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Surrealism:

Perspectives on the Avant-Garde

J. H. Matthews



Professor of French at Syracuse University and editor of *Symposium*, J. H. Matthews holds a doctorate in Letters from the University of Montpellier and a D.Litt. conferred by the University of Wales. Sixteen of his twenty-one published books deal with surrealism, the subject of two volumes currently in press. The present essay originated as an address to a plenary session of the 1983 Triennial Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association.

Is there not something just a little disturbing about a snapshot taken in 1931? It shows André Breton posed in the embrasure of a wall of the castle that Ferdinand Cheval had spent a third of a century building from stone and cement.

One cannot escape altogether the impression that the presence of the author of the surrealist manifestos is intrusive, even if meant perhaps to “authenticate” the *Facteur Cheval*’s edifice. That impression may not be well founded, of course. Nonetheless, it does bring into focus one fact of note. The surrealists sometimes established a relationship between the image they were intent on projecting and the creative activity of isolated individuals, a number of whom, we can be sure, would have declined close association with the surrealist group, or would have remained totally indifferent to the supposed benefits of affiliation.

On occasion, recognition from within the surrealist circle looks more like annexation than a fraternal gesture. We have occasion to observe that a number of contemporaries appear to have felt that acceptance into the surrealist group might be more confining than liberating: the Mauritian poet Malcolm de Chazal, for instance, and Hans Arp, poet, painter, and sculptor.

Some people—they are mainly persons who wandered away from the surrealist camp or who had been banned from reentry—have complained that the surrealist air was unbreathable. Others, meanwhile, could not imagine drawing breath except in the rarefied atmosphere peculiar to surrealism. The latter give the avant-garde a meaning which challenges our customary view of it.

I confess that my own introduction to the idea of the avant-garde was neither literary nor artistic; it was strictly military.

Defending Queen and Country, I found myself involved in a day-

time exercise that has stayed in my mind. I recall watching as one unfortunate was detailed to guard the rear during a rest period. While we all lay about, he had to kneel with his back to us, rifle at the ready, though unloaded, just in case something menacing emerged from the sewage fields behind us. Once our squad changed direction to return to base, my vigilant fellow recruit ceased to be our rearguard. For just a moment or two, he held a forward position. But we soon reached and passed *that*, without anything noteworthy having happened in what our sergeant major termed a farm; of a bluntly specified kind, need I add?

Later, I discovered in myself a marked reluctance to serve as a scout, even before my company commander was killed by the Mau Mau. All the same, I came to appreciate the cachet of the avant-garde, the aura first of the vanguard writer and then of the painter enjoying comparable status.

In 1949 a *pion* (supervisor) in the French school to which I had been assigned (having been in the Resistance, he had something heroic about him) assured me that, one day soon, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Le Mur* would be on the academic curriculum. Such an idea was to do more for me, in the end, than my attempt to ape the fellow's body-building success. Yet it seemed far-fetched at a time when Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*—favorite reading of an elderly landlady of mine, who, whenever she referred to "la guerre," was alluding to the Franco-Prussian War—was still on the *programme* of the *Agrégation*. Yet nowadays Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, whom I had been compelled to read in high school, is behind the rearguard—the decoration he received from Napoleon notwithstanding. And Sartre? Well, today he scarcely ranks as a vanguard writer. It may be unkind to say that we have advanced beyond the position that was his lookout post. But we certainly know where that position *is*; we have it circled on our campaign maps.

One may quibble about Sartre's candidacy for avant-garde rank without, I believe, disposing of the point I wish to make. With time, the Fauves have come to look quite tame; Futurism has fallen into the past; Vorticism has ceased to leave anyone giddy. Action painting is no longer where the action is, and *les extravagants* may now leave us yawning but surely not wide-eyed.

The advance guard and even those who move ahead as scouts, it seems, do not all qualify by any means as Baudelairian *phares* (lighthouses, beacons). Still, they have served as *éclaireurs* (scouts) of sorts, moving along paths by which we join them eventually. It was Edouard Dujardin's destiny to pave the way for James Joyce, so earning little more, in the end, than a footnote in literary history.

What about Joyce, incidentally? Here is part of what we read in the 1941 edition of *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, published, you will have noticed, the year of his death. My copy is stamped, "For use by H. M. Forces. NOT FOR RESALE." I have no reason to suppose, though, that the version which went through four printings in the next three years and was available to the public at large differs in any significant detail: "If mere quantity of discussion and shrillness of assertion offered any true test of quality, James Joyce (1882-1941) and David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) would have to

be regarded as the greatest novelists of their time. But we must not mistake the fervid claims of coteries for the calm voice of general judgment" (p. 970). "Much could be written in praise of *Ulysses*; but in dispraise the one fatal word must be uttered: it is unreadable. It would never have a public, even if copies were given away like tracts. The wild enthusiasm of its immature readers can therefore be dismissed as a pretence. . . . *Finnegans Wake* (1939) is equally experimental and even more unsuccessful" (p. 972). As for the assessment of Lawrence in the same reputable work of reference, it yields this gem: "He felt he was one of the unclassed [Oxbridge speaks!]. No Scotsman similarly placed would have been conscious of the least inferiority" (p. 973). I regret to have to report total lack of success in establishing the origins of the author of these lines, one George Sampson. I must conclude that he belongs to the obscure but fiercely proud Clan Sampson.

It is not the thorny question of value judgment that preoccupies me here—whether, for example, Sartre or Borges is more deserving of the vanguard title than Queneau or Cortázar. My attention goes rather to the capacity demonstrated repeatedly by literature and painting to overtake the avant-garde and, if not always to move on far enough to transform it into the *arrière-garde*, then to absorb its innovations, to assimilate its boldness, taking the latter as the basis for further progress, out of which—on occasion—vanguard expression once again derives. However, one cannot reflect on this phenomenon without noting that, generalized though it seems to be, it does not apply in every instance. A number of exceptions come embarrassingly to mind, discouraging universal application of the theory that the avant-garde is simply tomorrow clamoring for attention today.

One truism of literary history is that its practitioners have a knack for betting on the wrong horses, for neglecting at least a few of the truly important writers while touting many of the also-rans. So true is this that any author secretly aspiring to be immortal must surely tremble when granted wide recognition in the here and now. As a boy, I read a book about contemporary English poets called *Eight for Immortality*—only one of whom I have heard of since. I wonder if that is what Samuel Beckett's Vladimir would call "un pourcentage honnête" ("a reasonable percentage," in Beckett's own translation).

As for painting, it is a field where flaws in critical judgment stand out so plainly that, in recent years especially, commentators have deemed it advisable, by the look of things, to give up evaluation in favor of cautious conciliation. The latter seems likely to offer more promise of success in identifying what is worthwhile because nobody, anymore, dares take the risk of denouncing an apparent charlatan or an incompetent for fear the latter turns out, ten years from now, to be God's gift to the post-Picasso era.

It is true that we have quite often seen commentators on literature and art display the decency to try to make amends for past errors and also to repair omissions—acknowledging finally the value of neglected figures who merit notice. A pendulum swing in opinion has afforded us an opportunity to reconsider the importance of Pierre Loti and of Lautréamont. Yet some nonconforming artists of vanguard tendencies have proved to be unassimilable. They do not beckon to succeeding generations urgently enough, it appears. Hence, when not ignored en-

tirely, they are treated as anomalies or as sports from which no progeny is to be expected. Such a writer was a man who never doubted his own genius, his indisputable right to eternal glory: Raymond Roussel, still a marginal figure despite Alain Robbe-Grillet's tribute, Michel Foucault's, and the special number of a magazine called *Bizarre*. Such a writer, too, is Maurice Fourré—even more marginal, in spite of André Breton's open admiration for his work, or possibly to some extent because of it.

Generally speaking, there seems to be a pattern, somewhat erratic in rhythm, linking the progress made by art and literature and the advances attributable to the avant-garde. We witness the operation of an integrative principle to which, even if the word "progress" looks suspect, the vitality of the arts can be ascribed. Much of what shocks, even outrages, today, will be accepted tomorrow, or the day after. Thus, taking the long view persuades us less of the disruptive role of the vanguard than of its necessity for keeping creative action on the move. Certainly, those who resist the call of the avant-garde too long must pay the penalty of being dismissed as reactionary. And this is only as it should be, the rest of us agree, as we feel obligated to explain to those coming after us what looked so alarming, exactly, in the work of this or that painter as to warrant calling him a Fauve, or what it was that, during the early nineteen-fifties, persuaded certain filmmakers in Britain to speak gravely, albeit vaguely, about a Free Cinema.

In the long run, it is not innovative effort that most of us come to admire in this or that avant-gardist. We prize, finally, the anticipative nature of his investigation or hers. In time, we salute prescience where, at first, we were sensitive to nothing more than open conflict with tradition and customary usage. In fact, we apply the term "avant-garde" most readily to artists whom we have begun to overtake, who—although perhaps only silhouetted on the skyline—are yet within our purview. In other words, attribution of the title "avant-garde" is already, for most people, an earnest of approval. Its use is reserved for creative personalities we already foresee being brought into the mainstream of art or literature. Let me put it somewhat differently, in terms that may sound dangerously negative. By the time society's guard dogs (the critics) have caught the scent of a vanguard artist and have commenced growling or barking, the person of whose presence they warn has slowed down, permitting the rest of us to begin catching up.

Not all who have enjoyed the reputation of belonging to the avant-garde are as objective or as honest, for that matter, as Eugène Ionesco, who conceded that his work had lost its momentum (let us say, to be accurate, that it had lost a certain kind of momentum taking it in a certain direction) when he caught himself writing for an audience already exposed to his *anti-pièces*. Where the anti-play becomes the play, the dramatist's relation to his public can remain the same no longer than the public's relation can to his theater. Eventually, the *nouvelle vague* breaks on a seashore where cinema audiences are assembled and waiting, responses primed, heads poised for nods of complicity. In the shock of the new, we discover over and over again, the novelty is shocking, all right—but transient nevertheless. In the mid-sixties I addressed a postcard to a correspondent of mine, Jean-Jacques Lebel, one of the

promoters of happenings. Posing the query, "What's happening to happenings?" it elicited no reply. Lebel never wrote me again. I was left with the "collected works" he had sent me once: the bottom half of a paperback American sex novel, in a box designed to contain suppositories.

It might be argued that the term "avant-garde" can be used in good conscience only when the creative activity so identified is a sign that one artist has forged ahead in a direction where others surely will follow. The vanguard is thus a promise of things to come. This is to say that where an artist, instead of opening up a new exploratory path, seems to be headed into a dead end—going somewhere we are unlikely to follow or even to want to follow—the avant-garde label looks inappropriate. By the standards implied here, Maurice Fourré is not a vanguard writer at all. He is a perverse one, a novelist who must pay the price for trying to return to fiction after a forty-three-year layoff.

However objectively formulated unfavorable criticism of exceptional people like Fourré may appear, it restricts the concept of the avant-garde, confining it to limits in which thoroughly responsible commentators and their public can feel comfortable placing trust. It suggests that the vanguard artist and everyone ahead of whom he strikes out are part of the same evolutionary movement, advancing in the same direction. In this way, it renders the idea of the avant-garde tolerable, and even welcome. The assumption is that the vanguard artist is equipped with sharper instincts than anyone coming behind, presumably blessed with intimations which surprise, in the short term, yet prove to be sound and acceptable, in the long. There is no place in the scheme of things for individuals who never cease to surprise, whom the rest of us never overhaul and whom we see no advantage in chasing after. The attention we are prepared to grant the vanguard is so selective that we impose on the avant-garde a meaning which salutes certain virtues in the unconventional artist only to brand other characteristics aberrations or even vices.

It would be foolish to mutter of a conspiracy on a grand scale. What strikes me, instead, is the following. The avant-garde is a generally acceptable notion so long as those who have moved ahead can be seen, one day, as having made explicit something at present only implicit, either in our grasp on human experience or in our way of rendering it. Underlying our sense of the avant-garde is a usually unarticulated belief in the permanence of the *matter* of art and in the necessity for reviewing, periodically, the *manner* in which that matter is to be communicated. Thus the vanguard artist startles us when reaching for a communicative mode which, on our first contact with it, appears to function so strangely as to leave us at a loss, unable to participate because we are not yet attuned to the investigative procedures the artist has made his own.

Mention of surrealism in all this may sound anticlimactic. I should like to bring surrealism into the picture, nevertheless. My purpose is to test the hypothesis that there exists (side by side with something I term, for convenience, the respectable avant-garde) one that has not attained the status of respectability or, at most, is judged respectable only on terms laid down by the critics. And when

the artist does not meet the critics' standards? Well, he runs the risk of being dismissed, as René Magritte was dismissed by Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, who, as late as 1954, called his work "brothel painting."

At the risk of being accused of employing a vocabulary that is prejudicial, not to say inflammatory, I would call the avant-garde I have been describing up to now the official avant-garde. This is a form of vanguardism that is assigned and indeed actually can be seen to play a role in the evolution of art. It is, then, quite appropriately named, legitimately bearing a label for which there is ample justification. I have no excuse either for quarreling with the official avant-garde's designation or for questioning its relationship to art. Some might contend that I ought to be casting about, therefore, for a name which could be applied without danger of confusion to what I am going to call the unofficial avant-garde.

To whom could the term "unofficial avant-garde" apply, then? It identifies, for me, individuals in whose work anticonformity is not to be denied, persons who unquestionably forge ahead. These are people, though, whose advance appears of doubtful value, whom the majority of writers and painters (to say nothing of those who speak for them) see no advantage in following. If these artists must be acknowledged as having managed to strike out on their own, the consensus is that they have blundered into one cul-de-sac or another, where it would be pointless to follow. Thus they fail to meet the conditions under which the official avant-garde figures in the scheme of things. Their investigations are denied validity on the grounds that they offer to lead where no one else could imagine wishing to go. In other words, there is no *place* for them.

At this point, I offer you a date, not quite an arbitrary one, I think: 1907. That year Maurice Fourré brought out a short story, his last publication before 1950; Henri Rousseau's *La Charmeuse de serpent* was on display at the Salon d'Automne in Paris; Pablo Picasso completed a canvas called *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*; and Clovis Trouille, then eighteen years old, painted his *Palais de merveilles*. *Who painted what?* One has only to ask this question to be aware of the difference between the official avant-garde—in which not only Picasso but also the *Douanier* Rousseau occupies a position—and the unofficial avant-garde, which has as yet no history.

Clovis Trouille's name occurs in just one paragraph of John Weightman's *The Concept of the Avant-Garde*. There he is identified inaccurately as having "the admirably Surrealist name of Claude Trouille" and is described as "an elderly French Surrealist painter."¹ We can be sure that Trouille would not have been mentioned at all in Weightman's 300-page volume had he not given the name *Oh Calcutta! Calcutta!* to one of his 1946 canvases, which Weightman was apparently unable to recognize in reproduction on the backdrop of the stage show *Oh Calcutta* and on the front cover of that show's program.

In 1930 Trouille would paint *Remembrance*, describing it as "the anti-everything picture." Shown at the Salon des Artistes et Ecrivains Révolutionnaires that same year, it was his first exhibited work (he was already forty-one years old), attracting the attention of the French surrealists, who reproduced it in black and white on the final page of the third issue (1931) of their magazine *Le Surréalisme au service de la*

1. John Weightman, *The Concept of the Avant-Garde: Explorations in Modernism* (LaSalle, Ill.: Library Press, 1973), p. 208.

Révolution. Although awarded a Médaille d'Honneur du Travail by the mayor of the eighteenth *arrondissement* for thirty-five years' service as a touch-up artist for a Parisian firm manufacturing wax figures, Trouille (from choice more than neglect) did not hold a one-man show until 1963. To avoid "any blasphemous scandal," admission to the exhibit was reserved for guests bearing the invitation catalog as a kind of passport. By that time, Clovis Trouille was all of seventy-four years old. No indeed, Fourré and Trouille have not fared quite as Picasso and Henri Rousseau have done.

Let me go back, now, to a reference made earlier to André Breton's admiration for Maurice Fourré. At about the time Breton's preface to *La Nuit du Rose-Hôtel* came out with the novel in 1950, I ran across an article in a French periodical, recording the opinions of celebrities who had been asked to name the ten leading painters of the first half of the twentieth century. Breton, I read, had named artists about whom nobody else had ever heard. Moreover, I was assured, that was only to be expected of the man. Fourré's *La Nuit du Rose-Hôtel* inaugurated a series to be edited by Breton under the heading *Révélation*, for which the cover design, by the way, incorporated a Baudelairian lighthouse. Evidently, André Breton was running true to form, in launching a series (intended to complement Albert Camus's *Espoir*, for the same house of Gallimard) with a fictional text by a neglected writer in his seventies.

It was typical of Breton that, in his second surrealist manifesto, he should have identified surrealism as "the tail of romanticism," but only, he stressed, on condition that the prehensibility of that tail be acknowledged. There are moments when it seems that, facing surrealism, we witness the tail wagging the dog. A similar impression may accompany scrutiny of the tradition in which the surrealists gladly took their place. One is readily persuaded that surrealist taste was predictable to the extent that it looks quixotic, quirky. Surrealists obviously inclined to revere the outsider, the anticonformist, the isolated creator who apparently had no literary or artistic successors other than (occasionally, anyway) the surrealists themselves. Or again, the features of an artist's work commanding the surrealists' attention and drawing praise from them are those in which reputable critics have shown little or no interest.

To argue that the surrealists were, by definition, more perceptive commentators than other people, endowed with more subtle sensibilities, would be no more informative than convincing. It would merely separate the believers from the skeptical. What matters here is not whether anything is to be learned from the surrealists' conviction that they had to be in the right. The truly revelatory factor is less the peculiar nature of the surrealists' affections than the viewpoint nourishing those affections.

Turning to the preface Breton wrote in 1949 for *La Nuit du Rose-Hôtel*, we see what motivated him to plan the series *Révélation*. "It is a matter," he explained, "of bringing into the daylight a certain number of works that are really *à part*. Approaching them does not always fail to present certain difficulties but their virtue is to make us look *out to sea* in the life we think we are leading, in this way to preserve from stereotypy and sclerosis the vital forces of understanding."² Use

2. André Breton, "La Nuit du Rose-Hôtel et la Collection 'Révélation' qu'elle inaugure," in Maurice Fourré, *La Nuit du Rose-Hôtel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 9. All translations from the French are my own.

of the vocabulary of medicine (the respected and lucrative career which Breton, like Louis Aragon, had abandoned for poetry) helps uncover the basis on which surrealists judged the revelatory character of “a certain number of works.” What is more, the interpretation placed on revelation by Breton was consistent with the position he defended (and from which he attacked, too), as a surrealist.

Even though no titles were added to his series after *La Nuit du Rose-Hôtel*, it is worth reviewing the criterion Breton had in mind. He proposed to include texts from the past which had not attained “the desired resonance,” as he put it, either because of limited circulation or, more significantly, because they went deliberately “against the current.” Now those conditions present no novelty. They might be met by a wide variety of works in which people on the track of the official avant-garde could take some interest but in which the surrealists detected no particular virtue. The principal condition of acceptance for *Révélation* was announced when Breton spoke of “a new manner of envisaging man’s situation in the world,” of deducing means for freeing man from constraints inherent in the routine mode applied more and more generally, according to Breton’s text, “in the formation of the human mind.”

This still sounds quite vague. To trace Breton’s line of thought a little further, we have to look outside his comments on *La Nuit du Rose-Hôtel* and consider also the title of one of his catalog prefaces, “L’Art des fous: clé des champs” (Insane Art: roaming free). It was not “art” that attracted Breton in drawings and paintings by the insane. Nor was it madness, really. His title culminates in a phrase later used to name a collection of his essays gathered in 1953: *La Clé des champs*. Through art André Breton sought liberation.

In the first paragraph of the volume on surrealism written for a general history of painting, fellow surrealist José Pierre insists appositely: “Speaking pictorially and poetically, the notion of a ‘school,’ as it is current in literary history and the history of art, is fundamentally incompatible with the will to liberation from mental habits, formal conventions, technical routines, the profound ‘anti-sociality’ of the individual creator, poet or painter. On this plane, surrealism has deliberately held to the ‘buissonnière’ attitude”³ (*faire l’école buissonnière* = to play hooky). Looking “out to sea”; “roaming free”; “playing hooky”—complementary metaphors direct our attention to the same need, essential in the surrealists’ estimation: a need to elude control, to assert freedom in the face of imposed authority, and to find in *la sauvagerie* not merely a social posture but also a source of creative energy.

It would be unproductive to suggest that art could appeal to surrealists only after it had ceased to be art. It helps, though, to notice that the surrealists’ attention was engaged, their enthusiasm fired, when art became—in their eyes—more than art. So far as art managed to exceed functions prescribed by tradition, it held promise for the surrealists.

Their standpoint is most comprehensible—in many respects, anyway—when we observe how often surrealists took encouragement from Marcel Duchamp’s dictum that it is the beholder (*le regardeur*) who makes the picture. Much that is apparently arbitrary and even confusing in what they had to say may be traced to the assurance with which they claimed for the spectator/reader the right to invest the created work

3. José Pierre, *Le Surréalisme* (Lausanne: Editions Rencontre, 1966), p. 9

with a meaning of his or her own. Hence the title of another introductory essay by André Breton, who prefaced his anthology of black humor with a text called "Paratonnerre" (lightning rod). Surrealism, we infer, attracted certain electrical currents in the air, conducting them in a direction of its own. The surrealist interpreter chose a path divergent from that taken by other commentators on painting or literature, who therefore are at a disadvantage in their effort to evaluate surrealism. He judged the things he saw and read by extraartistic values.

Such a remark sounds like begging an unstated question. All the same, it explains why surrealists admired, for instance, the work of Fourré, in which literary criticism can detect nothing to rejoice over. It explains too why they were responsive to a number of eccentrics—to borrow (reluctantly) a term which immediately classifies negatively persons like Ferdinand Cheval and Léon Corcuff, inventor of aluminum shoes and collapsible beds, for whom there is still no assigned place in the world where Tinguely has found a public more awestruck, no doubt, than comprehending.

Even if inclined to make fun of Corcuff, we must admit that his creative activities fall outside the frame within which the avant-garde usually is delimited. At best, artists such as he may be saluted as *inspirés* (I have borrowed the word from Gilles Ehrmann's 1962 photo collection, *Les Inspirés et leurs demeures*, which Breton prefaced—a book in which the taxi driver Corcuff does not appear, though the mailman Cheval does). But that is a long way from being recognized as *illuminati*. By and large, the achievement of such people is adjudged curious rather than seminal.

Surrealism, of course, did not offer a permanent haven or even a temporary refuge to every artist who, being outside the limits set by accepted convention, failed to earn a niche in the official avant-garde. Rejection by everyone else was by no means a guarantee of approval by the surrealists. Indeed, the latter were strict in their demands, in imposing conditions under which innovative departure from conventional modes of thought and expression was condoned. To the degree that surrealism defied convention, betokened suspicion of literature, and was wary of what the art of painting had become, it stood for revitalization of poetic communication.

Now, surrealism did not presume to change every artistic dead end into a pathway to the new. But it did teach that the absence of some of the virtues regarded by critics as essential to artistic expression and discovery, even in the avant-garde, need not be an impediment to progress. Everything hinges, then, on the meaning attached to "progress," on the possibility remaining for advancement in a zone beyond that of artistic communication. It is here that the surrealists showed themselves responsive, while commentators alert to the official avant-garde continue to be unimpressed.

The problem is that, seen from outside the surrealist circle, the kind of assessment offered by Breton—of Raymond Roussel's theater, shall we say, or of Henri Rousseau's painting—seems out of focus. In reality, it is focused differently from the sort of commentary we have learned to expect of critics we trust to guide our judgment along lines laid down by the integrative principle cited earlier as usually controlling response to the avant-garde. Just listen for a moment to Breton discussing Kan-

dinsky in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* and you will notice that the basis for judgment is markedly similar to that on which the abortive series *Révélation* would have been erected: "The line is by [Kandinsky] returned to its true necessity: it is the Adriadne's thread which allows one to find oneself again in the labyrinth of appearances, setting aside that which can constitute from the outside the individual unity of objects."⁴

4. André Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 286.

Naturally, Breton could hardly have claimed to have discovered Kandinsky all by himself. But he surely can be credited with having had reasons for admiration which, while not detaching Kandinsky from the official avant-garde, link him with the unofficial vanguard so exciting to the surrealist imagination. Similarly, it would be foolish to assert that the customs man Rousseau's reputation as a representative of the official avant-garde is enhanced by Breton's remarks about his work. Even so, by emphasizing Rousseau's ability to demonstrate how ridiculous are artistic means that can be taught (*qui s'enseignent*), André Breton was able to relate the *Douanier* to a branch of the unofficial vanguard from which surrealists drew inspiration. Here so-called primitive painting rests on "*the cornerstone of ingenuousness*" to which *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* attributes the work of self-taught artists: "a fascinating decantation of the real."⁵

5. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

Kandinsky and Rousseau are two of a number of artists who may be described as straddling the official and unofficial avant-garde paths. I have introduced their names out of a necessity to stress a feature of the surrealist approach which seems to me of the greatest importance. Even when surrealists appeared to be in agreement with the critics, approving the very same artists, the grounds on which they voiced satisfaction were not shared by other observers. Wherever a surrealist saw cause for praise, we find he had reasons of his own for singling out this writer or that painter. The same reasons underlay his enthusiasm when he spoke with admiration of other vanguard writers and pictorial artists deemed unworthy of serious attention in critical circles.

Neither André Breton nor those—José Pierre, notably—who evaluated creative achievement from the same point of view can be accused of capriciousness when defending positions from which some artists appeared worthy of praise while others were treated with contempt. The surrealist's was certainly a dissident voice, though. When the moment came to assess some manifestation of the avant-garde, that voice was raised to endorse qualities by which surrealism validated art. Thus surrealists were sure why they approved the work done by Giorgio de Chirico roughly between 1910 and 1919, when, according to José Pierre, he was "the perfect model of the surrealist artist, or even of the surrealist pure and simple."⁶ They were just as sure why they should condemn everything the Italian painter did after 1920 or so, with the exception of his novel *Hebdomeros*, which they began to praise upon its publication in 1929.

6. José Pierre, *Le Surréalisme* (Paris: Fernand Hazan, 1973), p. 54.

Affection and esteem were elicited from the surrealist membership by qualities to which their common ambitions made them sensitive. Trouille could affirm his independence of all movements, schools, and factions with the declaration, "I adhere only to myself." Surrealists would not have denied him that right or withheld their support because he asserted it. Devotion to the cause of surrealism

was never to breed fickleness or even pettiness, despite things one hears from former affiliates of whom one, Georges Limbour, wrote to André Breton in 1929, "It would give me pleasure to see your nose bleed."⁷

When the surrealists surveyed the avant-garde, they did not embark on an anxious guessing game refereed by posterity. They did not care whether a writer whom they had rescued from obscurity (Lautréamont) or one they themselves had discovered (Gisèle Prassinos) would catch the attention of observers whose criteria surely differed radically from their own. It did not bother them (very much, anyway) that a painter might end up, like Max Ernst, capable of biting the surrealist hand that had once fed him. It was of little or no concern to them that, after a time, an Eugène Ionesco or a Fernando Arrabal might find that he could publish elsewhere than in surrealist magazines, or that Antonin Artaud's concept of a theater of cruelty took him away from their ranks and enshrined him in the official avant-garde, thanks largely to the inability of enthusiasts to understand what he meant by *la cruauté*.

Meanwhile, no surrealist saw any cause for alarm in the discovery that Raymond Roussel was an admirer of Pierre Loti as well as of Jules Verne, or that Clovis Trouille adored Titian and Giorgione. Nor were the surrealists disconcerted to learn that the work of each of these contemporaries betrays signs of an indebtedness frankly admitted. Surrealists did not seek to regiment the unofficial avant-garde or even that part of it which they deemed interesting. When they responded to solicitations from the work of certain artists in the van, they invariably revealed predispositions which are, in the final analysis, more enlightening than the commendation dispensed. I am thinking for example of André Breton's motives when he included Jean-Pierre Brisset in his anthology of black humor. As Breton saw it, Brisset's deeply serious writings introduce us to "a vertiginous succession of word equations" in which "great hallucinatory value" is to be detected.⁸ Thus considering the writings of Brisset from the angle of quite involuntary humor enabled Breton to situate them along a line linking Jarry's Pataphysics with Dali's paranoiac-critical activity. And that line, of course, set in surrealist perspective everything it joined together.

"The fact is," writes Christopher Robinson, in his *French Literature in the Twentieth Century*, "that Time imposes an orthodoxy of value judgments with which the prudent concur and against which the bold revolt."⁹ In their stance before the vanguard, the surrealists never ceased being in bold revolt against accepted views. Indeed, remaining true to surrealism required them to go on being impenitently imprudent in their perspective on the avant-garde.

7. From a letter quoted by André Breton in an appendix to his *Second Manifeste du surréalisme* of 1930. See *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, [1962]), p. 229.

8. André Breton, *Anthologie de l'Humour noir* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1966), p. 309.

9. Christopher Robinson, *French Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Newton Abbot & London: David & Charles; Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1980), p. 6.