rather than an understanding of their *œuvre*. Thus the sculpturesque Renoir nestles with the impressionists, the Whistlerian Braque is labeled cubist. Surrealism is also the wish-fulfilment mirage of critics. If we look at personalities its entity weakens. Its most doubtful exponents are those older painters who were already committed to a personal style when surrealism was born. To eulogize their work ten years ago for lyrical or emotional reasons would have seemed misplaced and even libelous. They had led the cubist movement but cubism was fast becoming old-fashioned. The simplest way to keep them up to date was to change the label on their goods. Chirico's early work was hailed within the cubist movement for its building up of architectures with compass and ruler, its rigid perspective, its mathematical symbols, its house-painter's way of laying the paint flat. It is now lauded for its mysterious moods, sexual innuendos, disquieting titles. Picasso's work was more difficult to reinterpret because of its obvious plastic soundness, simplest subject-matter and good-humored craft. Some person, however, did a good job of it who, by changing the title of a cubist "Bather" to "Metamorphosis," chucked it full of menacing implications. Between this blatant misuse of cubism to make it appear what it is not and bona fide surrealism there is a twilight fringe of painters, lacking the constructive solidity of the one as well as the literary frills of the other. The gay Miro, Masson the sad, can be made to fit in either camp. The melancholy offerings of Tchelicheff and of Berman are too close to a Whistler Nocturne in mood and means to fit easily into the surrealist bracket. The more genuine surrealist picture should exhibit a cluster of haphazard objects realistically achieved. Though Pierre Roy is the pioneer of this comeback to a *trompe-l'oeil* his work is so bathed in French lucidity as to starve the amateur of unhealthy complexes. Dali alone, by telling strictly horror stories or worse, fulfils all the expectations of the surrealist fan.

Men who wish sausages get them hanging from their nose.

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When Picasso some 15 years ago sighed that "Art is in need of David" he was voicing a desire for the reappearance of subject-matter, for a more objective rendition, for more craftsmanship in paint, conscious as he was of the defects of his own ego-swelled, sketch-mad era. No David but a Dali appeared in answer to this wish. Yet even though the new school features the sausage-shaped appendage reminiscent of the apologue instead of the Roman heroes dear to David, it brought back under this vile disguise some of the reforms that Picasso was asking for. The return to subject-matter and objective rendering is pregnant with consequences, reeducates the public into this only proper way for it to look at a picture. Compared to such a boon the kind of representation offered, offensive as it may be to some, is inconsequential. The artist ceases to be the egotist shut up in his tower. He must now come down from his pedestal into the street and gather a public to tell his story to. Surrealists reaffirm also the truth that art, whatever the manual labor involved, is preeminently a spiritual affair. They rescue from the too-physical armory of the cubist achievement this minute seed, this soul without which no picture of any school could live. That the artist needs a dæmon is of course no surrealist discovery, but the surrealists were brave enough to single out this fact from the discarded bric-à-brac of truths shelved by the cubists. The artist who yields to inspiration can no longer pretend that he is concerned only with himself and his own art problems. He becomes a channel for some agency more universal than himself. But though in the art-for-art achievement the artist could only hurt or ridicule himself, in art with universal implications his public too may be damaged. If his objectivity concerns only the social beliefs of a group the artist's only duty is to be accurate. But if he delves deeper into inspiration, or as we say now, follows the dictates of his subconscious, his manner approaches that of the prophet or the sibyl. For his own hygiene and that of his public he would do well in such case to be fastidious as to what gets hold of him.