



Janus Virus

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Along the backstreets that lead me to the room in which I now sit, a tree is broadcasting its spores, covering the pavement in a scatter of drifting fluff. White tufts stick to yesterday's drying puddles, to the patches of tarmac oozing in the summer heat, or stud the leftovers of the previous evening's excesses with downy stars.

To speculate on the future of surrealism is as hopeless as it is irresistible: a game for last thing at night. It obliges you, for one thing, to decide at last what surrealism has been, which vectors it belongs to now, before swinging it on its necessary trajectory: endlessly intricate, breathtakingly simple. The title of Vincent Bounoure's anthology of contemporary surrealist writings (1976) makes one of the biggest claims for what it might be: *La civilisation surréaliste*. Yet if surrealism is above all not merely a movement but a kind of culture (that always provisional term), it is perhaps in the sense of a biological culture: of bacteria, of microorganisms. First invisible, then seething, proliferating. Morphology and adaptation of countless moments, a world more present the closer one watches it; dwelling not so much in things as in the questioning spaces

between them. And then surrealism's fascination with the outmoded is itself a kinship with the creeping mould signalling that the time of bright trinkets is done, and the work of disintegration and re-making is at hand.

Like such organisms, surrealism has shown a notable level of resistance to hostile environments in recent history: the ferment of the Bucharest surrealists or the *Main à Plume* group in the 1940s, or of surrealism in Czechoslovakia throughout the Cold War, thriving in inhospitable places. We might also note that while surrealism has historically been anchored in Western contexts, some of its most fascinating mutations have come where different conditions for organic growth prevail: South America, the Caribbean, Egypt... One might risk the prediction that any future surrealism will be at its most vital and concrete in a far more diverse set of spaces and social contexts, in forms apt to critique and shift the very notion of surrealism itself, turning it towards new destinies.

Understanding surrealism's history properly will probably always remain vital. It's as though (an ugly metaphor, but no matter) in the panorama view from a driver's seat through the car's windscreen, one corner of the vista, one border of perception must always remain the rear-view mirror. In French, *rétroviseur*: a kind of optical machine for seeing the past as portent and shadow of what lies ahead. In the rear-view mirror, the future comes up from behind us. But the difficulty of predicting what surrealism's future paths might be lies to a large extent in our knowledge that so many of the once secret tracks behind it are now either blocked or tarmacked. It is not merely the problem of the recuperation of surrealism's poetic and visual discoveries, but that almost every area of contemporary Western discourse has borrowed a tinge of surrealist practice. Post-structuralism, postmodernism, the redirected applications of anthropology or psychoanalysis in critical theory, the kneading together of arbitrary juxtapositions: none of these grasp surrealism's sensibility or intentions – indeed many explicitly disavow them – yet they are all unthinkable without surrealism's precedent.

The idea of surrealism's future is a misleading question to the extent that its relationship to the past already differs from the usual temporal paradigms. For surrealists, the pasts of Fourier and Sade, of pre-Columbian societies or Lascaux might be as present and vital as this moment, and one recalls that at that point of the mind where antinomies are

abolished, and whose location André Breton first identified in 1924 as synonymous with surrealism's quest, the contradiction between the past and the future was already signalled as scheduled for demolition. Automatism and objective chance incarnate this imploding of time, from which meaning emerges gradually in the ulterior, through a meeting of pre-existing but hitherto unfathomable realities. Words as echoes, images as premonitions, gathered towards the stilled explosion of an encounter that is endlessly now. In this sense, many of the threads of surrealism's future are already woven into its past and present works and ideas; they have simply yet to be drawn together meaningfully but magically.

Breton himself, it should be remembered, entertained fertile doubts about the viability of surrealism from the 1940s onwards, seventy years ago... Octavio Paz recalled a last meeting with Breton two years before his death:

That night, as the two of us strolled through Les Halles together, the conversation turned to a subject that was worrying him: the future of the surrealist movement. I remember what I told him, more or less: that to me surrealism was the sacred malady of our world [...]; since it was a necessary negation in the West, it would remain alive as long as modern civilisation remained alive [...]. My elation moved him, but he answered: 'Negation is a function of affirmation and vice versa; I doubt very much whether the world that is now dawning can be defined in terms of affirmation or negation: we are entering a neutral zone, and the surrealist rebellion will be obliged to express itself in forms that are neither negation nor affirmation. We have gone beyond approval or disapproval.'

Some years ago scientists affirmed that birds practice their songs in their sleep. As the elm dreams of the mistletoe, the scissors dream of the paper or the lock of hair, so we all secretly replay yesterday's songs and protest chants each night the better to reimagine them for tomorrow. In the pregnant silences between things, between individuals and their constructions, away from the hum of electrical chatter – of banal tweets rather than a lark's one-line poem – the melody of reverie might swell.

Each night I rehearse my song.