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C. B. Morris

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

*Among Mad People*

‘But I don’t want to go among mad people,’ Alice remarked.

‘Oh, you can’t help that,’ said the Cat: ‘We’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.’

‘How do you know I’m mad?’ said Alice.

‘You must be,’ said the Cat, ‘or you wouldn’t have come here.’

Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures  
in Wonderland*

It is temptingly easy to judge surrealism by the extravagant and, at times, outrageous public acts of its members and to indict it for the notoriety they deliberately sought. Although the surrealist movement did not lack clowns, Salvador Dalí was perhaps more qualified than some to write of its ‘caractère férocement extra-artistique’. Exhibitionism represented for him, as it did for other surrealists, a means of being honest with oneself in the face of society’s incomprehension; this is clear from his defence of the man whose exposure of his erect penis in the Paris Métro he called ‘un des actes les plus purs et les plus désintéressés qu’un homme soit capable de réaliser dans notre époque d’avilissement et de dégradation morale’.<sup>1</sup> The publication in *La Révolution Surréaliste* of press cuttings hostile to surrealism and of a photograph of Benjamin Péret insulting a priest<sup>2</sup> was intended to pursue disrepute and to aggravate sensibilities ceaselessly challenged by epigram as well as antic. Breton’s and Eluard’s contention that ‘Un poème doit être une débâcle de l’intellect’ was meant to be provocative, like Eluard’s claim that ‘La connerie est française, la vérole est française, les porcs sont français...’<sup>3</sup> Aragon’s faith in ‘la victoire de tout ce qui est sordide sur tout ce qui est admirable’ was meant to disturb in the same way.<sup>4</sup>

The surrealists’ schoolboy eagerness to pepper their writings with such words as *con*, *cul*, *cracher*, *foutre*, *merde* and *pourriture* forces our gaze to the bed, the gutter and the lavatory where in a display of the humour that, in Aragon’s view, ‘rend une invention surréaliste,’ René Crevel described in his novel *Etes-vous fous?* (1929) a toilet-roll fixed to a music-box playing ‘Les montagnards sont là’.<sup>5</sup> The laughter

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that is most often heard in surrealist literature is the bitter, cheerless sneer captured by the ubiquitous word *ricaner*. Surrealism is not for the squeamish, who might perhaps be forgiven for thinking that much of its art and literature is, to use Philippe Soupault's words from *Bulles billes boules* (1920–30), a

Litanie  
comme celui qui vomit  
et removit.<sup>6</sup>

David Gascoyne's vision in 1933 of a woman who

... was standing at the window clothed only in a ribbon  
she was burning the eyes of snails in a candle  
she was eating the excrement of dogs and horses  
she was writing a letter to the president of france<sup>7</sup>

reproduces some of the macabre features of many surrealist fantasies at the same time as it commemorates the surrealists' search for notoriety with offensive open letters.

Although gross, Marcell Noll's public confession to the Catholic writer Stanislas Fumet on 3 June 1926 that 'je te tiens pour un con, un lâche, et le dernier des porcs'<sup>8</sup> did not have the repercussions of the letter Georges Sadoul and Jean Caupenne wrote to a young man called Keller urging him not to enter Saint-Cyr; undoubtedly horrified to learn that 'votre visage est couvert de pustules suppurantes, de servilité, de patriotisme, de merde et d'abjection', Keller turned the letter over to the military authorities.<sup>9</sup> Sadoul's stubborn refusal to withdraw his words earned him the three months' imprisonment that Aragon listed in the litany of persecution he recited in 1931, when he felt particularly beleaguered by civil power and harassed by private groups like the *camelots de Roi*, who in 1930 broke up a showing of *L'Age d'or* and destroyed paintings by Arp, Ernst, Miró, Tanguy and Man Ray:

Nous arrivons ainsi en 1930. Plus que jamais les surréalistes refusent de reconnaître *l'art* comme une fin... Il n'y a pas de domaine où, avec une soudaineté sans précédent, les surréalistes ne se trouvent traqués. En 1930, André Breton dans la vie privée connaît toutes les persécutions que peut appuyer l'appareil légal. Georges Sadoul est condamné à trois mois de prison. Eluard se voit privé par la police du droit de sortir de France.<sup>10</sup>

But the surrealists were not to be so easily intimidated as to shirk a fight. Breton's impulse to 'descendre dans la rue, revolvers aux poings' symbolized an aggressiveness that, directed against the public

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in general, the hated bourgeoisie in particular and occasionally one of their own fissile group, was to become a recurrent fantasy.<sup>11</sup> The rifles that in a dream Max Morise saw handed out in a banquet in honour of surrealism become specifically the Winchesters with which in Chirico's *Hebdomeros* (1929) children shoot at bats, and which grow into the 'canon épouvantable' that in Péret's *Le grand jeu* is 'dirigé contre la destinée de chacun'.<sup>12</sup> Péret aptly commented in the same work that 'Il y a dans l'air un coup de revolver.'<sup>13</sup>

If the surrealists sometimes chose to appear as gunmen and gangsters, they also adopted the mantle of priests and intellectual heavyweights dropping names as well as insults. Aragon's review of three books on Heraclitus<sup>14</sup> is one example of a cultural breadth displayed with conscientious candour; the surrealists traced for themselves an elaborate pedigree comprising such diverse and illustrious forbears as Apollinaire, Lewis Carroll, Hegel, Lautréamont, Rimbaud and Sade. In the abundant *manifestes*, *essais* and *spécifications* with which the surrealists complemented and glossed their creative works, they did not stint definitions and explanations of their aims and achievements, even though many of their dicta are more impressive to the ear than to the understanding. Aragon's claim that 'Le surréalisme est l'inspiration reconnue. . . ' is no more precise than his warning that 'le surréalisme n'est pas un refuge contre le style.'<sup>15</sup> Antonin Artaud's contention that 'Le surréalisme est avant tout un état d'esprit' is no more exclusive to surrealism than Eluard's statement that 'Le surréalisme. . . travaille à mettre au jour la conscience profonde de l'homme.'<sup>16</sup> And the woolly phrases like 'une *crise de conscience*', 'a desire to deepen the foundations of the real' and 'the supremacy of matter over mind'<sup>17</sup> which encrust Breton's theoretical works point to the surrealists' pontifical passion for doctrine, which in its dryness contrasts with the extraordinary range, vision and vitality of their creative works. As Gascoyne has aptly commented, 'surrealism is by no means simply a recipe. . . Rather is it a starting-point for works of the most striking diversity. . .'<sup>18</sup>

In its systematic search for and exploitation of mental liberty, the automatic writing with which the surrealists experimented achieved a notoriety that may have deterred the approach of some people; it also deadened the sympathy of others unmindful that no single formula could guarantee evenness of quality or conceal differences of talent, temperament, technique and style. As Aragon tartly but shrewdly observed in *Traité du style*, 'Si vous écrivez, suivant une méthode

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surréaliste, de tristes imbécillités, ce sont de tristes imbécillités.<sup>19</sup> Even when one turns to the dreams that constituted another link between such distinct personalities as Aragon, Breton, Crevel, Eluard and Péret, it is wise to bear in mind De Quincey's warning, similar to Aragon's, that 'opium could only give you interesting dreams if you already had an interesting mind and the power to dream'.<sup>20</sup> Only the blind, blinkered or prejudiced would deny the range of the surrealists' achievements or challenge the place they won among the most exciting and revolutionary artistic movements.

Their *enquêtes* and their 'Bureau de Recherches Surréalistes' were signals of a probing curiosity and a mental vitality that, applied to sculpture, cinema, painting and literature, explored and executed new ideas, new techniques and sought new themes remote from the tired motifs rejected by Soupault in *Georgia* (1926):

Il ne suffit pas de parler du soleil  
des étoiles  
de la mer et des fleuves  
du sang des yeux des mains  
Il est nécessaire bien souvent  
de parler d'autres choses<sup>21</sup>

Through the breadth and brilliance of its creations, which I shall try to survey in the second and third chapters of this book, surrealism has graduated from opprobrium to critical respectability and deserves the generous attention now devoted to it.

However, when we turn to Spain and to the influence that surrealism is generally supposed to have exerted on its literature, particularly its poetry, in the 1920s and 1930s, we find that the crisp outlines of detailed chronicle and precise documentation fade into a haze of half-truths and generalizations born more of guesswork than of careful investigation and considered judgment. In Spain as elsewhere in the 1920s and 1930s, surrealism's extreme attitudes and actions stimulated extreme responses. Rare indeed was the sympathy shown by the magazine *Gaceta de Arte*, which, although published in the geographically isolated Canary Islands, established personal contacts with some surrealists and displayed intelligent understanding of their works, evident in its explanation in its seventh manifesto that 'surrealism is the explosion of a society, beneath the repressive anguish of an antiquated morality.'<sup>22</sup> Alberti's contemptuous description of surrealism in 1933 as 'another nickname',<sup>23</sup> together with Lorca's

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insistence in a letter he wrote in 1928 to his friend Sebastián Gasch that the ‘new *spiritualist* manner’ of poems like ‘Oda al Santísimo Sacramento del Altar’ ‘is not surrealism’ (p. 1594), reveal a touchiness that others sharpened into open hostility, where pungent words born of instinctive responses replaced considered judgments. In suggesting that Juan de Mairena would have said of the surrealists: ‘Those mules on the waterwheel have not yet realized that there is no wheel without water,’ Antonio Machado shared with Gasch a ‘position...frankly of censure’.<sup>24</sup> And Eugenio Montes’ comment that the surrealists ‘present themselves as the devil’s advocates. But they make too much of a noise about it for us to believe them’ reinforced Luis Montanya’s gratuitous warning that without artistic and aesthetic control ‘The instinct of the subconscious...can produce only monstrous, hybrid fruits.’<sup>25</sup>

Joan Fuster’s attack in 1948 on surrealism’s ‘spurious automatism’ and Juan Larrea’s censure in 1944 of its ‘hollow convolutions’ show that the passage of time did not mellow those instinctively violent feelings that in some masqueraded as reasoned literary criticism.<sup>26</sup> Dámaso Alonso’s misty reference to ‘that which is in the air,’ echoed by Alberti’s recollection in 1959 that ‘The *thing* was in the atmosphere,’<sup>27</sup> marked one extreme of critical reticence that in its vagueness is as unhelpful as Manuel Durán’s bold affirmation that ‘when the Surrealist movement made its triumphant entrance on the European cultural theater, in the Twenties, Spain was ready. It was love at first sight. In subsequent years, Spain produced some of the best Surrealist films, poems, paintings.’<sup>28</sup>

Similarly impressive – but unsupported – claims abound. Although Albi and Fuster maintain that ‘the four most representative poets of the movement – Alberti, Aleixandre, Cernuda and García Lorca (...) – did not come to surrealism ignorant of its literature’, J. F. Aranda insists paradoxically that ‘Surrealist influence and the stylistic canons of this new creed remained undoubtedly imprinted on Buñuel’s companions, with little or no foreign influence.’<sup>29</sup> José María Hinojosa was championed by Cernuda as ‘the first Spanish surrealist’, while Gerardo Diego, according to Durán, wrote ‘the first surrealist poems published in the Spanish language’.<sup>30</sup> For Bodini the Lorca of *Poeta en Nueva York* and *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* can be considered as no less than ‘the greatest European surrealist poet’; and A. P. Debicki has seen in *Poeta en Nueva York*, *Espadas como labios*, *Sobre los ángeles* and *Sermones y moradas* ‘an obvious surrealist in-

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fluence'.<sup>31</sup> What entangles even further this knot of claim and counter-claim is that competing labels such as *surrealista*, *sobrerrealista* and *superrealista*, to which critics have sometimes tried to give a false force and extra meaning by enclosing one or other of them in inverted commas, have been used so indiscriminately as to drain them of meaning.

No more helpful than those critics who see traces of surrealism everywhere in Spain are others who choose automatic writing as the sole criterion for gauging the impact of surrealism on Spanish letters. When Guillén stated that 'In Spain no-one was ever satisfied with the surrealist "document"', he committed the same error of focus as Albi and Fuster, who insisted that 'Neither Alberti, nor Cernuda, nor Lorca devote themselves to automatism,' and as L. Rodríguez Alcalde, who has reminded us unnecessarily that 'Spanish surrealism... was never faithful to a narrow concept of automatic writing.'<sup>32</sup> The fortunes of surrealism in Spain are meagrely recorded in equally bold statements that are either self-evident, unproven or mistaken. Bodini's insistence on 'the complete theoretical and ideological lack' of surrealist sympathies among Spanish writers overlooked the manifesto that, according to Durán, Aleixandre, Cernuda and Prados prepared but did not publish,<sup>33</sup> and the fraternally sympathetic declarations published by the *Gaceta de Arte*, whose eleventh manifesto in particular demonstrated the awareness of its contributors that surrealism was, as much as a technique, a critique of society:

The repression of bourgeois society has produced in its age its typical illnesses: *syphilis and neurosis*.

Its architecture has contributed to the development of the plague of our time: *tuberculosis*. Its congested urbanism has elevated *nervous illnesses* to the front rank.

Day by day its morality drags youth towards *madness and suicide*, the limits over which a repressed spirit spills.

And it exhibits this scar: *prostitution*. And this crime: *war*.<sup>34</sup>

Although Bodini failed to provide exact answers, he did at least ask in his boldly entitled anthology *I poeti surrealisti spagnoli* the questions that a literary historian should set himself:

Does a Spanish poetic surrealism exist? And what are its connexions with French surrealism? Does it correspond to the general features of French surrealism or does it differ from it? And in what way? And what, finally, is its poetic validity?<sup>35</sup>

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Such questions, however, matter little to Paul Ilie in a work he has called with equal verve *The Surrealist Mode in Spanish Literature* (1968). Ilie's determination to 'employ the word surrealism in the least doctrinaire and most generous way possible'<sup>36</sup> led him to write a work that, fascinating as it is, has nothing to do with French surrealism and Spain. In the 1920s and 1930s Spanish writers and artists produced their works in a climate and a context which Ilie has disregarded in his quest for a fashion that, defying precise definition, he has chosen to call 'surrealistic' – even though he confesses blandly that 'very few works are totally identifiable as surrealistic'.<sup>37</sup> Guided by his personal radar system to the 'strange, disturbing world' that is for him the most infallible criterion for determining whether a work is 'surrealistic',<sup>38</sup> he concludes with some vagueness, and with apparent contempt for the emotions that move writers and the subjects with which they deal, that 'In the last analysis, it is the language and style of a work that mark it as being surrealist. Often, as a consequence, critics can recognize a surrealist work almost instinctively, without recourse to literary history or aesthetic theory.'<sup>39</sup> Ilie has thus borrowed a word legitimized by a specific artistic movement to label a vogue that he does not define and that in his view has nothing to do with that movement.

Ilie's disregard for 'literary history or aesthetic theory' licenses his inclusion in a work about something he calls surrealism of Antonio Machado and José Gutiérrez Solana, and explains his exclusion from that work of Cernuda, who knew much surrealist literature. If, as Ilie suggests in a critical shortcut, 'It would be better to assume that writers were familiar with French surrealism even if they did not say so,'<sup>40</sup> would it not therefore be reasonable to assume an imprint of French surrealism on Spanish art and letters and would it not also be just to measure it? What Ilie has chosen not to consider is that when Spaniards spoke and wrote about surrealism in the 1920s and 1930s, they had in mind a specific literary and artistic movement and not the definition he has adduced to justify his liberal approach. His book, whose title has in my view little to do with its content, convinces me more than ever of the need to chronicle this important episode in Spain's literary history.

It is clear to me that in the 1920s and 1930s some Spanish writers and critics were sympathetic towards and closely acquainted with surrealist art and literature. As A. Adell has suggested in an essay that criticizes Ilie's omission from his book of Cernuda, Agustín Espinosa

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and the *Gaceta de Arte*, ‘Spanish eyes were very attentive to what was being done or no longer being done in Paris and the air flowed freely and, indeed, merrily from one capital to the other.’<sup>41</sup> Ramón Gómez de la Serna for one knew what was going on in Paris. Modelling the hero of his story *El hijo surrealista* (1930) on the surrealists, he made his Henri Klox emulate their public outrages by throwing sulphuric acid on wax models in the Musée Grévin, flinging into the Seine decorations stolen from the Musée de la Légion d’Honneur and writing ‘a terrible letter’ to the President of the Republic.<sup>42</sup>

In my first book I did not know French surrealist literature well enough to be able to do more than hint at the ‘stimulus to artistic ferment’ it exercised on Spanish writers and artists.<sup>43</sup> Now, having read much surrealist literature, I am so convinced of the strength and extent of that stimulus that I intend in this second book to document and evaluate it. As I see surrealism as a specific movement and not as a loose synonym for fantasy or literary eccentricity, I think it is valid to talk of surrealism and Spain, or surrealism in Spain, but that the term ‘Spanish surrealism’ is as critically incongruous as French *conceptismo* or Welsh *gongorismo*. My field of focus may be narrow, but only by concentrating sharply first on French surrealist works and then on the Spanish works that, according to critical folklore, received their imprint and on others that critics have ignored, can one hope to chart an almost virgin area in Spain’s literary history.

My aim therefore is to chronicle Spain’s contact with and knowledge of French surrealism and to measure the literary – and sometimes artistic – results of that contact; although I shall mention many names, those that will recur most often are, on the French side, Louis Aragon, André Breton, René Crevel, Robert Desnos, Paul Eluard, Benjamin Péret and Philippe Soupault, and, on the Spanish side, Rafael Alberti, Vicente Aleixandre, Luis Buñuel, Luis Cernuda, Salvador Dalí, Juan José Domenchina, Agustín Espinosa, Josep Vincenc Foix, Federico García Lorca and Juan Larrea. In Chapter 1 I propose to pinpoint ‘that which is in the air’ mentioned but not identified by Dámaso Alonso by examining how surrealism was transmitted to Spain by pen, paint and person and how much was accessible to Spaniards from the writings they read or from the films and paintings they saw. Those who wish to assess the evidence for themselves may consult the Appendices, particularly A and C, where I reproduce the lectures given in Spain by surrealists between 1920 and 1936 and the surrealist texts that appeared in Castilian or Catalan translation in



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Spanish magazines during the same period. In Chapters 2 and 3 I attempt to trace in Spanish writers the themes, motifs, moods and techniques that were put at their disposal by surrealist art and literature.

In moving thus from French surrealism to Spanish literature, one is quickly aware of divergences as well as parallels, particularly in the 1920s; in that decade the surrealists shared as an aftermath of the First World War a mood of disgust and aggressiveness which some Spaniards were to acquire in the late 1920s and in the 1930s as they joined the international chorus for communism, which was voiced in Spain by the magazine *Octubre* (1933–4) and in England by the *Left Review* (1934–8). A common ground of political commitment came to be shared by the French surrealists with Spaniards such as Cernuda, Prados and Alberti, who reminisced in 1961 that:

le surréalisme correspondait parfaitement à cet état de protestation et de révolte qui était celui de l'Espagne. D'une manière imprécise, nous cherchions autre chose. Le surréalisme, introduit chez nous avec retard, était pour nous l'image d'une jeunesse confusément tourmentée, et nous convenait.<sup>44</sup>

The conviction Aragon expressed in 1931 in *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution* that 'il est... impossible de considérer le devenir des surréalistes en dehors de celui du Prolétariat' was echoed by *Octubre's* declaration in 1933 that it was 'against imperialist war, for the defence of the Soviet Union, against fascism, with the proletariat';<sup>45</sup> it also reverberated in Domingo López Torres' assertion in 1932 in an essay unequivocally entitled 'Surrealismo y revolución' that 'We proletariat of the world are involved in a constant struggle to implant our principles, to destroy a tired system.'<sup>46</sup> And Crevel's insistence in the lecture he gave in Barcelona on 18 September 1931 [Appendix C] that 'le surréalisme aboutit au matérialisme dialectique' publicized the political faith shared by Cernuda, who announced in *Octubre* in 1933 that:

This society sucks up, withers, destroys the youthful energies that are now emerging. It should be killed... For that I count on a revolution inspired by communism. In that way life will be saved.<sup>47</sup>

When the surrealists in their manifesto 'Au feu!' exalted the 'belle flamme' that in 1931 had destroyed churches and convents throughout Spain [Appendix D], they advocated the very violence that Eluard was to lament when in his poem 'La Victoire de Guernica' he censured

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the destruction and death wrought by Franco's air-force.<sup>48</sup> The 'attitude of combat' maintained by the *Gaceta de Arte* in its manifestos was adopted with particular truculence by Alberti, who in 1929 put into practice a favourite surrealist fantasy by capping his preposterous lecture entitled 'Palomita y galápago (¡No más artríticos!)' with 'six shots from a revolver'.<sup>49</sup> In *Sermones y moradas* the blood vomited by the moon and the shout of 'war!' uttered by the dawn illustrate the belief he expressed in 1931 that 'the poets of today' should be 'cruel, violent, demoniac, terrible' and anticipate the savage threats he made on his family in his sneering 'Índice de familia burguesa española'.<sup>50</sup> Compared with the poetry Alberti wrote in the 1920s, *Sermones y moradas* – together with Cernuda's *Los placeres prohibidos* and Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York* – acquire the moral thrust, the social relevance and the concern with right and wrong that mark much English and French literature in the 1930s.

While social awareness and common political convictions offer a parallel between the French surrealists and some Spanish writers, one clearly did not have to be a surrealist to hold left-wing views in the 1930s. Julian Symons has reminded us that 'at the heart of the Thirties dream there was a conception of social morality'.<sup>51</sup> Although I am less concerned in this book with politics than with charting contacts that were largely literary and visual and only occasionally personal, it would be nonetheless wise to bear in mind that such contacts were likely to be closer and more fruitful when the sharing of ideals and hatreds forged a bond of brotherhood and generated a mood of partisanship.

\* \* \* \* \*

The page references in the text are to the following editions:

Alberti, *Poesías completas* (Buenos Aires, 1961).

Aleixandre, *Obras completas* (Madrid, 1968).

Cernuda, *La realidad y el deseo*, 3rd ed. (Mexico, 1958).

Foix, *Obras poètiques* (Barcelona, 1964).

García Lorca, *Obras completas*, 3rd ed. (Madrid, 1957).

All other references are specified in the notes.

I have provided at the foot of the page a prose gloss in English of inset quotations from Spanish and Catalan poetry. I have rendered directly into English extracts of Spanish and Catalan prose, as well as most of those lines and phrases of Spanish and Catalan poetry that occur within sentences.