

1 INTRODUCTION

The present volume represents neither a history nor a theoretical study of Surrealism. It seeks neither to chronicle the successive phases of its evolution nor, for the most part, to analyze the principles that govern its expression. On the contrary, it examines certain developments that prepared the way for the Surrealist movement, considered in its international context, as well as the triumph of Surrealism itself. Had the movement been founded a mere twenty years earlier, before the Cubists and the Dadaists left their mark, it would never have assumed the form in which we know it today. As will become apparent, the Surrealists benefited both directly and indirectly from their avant-garde predecessors, who served as important models and influenced them in numerous ways. Although the book is concerned with historical schools to some extent, I have preferred to concentrate on some of the artists and writers who played a key role in the elaboration of Surrealism. Each chapter is devoted to one or two persons who deserve to be much better known, both in their own right and in the light of their contributions to modern aesthetics. Although a few of these figures have achieved a certain notoriety, most of the others have received little or no recognition. For every Marcel Duchamp or Salvador Dalí who has risen to prominence, dozens of equally talented individuals have been consigned to relative obscurity.

For better or worse (I hope the former), the study that follows is highly ambitious. Spanning the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, it surveys half a dozen countries situated on three different continents. Among the various movements that receive extended commentary, four are especially

2 THE RISE OF SURREALISM

prominent: Cubism (both literary and artistic), Metaphysical Art, Dada, and Surrealism. Within the framework constituted by these schools, the work examines a number of distinctive styles, such as machinism and abstraction, and encompasses a series of related topics. Much of the book is concerned with competing artistic models and with different strategies for creating Surrealist and proto-Surrealist works. Much is devoted to the dynamics of the imagery that artists and writers chose to employ and to the new roles it assumed in their compositions. Utilizing examples taken from a number of countries, including France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Argentina, Mexico, Chile, and the United States, the volume analyzes their aversion to mimesis and the solutions they devised to replace it. As much as anything, it considers how poets and painters sought to redefine their relationship to the modern world, which was fraught with paradox. For just as the discovery of a new reality demanded to be expressed by a new realism, the creation of a new realism disclosed a brand new reality.¹

As the reader will discover, each chapter investigates one or more problems that, in many cases, have puzzled scholars for decades. Following the Introduction, the initial chapter examines Guillaume Apollinaire's treatment of the fourth dimension, which, like Max Weber's, has appeared to some observers to be inexplicable. At the same time, it explores the concept of the fourth dimension itself and discusses its implications for Surrealism and for the avant-garde in general. By appropriating this intriguing concept, which fired the popular imagination, the Fauvists and the Cubists succeeded in freeing themselves—and those who came after them—from the shackles of traditional realism. For the first time, artists and writers were able to enter into a new, imaginary dimension where they could do as they liked. Although the fourth dimension served primarily as a metaphor initially, the Surrealists conceived of it as an actual domain—that of the Freudian unconscious—whose boundaries could be determined via certain procedures. Embracing both literary and artistic invention, the fourth dimension serves as an overarching metaphor for the succeeding chapters, each of which examines a similar attempt to construct a brave new world.

Chapter 3 considers Dada portraiture as practiced by Marius de Zayas and Francis Picabia, two of the first artists to experiment with abstraction. As with Apollinaire and Weber, the interaction between a major French figure and an obscure artist living in America leads to a surprising finding, which the reader will discover in due course. The principal challenge that confronts the critic is

to understand how these portraits operate and to clarify their relation to each other. For in liberating objects from their ordinary functions, one discovers, Picabia and de Zayas endowed them with endless interpretive possibilities that the Surrealists would exploit in turn. In contrast to Duchamp, who emphasized the aesthetic value of ordinary objects, they focused on their symbolic value and explored their multiple associations. The relationship between Dada and Surrealism has been the subject of endless debates, as critics have sought to demonstrate that the former was subsumed in the latter or vice versa. What matters for our purposes is that Surrealism was born out of a certain disillusionment with Dada. Although the two movements differed radically in spirit, they were continuous historically and included many of the same members (see Chapter 5). Convinced that they had become trapped in a vicious circle, André Breton and his colleagues sought to redefine Dada's negativity "as a critique capable of opening the way to more constructive enterprises."²

The fourth chapter concentrates on the inventor of Metaphysical Art, Giorgio de Chirico, and investigates his revolutionary aesthetics. The father of Magic Realism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and Surrealist painting, de Chirico has been the last major modern artist to successfully defy interpretation. This chapter proposes the first systematic explanation of his enigmatic art, which it studies extensively. "It is a paradox of de Chirico's career," James Thrall Soby remarks, "that he first attained truly international fame during the 1920's, when his relationship with those chiefly responsible for his fame—the Dadaists, soon to become Surrealism's leaders—was slowly deteriorating."³ Until they concluded (toward 1926) that his original inspiration had disappeared, they eagerly corresponded with de Chirico, visited him in Italy, wrote glowing accounts of his paintings and drawings—which they also purchased—and welcomed him into their group when he settled in Paris. Despite their eventual disillusionment with the man himself, they continued to draw inspiration from his early works, which so perfectly exemplified the Surrealist mission. "De Chirico a accompli dans sa jeunesse le voyage le plus extraordinaire qui soit pour nous" ("During his youth, de Chirico completed what was for us the most extraordinary journey ever undertaken"), Breton declared in 1928—a journey not only into the realm of dream but into the deepest recesses of the unconscious.⁴

The remaining chapters in the volume explore a series of topics associated with the Surrealist movement itself. Chapter 5 examines a persistent question that continues to intrigue modern scholars: the extent of André

Breton's debt to Apollinaire. Focusing on their respective poetics, which for both were subsumed under the heading of *surréalisme*, it attempts to elucidate the relations that existed between them. Concentrating on several crucial texts, the investigation discloses a number of differences but reveals that the two poetics (and the two poets) had a surprising amount in common. In particular, it sheds new light on Breton's theory of the image that, as he admitted himself, derived from experiments initially performed by the Cubists. Another example of the broad debt that Surrealism owed to Cubism, Breton's conception of Surrealist imagery turns out to exemplify his understanding of inspiration as well.

Extrapolating from the preceding discussion, Chapter 6 explores Surrealism's iconic dimension. Above all, it seeks to explain how the Surrealist image functions and proposes a new model based on Roman Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy. Drawing on both art and literature, it investigates the internal dynamics of Surrealist imagery, which, I argue, operate at multiple levels.

The final two chapters are devoted to the vexing problem of textual interpretation. What is the best way to interpret Surrealist poetry, which is so notoriously difficult to decipher? In response to this question, I propose two separate but complementary solutions. After many years of trying to unlock texts that seem hopelessly obscure, I have found these strategies to be especially rewarding. I hope others will find them equally useful and will experiment with them in turn. To some extent, since they adopt a generative approach to art and literature, both models recall Noam Chomsky's invention of transformational grammar. Although they generate somewhat different insights, they allow one to enter into the artist's or the writer's mind and to recreate the works in question. Chapter 7 employs a critical methodology of my own devising based on Jakobson's discussion of metaphor and metonymy. Chapter 8 favors an approach invented by Michael Riffaterre, a proponent of structural stylistics, who has contributed immeasurably to the study of Surrealist poetry. Each chapter concentrates on a single text reflecting an encounter between a poet and an artist. The former considers a poem by the Catalan Surrealist J. V. Foix that comments on the art of his compatriot Joan Miró. The latter analyzes a poem by Breton that embodies his response to a single painting, also by Miró. Although it presents the reader with a similar challenge, one discovers that it operates in an entirely different manner. In both instances, we

are confronted with a double task: to decipher works that are apparently impenetrable and to discover how they function as *poésie critique*.

Although this itinerary is far from exhaustive, it illustrates a series of Surrealist principles and focuses on a number of major figures. One is struck, finally, by the immense vitality of the Surrealist adventure and the various movements that preceded Surrealism, which infected even minor works with unexpected exuberance. The artists and writers examined in these pages were excited by the period in which they lived, by the numerous changes that were transforming modern life. This was especially true of the earlier decades, which experienced a rapid succession of technological advances. Understandably, as Marjorie Perloff notes, they “felt themselves to be on the verge of a new age that would be more exciting, more promising, more inspiring than any preceding one.”⁵ In keeping with their anti-bourgeois sentiments and the emphasis they placed on creativity, Surrealism and the movements that preceded it embraced the twin goals of revolution and revelation. Although the first goal encouraged numerous people to engage in provocation and subversion, these were not their only objectives. The individuals who subscribed to the Surrealist cause, and to its various antecedents, were committed above all to producing change—social as well as aesthetic. I hope the reader will experience some of the excitement that accompanied their experiments as poets and painters vied with each other to create a new vision, and a new version, of the world around them.