

Sacred Surrealism, Dissidence and International Avant-Garde Prose

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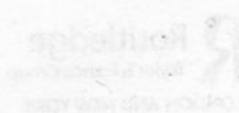
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FOREWORD

It would seem that for scholars and curators, their readers and audiences alike, there is no prospect in sight that the subject of international surrealism will cease to fascinate and provoke. Where several decades ago the study of this movement seemed a marginal interest at best, deeply unfashionable at worst, for many years now entire university undergraduate courses have been devoted to specific aspects of its ideas; exhibitions showcasing surrealism are a staple of institutional programmes; young children at school learn of the work of Magritte, Dalí and Miró. The books, catalogues and journal articles could fill a modest library all by themselves.

Two things above all else stimulate this tremendous and repeatedly renewed appetite for a movement begun nearly a whole century ago. The first, clearly, is the enduring allure of the works of the surrealists themselves: vivid and elusive at the same time, touching on those parts of who and where we are that seem to lie at the edge of knowledge, in the ambiguous corners of perception. Always something new, even for enthusiasts: a poet not read before, a journal only now reissued in facsimile, entire surrealist groups unearthed from obscurity. With some initial reluctance Anglophone academics have acknowledged over recent decades that the movement concerns not merely Paris between the wars, but dozens of international groups and centres; and that it continued to flourish long after the Second World War, even that authentic surrealist activity continues to this day. Just as significantly, however, what remains compelling about surrealism is the sense of its continued centrality to the history of ideas and its relevance to so many currents of contemporary thought and practice. Whole swathes of today's critical and cultural theory seem unthinkable without the models of surrealism's radical perceptions and its innovative models for critical expression. While surrealism's own concepts often remain poorly understood – and its theorists, with the notable exception of Georges Bataille, undervalued – the movement's themes and concerns, and with them the deliberately oblique, open-ended but passionate ways in which it engaged with them, anticipate many of the modes and tasks of contemporary theory.

V.L. Brough-Evans's *Sacred Surrealism, Dissidence and International Avant-Garde Prose* exemplifies these fertile questions. Issues such as identity, gender and postcolonialism that are key to so many recent debates are here

foregrounded, problematised and explored in sometimes unexpected places: brilliant but for the most part little-known novels that all belong in one way or another to the dialogues and diasporas of international surrealism. In contrast to the majority of recent scrutiny of the movement, the focus on literature rather than the visual arts here is refreshing, and brings the research closer not only to early generations of scholarship on the movement, before art history captured the field, but also to the predominantly poetic and literary sources of surrealism in the early 1920s. Ambitious in its scope, the role of specific cultural locations is crucial for this study, but so is the sense of how surrealism – often taken in its wider resonances rather than as a doctrinaire position – enabled generations of writers, artists and thinkers to negotiate the tensions and exchanges between them without falling back into outmoded or compromised Western philosophical positions. The three authors presented in *Sacred Surrealism* all have in common this sense of a navigation across and within cultures, many of them less familiar to Anglophone readers: between Europe, the Caribbean and South America (including real and imagined explorations into an ‘uncolonised’ interior) in the case of the Cuban Alejo Carpentier; from aristocratic Britain to the pell-mell creative intensity of France and then Mexico for artist and writer Leonora Carrington; and from the ferment of avant-garde Central Europe, in dialogue with Paris, to the emotional journeys of a dissident forced into internal exile under totalitarian power in the case of the Romanian Gellu Naum.

The sheer range of historical, political and intellectual contexts across a generous sweep of the mid-twentieth century could overwhelm this narrative, were it not that the gold thread of surrealism’s ideas – no matter whether in ‘orthodox’ or contested modes – can be seen running through each story, wherever a cross-section of it is taken, with its powerful, sometimes uncanny ability to throw the first filament of a rope bridge across apparently irreconcilable differences of experience. Retold from this perspective, received conceptual models of margin and mainstream, centre and periphery, dissidence and orthodoxy – much as these terms might help us to construct preliminary mental topographies – eventually begin to seem like background features in comparison to the teeming high-key strands of encounter and exchange across communities, geographies, histories and bodies of knowledge. It is as though surrealism can motivate that tiny but paradigm-changing adjustment of the microscope’s lens that brings entirely new and intricate structural networks into focus among what hitherto appeared as indistinct, two-dimensional matter.

The complexity of surrealism itself – too often considered from limited or reductive perspectives – is of course part of this challenge as well. *Sacred Surrealism* prioritises the positions developed by the Collège de Sociologie in Paris during the late 1930s, particularly around such figures as Bataille, Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris, and informed, amongst other strands of thought, by ethnography and sociology. While scholars since the 1970s such as those associated with the journals *Tel Quel* in France and *October* in the US have tended to highlight the ideas of the Collège, especially those of Bataille, in order to produce an attractively dramatic but generally misleading model of ‘mainstream’ versus ‘dissident’ surrealism, the intention here is, with greater relevance, to access that part of surrealist thought that in innovative ways has

both studied and activated problems such as ritual, the sacred and the irrational. In tune with surrealism's own strategies, this study is also not afraid to propose original concepts and terms as it proceeds, and the new notions such as *divin fou* or the 'adject' set in play here have the potential to spark fresh insights and connections in the material under investigation. The fertile encounters, the interactions and exchanges, the propensity to hybridity and surprise that characterise surrealism's quest for new and renewed knowledge are all revealed at work in the three novels studied here, at the same time that their scrutiny represents a search for deeper patterns of meaning that glint as tantalisingly close to today's reader as last night's dreams.

Krzysztof Fijalkowski