

André Breton, *What is Surrealism?* 1934*

At the beginning of the war of 1870 (he was to die four months later, aged twenty-four), the author of the *Chants de Maldoror* and of *Poésies*, Isidor Ducasse, better known by the name of Comte de Lautréamont, whose thought has been of the very greatest help and encouragement to my friends and myself throughout the fifteen years during which we have succeeded in carrying on a common activity, I made the following remark, among many others, which were to electrify us fifty years later: "At the hour in which I write, no tremors are running through the intellectual atmosphere; it is only a matter of having the courage to face them." 1868-75: it is impossible, looking back upon the past, to perceive an epoch so poetically rich, so victorious, so revolutionary, and so charged with distant meaning as that which stretches from the separate publication of the *Premier Chant de Maldoror* to the insertion in a letter to Ernest Delahaye of Rimbaud's last poem, *Rêve*, which has not so far been included in his *Complete Works*. It is not an idle hope to wish to see the works of Lautréamont and Rimbaud restored to their correct historical background: the coming and the immediate results of the war of 1870. Other and analogous cataclysms could not have failed to rise out of that military and social cataclysm whose final episode was to be the atrocious crushing of the Paris Commune; the last in date caught many of us at the very age when Lautréamont and Rimbaud found themselves thrown into the preceding one, and by way of revenge has had as its consequence—and this is the new and important fact—the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution.

In an article, "Enter the Mediums," published in *Littérature*, 1922, reprinted in *Les Pas Perdus*, 1924, and subsequently in the Surrealist Manifesto, I explained the circumstance that had originally put us, my friends and myself, on the track of the surrealist activity we still follow and for which we are hopeful of gaining ever more numerous new adherents in order to extend it further than we have so far succeeded in doing. It reads:

It was in 1919, in complete solitude and at the approach of sleep, that my attention was arrested by sentences more or less complete, which became perceptible to my mind without my being able to discover (even by very meticulous analysis) any possible previous volitional effort. One evening in particular, as I was about to fall asleep, I became aware of a sentence articulated clearly to a point excluding all possibility of alteration and stripped of all quality of vocal sound; a

* From a lecture originally published in André Breton, *Qu'est-ce que le Surréalisme?* (Brussels: R. Henricquez, 1934). This excerpt from the English translation by David Gascoyne in Breton, *What is Surrealism?*, pp. 44-90.

¹ While the Surrealist movement itself did not date back this far, Breton was associated with the Dadaists and he had visited Sigmund Freud in Vienna soon after the end of World War I. His first book, *Les Champs magnétiques* (1921) was an experiment in unconscious writing.



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Pablo Picasso, André Breton, 1923, dry point

curious sort of sentence which came to me bearing—in sober truth—not a trace of any relation whatever to any incidents I may at that time have been involved in; an insistent sentence, it seemed to me, a sentence I might say, that *knocked at the window*. I was prepared to pay no further attention to it when the organic character of the sentence detained me. I was really bewildered. Unfortunately, I am unable to remember the exact sentence at this distance, but it ran approximately like this: "A man is cut in half by the window." What made it plainer was the fact that it was accompanied by a feeble visual representation of a man in the process of walking, but cloven, at half his height, by a window perpendicular to the axis of his body. Definitely, there was the form, re-erected against space, of a man leaning out of a window. But the window following the man's locomotion, I understood that I was dealing with an image of great rarity. Instantly the idea came to me to use it as material for poetic construction. I had no sooner invested it with that quality, than it had given place to a succession of all but intermittent sentences which left me no less astonished, but in a state, I would say, of extreme detachment.

Preoccupied as I still was at that time with Freud, and familiar with his methods of investigation, which I had practiced occasionally upon the sick during the War, I resolved to obtain from myself what one seeks to obtain from patients, namely a monologue poured out as rapidly as possible, over which the subject's critical faculty has no control—the subject himself throwing reticence to the winds—and which as much as possible represents *spoken thought*. It seemed and still seems to me that the speed of thought is no greater than that of words, and

hence does not exceed the flow of either tongue or pen. It was in such circumstances that, together with Philippe Soupault, whom I had told about my first ideas on the subject, I began to cover sheets of paper with writing, feeling a praiseworthy contempt for whatever the literary result might be. Ease of achievement brought about the rest. By the end of the first day of the experiment we were able to read to one another about fifty pages obtained in this manner and to compare the results we had achieved. The likeness was on the whole striking. There were similar faults of construction, the same hesitant manner, and also, in both cases, an illusion of extraordinary verve, much emotion, a considerable assortment of images of a quality such as we should never have been able to obtain in the normal way of writing, a very special sense of the picturesque, and, here and there, a few pieces of out-and-out buffoonery. The only differences which our two texts presented appeared to me to be due essentially to our respective temperaments, Soupault's being less static than mine, and, if he will allow me to make this slight criticism, to his having scattered about at the top of certain pages—doubtless in a spirit of mystification—various words under the guise of titles. I must give him credit, on the other hand, for having always forcibly opposed the least correction of any passage that did not seem to me to be quite the thing. In that he was most certainly right.

It is of course difficult in these cases to appreciate at their just value the various elements in the result obtained; one may even say that it is entirely impossible to appreciate them at a first reading. To you who may be writing them, these elements are, in appearance, as *strange as to anyone else*, and you are yourself naturally distrustful of them. Poetically speaking, they are distinguished chiefly by a very high degree of *immediate absurdity*, the peculiar quality of that absurdity being, on close examination, their yielding to whatever is most admissible and legitimate in the world: divulgence of a given number of facts and properties on the whole not less objectionable than the others.

The word "surrealism" having thereupon become descriptive of the generalizable undertaking to which we had devoted ourselves, I thought it indispensable, in 1924, to define this word once and for all:

SURREALISM, n. Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought. Thought's dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations.

ENCYCL. *Philos.* Surrealism rests in the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association neglected heretofore; in the omnipotence of the dream and in the disinterested play of thought. It tends definitely to do away with all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in the solution of the principal problems of life. Have professed *absolute surrealism*: Messrs. Aragon, Baron, Boiffard, Breton, Carrive, Crevel, Delteil, Desnos, Eluard, Gérard, Limbour, Malkine, Morise, Naville, Noll, Péret, Picon, Soupault, Vitrac.

These till now appear to be the only ones, and there would not have been any doubt on that score were it not for the strange case of Isidore Ducasse, of whose extra-literary career I lack all data. Were one to consider their output only superficially, a goodly number of poets might well have passed for surrealists, beginning with Dante and Shakespeare at his best. *In the course of many attempts I have made towards an analysis of what, under false pretences, is called genius, I have found nothing that could in the end be attributed to any other process than this.*

The *Manifesto* also contained a certain number of practical recipes, entitled: "Secrets of the Magic Surrealist Art," such as the following:
Written Surrealist Composition or First and Last Draft.

Having settled down in some spot most conducive to the mind's concentration upon itself, order writing material to be brought to you. Let your state of mind be as passive and receptive as possible. Forget your genius, talents, as well as the genius and talents of others. Repeat to yourself that literature is pretty well the sorriest road that leads to everywhere. Write quickly without any previously chosen subject, quickly enough not to dwell on, and not to be tempted to read over, what you have written. The first sentence will come of itself; and this is self-evidently true, because there is never a moment but some sentence alien to our conscious thought clamors for outward expression. It is rather difficult to speak of the sentence to follow, since it doubtless comes in for a share of our conscious activity and so the other sentences, if it is conceded that the writing of the first sentence must have involved even a minimum of consciousness. But that should in the long run matter little, because therein precisely lies the greatest interest in the surrealist exercise. Punctuation of course necessarily hinders the stream of absolute continuity which preoccupies us. But you should particularly distrust the prompting whisper. If through a fault ever so trifling there is a fore-warning of silence to come, a fault, let us say, of inattention, break off unhesitatingly the line that has become too lucid. After the word whose origin seems suspect you should place a letter, any letter, *l* for example, always the letter *l*, and restore the arbitrary flux by making that letter the initial of the word to follow.

We still live under the reign of logic, but the methods of logic are applied nowadays only to the resolution of problems of secondary interest. The absolute rationalism which is still the fashion does not permit consideration of any facts but those strictly relevant to our experience. Logical ends, on the other hand, escape us. Needless to say that even experience has had limits assigned to it. It revolves in a cage from which it becomes more and more difficult to release it. Even experience is dependent on immediate utility, and common sense is its keeper. Under color of civilization, under the pretext of progress, all that rightly or wrongly may be regarded as fantasy or superstition has been banished from the mind, all uncustomary searching after truth has been proscribed. It is only by what must seem sheer luck that there has recently been brought to light an aspect of mental life—to

my belief by far the most important—with which it was supposed that we no longer had any concern. All credit for these discoveries must go to Freud. Based on these discoveries a current of opinion is forming that will enable the explorer of the human mind to continue his investigations, justified as he will be in taking into account more than mere summary realities. The imagination is perhaps on the point of reclaiming its rights. If the depths of our minds harbor strange forces capable of increasing those on the surface, or of successfully contending with them, then it is all in our interest to canalize them, to canalize them first in order to submit them later, if necessary, to the control of the reason. The analysts themselves have nothing to lose by such a proceeding. But it should be observed that there are no means designed *a priori* for the bringing about of such an enterprise, that until the coming of the new order it might just as well be considered the affair of poets and scientists, and that its success will not depend on the more or less capricious means that will be employed.

I am resolved to render powerless that *hatred of the marvelous* which is so rampant among certain people, ridicule to which they are so eager to expose it. Briefly: The marvelous is always beautiful, anything that is marvelous is beautiful; indeed, nothing but the marvelous is beautiful.

The admirable thing about the fantastic is that it is no longer fantastic: there is only the real.

As I said in the *Manifesto*:

I believe in the future transmutation of those two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, of surreality, so to speak. I am looking forward to its consummation, certain that I shall never share in it, but death would matter little to me could I but taste the joy it will yield ultimately.

Aragon expressed himself in very much the same way in *Une Vague de Rêves* (1924):

It should be understood that the real is a relation like any other; the essence of things is by no means linked to their reality, there are other relations beside reality, which the mind is capable of grasping, and which also are primary like chance, illusion, the fantastic, the dream. These various groups are united and brought into harmony in one single order, surreality . . . This surreality—a relation in which all notions are merged together—is the common horizon of religions, magics, poetry, intoxications, and of all life that is lowly—that trembling honeysuckle you deem sufficient to populate the sky with for us.

And René Crevel, in *L'Esprit contre la Raison*:

The poet does not put the wild animals to sleep in order to play the tamer, but, the cages wide open, the keys thrown to the winds, he journeys forth, a traveler who thinks not of himself, but of the voyage, of dream-beaches, forests of hands, soul-endowed animals, all undeniable surreality.

I was to sum up the idea in these terms in *Surrealism and Painting* (1928):³

All that I love, all that I think and feel inclines me towards a particular philosophy of immanence according to which surreality will reside in reality itself, will be neither superior nor exterior to it. And conversely, because the container shall be also the contained. One might say that it will be a communicating vessel placed between the container and the contained. That is to say, I resist with all my strength temptations which, in painting and literature, might have the immediate tendency to withdraw thought from life as well as place life under the aegis of thought.

From 1930 until today the history of surrealism is that of successful efforts to restore to it its proper *becoming* by gradually removing from it every trace both of political opportunism and of artistic opportunism. The review *La Révolution Surréaliste* (12 issues) has been succeeded by another, *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution* (6 issues). Owing particularly to influences brought to bear by new elements, surrealist experimenting, which had for too long been erratic, has been unreservedly resumed; its perspectives and its aims have been made perfectly clear; I may say that it has not ceased to be carried on in a continuous and enthusiastic manner. This experimenting has regained momentum under the master-impulse given to it by Salvador Dali, whose exceptional interior "boiling" has been for surrealism, during the whole of this period, an invaluable ferment. As Guy Mangeot has rightly pointed out in his *History of Surrealism*⁴ published recently by René Henríquez, Dali has endowed surrealism with an instrument of primary importance, in particular the paranoiac-critical method, which has immediately shown itself capable of being applied with equal success to painting, poetry, the cinema, to the construction of typical surrealist objects, to fashions, to sculpture, and even, if necessary, to all manner of exegesis.

He first announced his convictions to us in *La Femme Visible* (1930):

I believe the moment is at hand when, by a paranoiac and active advance of the mind, it will be possible (simultaneously with automatism and other passive states) to systematize confusion and thus to help to discredit completely the world of reality.

In order to cut short all possible misunderstandings, it should perhaps be said: "immediate" reality.

Paranoia uses the external world in order to assert its dominating idea and has the disturbing characteristic of making others accept this idea's reality. The reality of the external world is used for illustration and proof, and so comes to serve the reality of our mind.

In the special "Intervention surréaliste" number of *Documents* 34 [Brussels, 15 May 1934] under the title "Philosophic Provocations," Dali undertakes today

³ Not translated until 1936. See *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928); *Surrealism and Painting* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936).

⁴ Not translated; see *Histoire du Surréalisme* (Brussels: 1934).

to give his thought a didactic turn. All uncertainty as to his real intentions seems to be swept away by these definitions:

Paranoia: Delirium of interpretation bearing a systematic structure.

Paranoiac-critical activity: Spontaneous method of "irrational knowledge," based on the critical and systematic objectification of delirious associations and interpretations.

Painting: Hand-done color "photography" of "concrete irrationality" and of the imaginative world in general.

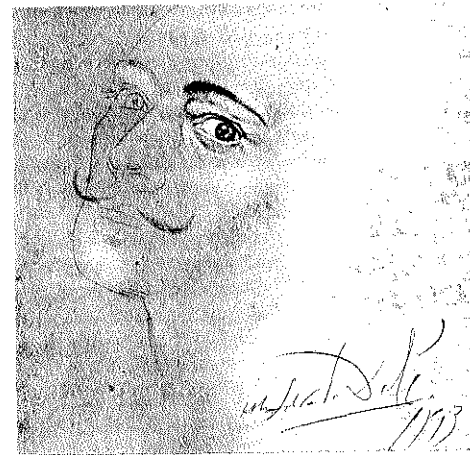
Sculpture: Modeling by hand of "concrete irrationality" and of the imaginative world in general. Etc. . . .

In order to form a summary idea of Dalí's undertaking, one must take into account the property of *uninterrupted becoming* of any object of paranoiac activity, in other words of the ultra-confusing activity rising out of the obsessing idea. This uninterrupted becoming allows the paranoiac who is their witness to consider the images of the exterior world as unstable and transitory, or suspect; and what is so disturbing is that he is able to make other people believe in the reality of his impressions. One aspect, for instance, of the *multiple* image occupying our attention being a putrefied donkey, the "cruel" putrefaction of the donkey can be considered as "the hard and blinding flash of new gems." Here we find ourselves confronted by a new affirmation, accompanied by formal proofs, of the *omnipotence of desire*, which has remained, since the beginnings, surrealism's sole act of faith. At the point where surrealism has taken up the problem, its only guide has been Rimbaud's sibylline pronouncement: "I say that one must be a seer, one must make oneself a seer." As you know, this was Rimbaud's only means of reaching "the unknown." Surrealism can flatter itself today that it has discovered and rendered practicable many other ways leading to the unknown. The abandonment to verbal or graphic impulses and the resort to paranoiac-critical activity are not the only ones, and one may say that, during the last four years of surrealist activity, the many others that have made their appearance allow us to affirm that the automatism from which we started and to which we have unceasingly returned does in fact constitute the *crossroads* where these various paths meet. Among those we have partly explored and on which we are only just beginning to see ahead, I should single out the simulation of mental diseases (acute mania, general paralysis, dementia praecox), which Paul Eluard and I practised in *The Immaculate Conception* (1930), undertaking to prove that the normal man can have access to the provisionally condemned places of the human mind; the manufacture of objects functioning symbolically, started in 1931 by the very particular and quite new emotion aroused by Giacometti's object, *L'Heure des Traces*; the analysis of the interpenetration of the states of sleep and waking, tending to make them depend entirely upon one another and even condition one another in certain affective states, which I undertook in *The Communicating Vessels*; and finally, the taking into consideration of the recent researches of the Marburg school, to which I drew attention in an article published in *Minotaure*, "The Automatic Message" [(Paris)

1933, nos. 3-4], whose aim is to cultivate the remarkable sensorial dispositions of children, enabling them to change any object whatever into no matter what, simply by looking at it fixedly.

Nothing could be more coherent, more systematic or more richly yielding of results than this last phase of surrealist activity, which has seen the production of two films by Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dalí, *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Âge d'Or*, the poems of René Char, *L'Homme Approximatif*, *Où Boivent les Loups* and *L'Antité* by Tristan Tzara, *Le Clavecin de Diderot* and *Les Pieds dans le Plat* by René Crevel, *La Vie Immédiate* by Eluard, the very previous *visual* commentaries by Madame Valentine Hugo on the works of Arnim and Rimbaud, the most intense part of the work of Yves Tanguy, the inspired sculpture of Alberto Giacometti, the coming together of Georges Hugnet, Gui Rosey, Pierre Yoyotte, Roger Caillois, Victor Brauner, and Balthus. Never has so precise a common will united us. I think I can most clearly express this will by saying that today it applies itself to "bring about the state where the distinction between the subjective and the objective loses its necessity and its value."

Salvador Dalí, "The object as revealed in Surrealist experiment," 1931*



Salvador Dalí, *Self-Portrait*, 1943, drawing.

* Originally published in part as "Objets Surréalistes," *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution* (Paris), No. 3 (1931). This English translation from *This Quarter* (London), V, 1 (September 1932), 197-207. Titles in brackets are the actual titles of books which do not exist in an English translation but which the translator nevertheless has rendered into English.