

ANDRÉ BRETON

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Volume 22

J. H. Matthews

André Breton
Sketch for an Early Portrait

J. H. MATTHEWS

ANDRÉ BRETON

Sketch for an Early Portrait

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Preface

There are not many books in English about André Breton. Certainly, there are not so many of them that the author of yet another must feel obligated to explain how he was moved to write his. Breton's stature is much greater than that of a number of contemporaries who have received, already, far more attention from the critics than he. It provides justification without excuse, especially when the commentator's purpose is to shed light on the intricacies of Breton's mind, the significance of his original work, or the impact of his ideas on twentieth-century culture. Hence the aim pursued in the present study may be stated without further preamble: To attempt to broaden understanding of the evolution of André Breton's thinking during a critical period in his life, the one which brought him to leadership of the surrealist movement in France.

Evidently, the focus here is narrow, the goal being to give clearer definition to the intellectual state of a young man emerging from doubt—and so from self-doubt—into renewed confidence in his poetic calling. Examination of other cases (that of Louis Aragon, or Paul Eluard, or Benjamin Péret) which complement and in some respects parallel Breton's, has been excluded. However, the intention behind this book is not to leave a gullible audience with the belief that André Breton's experience was quite unique. Instead, attention is concentrated on the evolving thought of an individual whose prominence among the surrealists warrants granting him careful consideration.

The surrealists' reputation for being incorrigible iconoclasts, determined to go their own way, whatever the opposition or resistance facing them, is well established and widely acknowledged. As a consequence, without really thinking about the matter, many people tend to treat surrealism as a movement having no prehistory, a phenomenon which somehow appeared from nowhere on October 15, 1924, the day Simon Kra published André Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme* under the imprint Editions du Sagittaire. Their viewpoint represents one of those accommodations by which we spare ourselves the effort of serious reflection. It conveniently ignores indications like the following.

Future surrealist playwright Roger Vitrac dedicated to the Symbolist poet Henri de Regnier the opening sonnet of his first verse collection, *Le Faune noir* (1919). Future surrealist poet Benjamin Péret made the discovery of poetry when, in transit one day during his military service, he found on a railroad station bench a copy of *Poèmes* by that preeminent Symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé. Not all of those cited in the first surrealist manifesto as "having shown proof of ABSOLUTE SURREALISM" began writing under inspiration from the dominant poetic movement of the closing years of the nineteenth century. None of them, either, avoided all contact with literary tradition before enlisting in surrealism. In 1914, future poet of surrealism and its principal theoretician, André Breton published verse for the first time. Three poems of his appeared in *La Phalange*, a magazine edited by a disciple of Mallarmé's, Jean Royère. The first was dedicated to Paul Valéry, a great admirer of Mallarmé and someone whom Breton venerated as the author of *Monsieur Teste*, which he had committed to memory. The second was dedicated to the Symbolist poet Francis Vielé-Griffin.

The facts are unexceptional, but worth noting all the same. André Breton was still a schoolboy when he wrote his first poems. Lacking adequate knowledge of any language but his mother tongue, he found his earliest models among the poets of France, where poetic tradition has always been strong and where dissidence has relegated writers to isolation oftener than it has earned them respect or a position of prominence. Breton's case would have been unusual indeed, had he approached poetry, while still a teenager, in a spirit of revolt, bent on scotching tradition and striking out on his own.

So far as inherited values were concerned, André Breton showed himself to be dutifully acquiescent rather than rebellious. And his plan of campaign (if we may apply such a term to a course of action that was entirely predictable and not in the least original) was to earn approval from his elders, whom he could then expect to facilitate acceptance of his work by poetry magazines. As a beginner, he displayed no inclination to attempt to take the poetic citadel by storm. He sought entry—if possible by the main gate, so that his arrival would be noticed—armed with letters of introduction which would ensure that the drawbridge would be lowered for him, and with the least delay possible.

The respectability of André Breton's ambitions as a youthful poet deserves mention because it contrasts radically with the aspirations nourishing the ideas and writings for which he is remembered. Between the time when he published his first verses and the appearance of *Poisson soluble* (appended to his first surrealist manifesto), Breton's outlook underwent a profound change, to which we owe the publication of his mature years. The change occurred during the period in Breton's life with which we are concerned here, a time when disillusionment and hesitation caused his advance toward poetry to falter and then to pick up momentum as it took a new and exciting direction.

How did Breton, who as an eighteen-year-old seemed perfectly content to look to his elders for poetic examples to follow, come to reject the past and to map a route for the future exploration of poetry? This is the question underlying the present study, which is intended to provide a sketch of a young poet in evolution. The orientation of this study needs to be stressed from the outset, so that confusion about its scope does not lead some readers into disappointment or irritation other than of the kind its author may elicit inadvertently. A variety of influences came together to lead André Breton on a quest in which he was engaged already for quite some time before he realized where it was leading him. The focal point of our attention is therefore a sensibility which reveals its complexities as it responds to the appeal (in some instances more directly influential than in others) of predecessors and contemporaries. The work of certain individuals seemed to Breton to hold up a mirror in which he caught glimpses of himself as he wanted to be, tantalizingly incomplete, sometimes rather vague, but fascinating and stimulating none the less.

This volume deals with influences that left their mark on Breton by contributing in some way to his intellectual formation, to the evolution of his ideas. It argues that the value of Breton's published essays about men as different from one another as Guillaume Apollinaire and Sigmund Freud lies elsewhere than in undisguised, uncritical devotion. When we look beneath the surface of Breton's comments in print we always find, though in unequal measure, indications of his personal preoccupations. These take us beyond objective evaluation of this or that person's ideas and accomplishments. Ultimately, the significance of the essays written by André Breton while he was still a young man may be traced to his concern for questions which the particular occasion—prefacing an exhibition of Picabia's paintings or supplying an overview of Apollinaire's poetry, shall we say—offered him the opportunity to confront, even when definitive or explicit answers eluded him.

The chapters assembled below are headed by names none of which could be confused with André Breton's. In no instance is an effort made to present a balanced view, of the ideas of Freud, for instance, or of Marcel Duchamp's achievement. An equitable treatment, based on broad acquaintance with Freudian theory, Apollinairian writing, and so on, has not been accomplished, and indeed has not been attempted. Instead, readers will discover evidence in Breton of a bias which is, at moments, flagrant. In each instance, the bias reflected in Breton's comments proves to be the most illuminating feature of what he has to say, bringing both light and shade to the picture he paints. It would be pointless, then, to refer to André Breton for an objective assessment of the contribution made by Freud or Artaud. Breton had no reason to aspire to present such an evaluation. Thus it is especially informative to consider, for example, why he was attracted to Freud, when we are concerned with sketching Breton's portrait, not Freud's.

The artists whose ideas and accomplishments bring André Breton's opinions into focus here were not all, strictly speaking, contemporaries of his. They were all, however, men whom he had occasion to know personally, to meet (whether only once, as in the case of Freud, or at irregular intervals throughout his life, as in the case of Duchamp), to frequent, to engage in the exchange of ideas. A glance at his first collection of essays, *Les Pas perdus* of 1924, is all we need to be able to appreciate that Breton was capable of feeling and inclined to express admiration for people who had not lived long enough to give him the opportunity to make their acquaintance—Lautréamont, notably, and Louis Bertrand. Taken up in that volume, his article on Alfred Jarry alludes to the position in which Breton found himself when discussing such men. André Breton describes himself as having to “imagine him, I who did not know him.”¹ However, on the same page Breton affirms without hesitation, “I can, I think, judge his work with sufficient detachment.” In this statement, the French phrase “un recul suffisant” stands out oddly. It is anything but representative of Breton's approach to artists who had stimulated his admiration. The essay on Jarry is, indeed, uncharacteristic, not only of *Les Pas perdus* but of its author's nonpoetic studies in general.

While Eluard once wrote an important text on Baudelaire, and Soupault, another (not to mention his book on Lautréamont), André Breton's published essays yield nothing comparable. Far from deriving benefit from distance (*recul*), and so improving perspective (*recul*), his comments on poetic matters gathered momentum best from proximity, which never held him back from judging to his own satisfaction artists physically close to him, whether they happened to be close to his own age or not. It goes without saying that Breton was very selective, in that the problems brought into focus when he evaluated the work of others were the very ones to which his own concerns granted priority. Not only were distance and detachment unnecessary, while perspective was preordained; they were inappropriate too, since the urgency of the problems Breton shared with selected artists (or thought he did—it comes to the same thing) would have made distance irrelevant, even perhaps an impediment. André Breton was deeply impressed by Jarry, and even more impressed by Arthur Rimbaud. But—and this explains their absence from the present study—we could not expect him to have discussed their work quite the way he did that of the individuals examined in the pages that follow.

The main objective in view here is to shed light on Breton's position and to illuminate his ideas, through an examination of his response to the activities of men to whom he ascribed special importance and who helped him clarify his ideas and formulate them. Exhaustive treatment of the origins of surrealism in France lies beyond the range of the present volume. But review of certain documents will bring with it clarification of Breton's concept of surrealism.

And attention to the latter will make it easier to paint Breton's portrait in natural hues.

One would have difficulty defending the thesis that, had André Breton not lived, or had he become a doctor of medicine and ignored his poetic vocation, surrealism would never have existed. Even so, reviewing what Breton contributed to surrealism—what his needs as a poet actually were, and how he tried to satisfy those needs—leaves us convinced that without Breton's participation, surrealism would have developed in somewhat different ways, perhaps radically different ones. It would surely have had a rhythm different from the one imposed by Breton's sensitivity to some modes of artistic expression (painting among them) and indifference, even hostility, to others (music, notably). One thing is certain. No adherent—even Benjamin Péret, the other French poet who, after entering its ranks, continued to be devoted to surrealism for the rest of his life—was ever to exert so much influence on the theory which gave meaning and direction to surrealist poetic practice. Even if Breton's creative personality had been less fascinating than it was, this fact alone would justify our examining how some of his ideas originated and how, taking shape, they molded surrealism, not only as an expressive mode but, more important by far, as an investigative one.

By and large, André Breton's sense of taste—which owed nothing to so-called good taste and more and more, as time went by, to emergent surrealist principles—not only authorized the enthusiasms he felt and expressed but accounted fully for them, in his friends' eyes. In addition, it gave to his discussions of men he praised in his writings and private correspondence a significance going beyond the limits of personal idiosyncrasy to broaden and deepen our understanding of what surrealism stood for, demanded of its participants, and offered them in return.

It has become a truism that André Breton was surrealism personified. Like so many truisms, this one represents simplification yet embodies enough truth to restrain us from dismissing it as a falsification. All the same, in late adolescence surrealism's undisputed leader in France did not start out with the goal of becoming a surrealist. Yet one point is worth noting, even so. Breton's dominant ambition, from his teens onward, was to be a poet. His motivation grew out of doubt regarding his ability to realize that ambition while persisting in following traditional poetic paths. In the end, it was Breton's destiny to identify poetry with surrealism, to undertake exploration of the former by way of the latter, to elaborate a theory of surrealism which invested poetic endeavor with new meaning. Still, surrealist precepts did not take form overnight. Nor, for that matter, did every feature of surrealist theory find its source in Bretonian thought. Nevertheless, André Breton's influence on the definition