

**Du surréalisme considéré dans ses rapports au totalitarisme et aux tables tournantes. Contribution à une histoire de l'insensé** by *Jean Clair*, Mille et une nuits, Paris, 2003, 215p., 14 €, ISBN 2-842-05732-5 (paperback)

Jean Clair has never liked Surrealism; still less has he ever liked André Breton. Perhaps the aging Breton borrowed a sum of money from the young Jean Clair and never paid it back. Perhaps Breton gunned down Jean Clair's brother in somewhere like Dodge City. One can only speculate as to the reasons why the man behind the 1980 ground-breaking exhibition, *Les Réalismes*, the author of immensely penetrating and erudite articles on *Arte Metafisica*, melancholy and totalitarianism, Duchamp, and Giacometti, should so completely throw his scholarly virtues to the wind whenever he discusses André Breton. Vainly does he claim at the start of his latest book to approach the subject '*sine ira et studio*,' for in fact the reader can feel the seething hostility behind every word he writes. Clair has a personal animosity that would be well summed up in the French word '*hargne*.'

This is not to say that Surrealism does not merit a critical approach, but the movement in general and Breton in particular have already been the object of genuine critical studies that have revealed their limitations far more effectively than Jean Clair's effort. He claims that Surrealism was contested in the 1920s and 1930s, but that from the 1950s onwards it became the object of an academic cult celebrated through myriad colloquia and large-scale exhibitions.<sup>1</sup> Now, this may well be true within a radius of a couple of kilometres of the Centre Pompidou and the Musée Picasso, of which Jean Clair is director, but it certainly is not true beyond. Breton has always been and continues to be described with such epithets as 'pope' or 'dictator.' There has been very searching criticism of Surrealism, not to say condemnation of the movement, particularly from a feminist perspective. Does Jean Clair mention any of this? Not in the least: although there are scholarly-looking footnotes throughout the book, there is no awareness shown of any of the secondary literature on Surrealism, let alone the many bull's-eyes scored on the movement by Marxism, feminism and gender studies. Jean Clair would give the naïve reader the impression that he alone is battling against the massed legions of blindly obedient academics and media intellectuals whom Breton is regimenting in his service and commanding from beyond the grave.

What are the main faults of Surrealism in Jean Clair's eyes? He declares that his intention is not to examine Surrealist works of art, nor to scrutinise the creative aspects of the movement, but instead to focus on Surrealism as an ideology. Some may take issue with this reduction of avant-garde activity to its political and social significance, but here Clair does have a point. Surrealism aimed to be more than a literary-cum-artistic movement, so why not treat it as such? Clair's gripes can be summarised succinctly: Surrealism is authoritarian and structured around the dubious charisma of a tyrannical leader; its ideas are shrouded in a murky haze of occultist verbiage, and it has no genuine points of contact with contemporary science, such as might anchor it in the true movement of ideas of its time;



and finally it exists in a Parisian vacuum where people habitually pontificate on the gravest of issues with no consequence whatsoever for the real world. This last charge contains no doubt a degree of truth, although what denizen of the intellectual or academic milieus could claim to be free from all stigma in this respect? However, it is here that Clair's animus expands to embrace, not just Montmartre and Saint-Germain-des-Prés, but the whole of France. He contrasts the experience of French life in the twentieth century with that of Germany and Italy where, under political dictatorships, people learned that words could be dangerous weapons.<sup>2</sup> Sounds impressive. And yet to make such an assertion is to ignore the German Occupation of France and the terrible episodes associated with the Collaboration, above all the deportations from France in the direction of the death-camps. On a longer term perspective, it draws a veil over all the political struggles, often violent, that mark modern French history from 1789 to the Algerian War and beyond. To such hasty generalisations are added a basic contradiction: on the one hand Surrealism is too innocuous to be taken seriously; on the other, for Clair, it is all part and parcel of the great totalitarian systems of the twentieth century. And here is where his grand strategy comes in.

What is the principal method of argumentation used to convince the reader of this equation between Surrealism and authoritarian politics? An incredibly obvious, almost naïve form of smearing by association. Clair constantly insinuates, and his insinuation appears at times to boil down to: André Breton = Rudolph Steiner = Adolf Hitler; or, Surrealism = theosophy/anthroposophy = Nazism. How so? By an appeal to an irreproachable authority figure, in this case Hannah Arendt, whose very valuable work on the origins of totalitarianism emphasises the role of secrecy in the creation of a dictatorial party (pp. 19-20). The logic of Clair's argument goes as follows: Hannah Arendt shows that Nazism has something about it of the secret society; therefore, any secret society must have something of Nazism about it – and Surrealism was a secret society. In all this there is no recognition of the very specific way in which Arendt analyses secrecy with respect to the Nazi party; no reference to the sociology of secrecy since Georg Simmel's pioneering work in this domain, showing that secrecy is a pervasive and inevitable ingredient of social life, capable of assuming many and varied forms. Clair gives us no examination of how secrecy actually manifests itself in Surrealism – for assuredly it does. For him, it is enough to assert that the Surrealists were interested in 'occultism.' Yet the latter word is given no definition, surprisingly in view of all the scholarly work in recent years on what is once more a highly complex subject. Instead the word is produced like a scarecrow, as though meant to induce panic in the implied reader who is evidently some sort of caricatural offspring of the Enlightenment. The most amusing slur concerns Breton's interest in things Celtic, Clair revealing that 'celtisme' would become a reference-point for right-wing nationalists. He not only seems to be unaware that Breton's enthusiasm for such mythology is a later development in his work, but also implies that anyone with a taste for Celtic twilight must lean towards Fascism. Obviously, for Clair, *Riverdance* is a kind of Nuremberg rally.



Far more worrying is his sloppiness with regard to certain fundamental facts. He situates Surrealism's engagement with Communism in 1930, probably because that is the year in which the conveniently entitled review, *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, was first published. But as anyone acquainted with the movement would know, Breton had actively been seeking an alliance with the PCF for some years. However, in a sublime gesture of contempt for the truth, Clair describes 1930 as 'late,' for by that time, he says, the totalitarian character of Soviet Communism was well-known to Parisian intellectuals.<sup>3</sup> Does one really need to name all the famous figures of European culture who remained committed to Communism into the 1930s or who even converted to it then? André Gide? Louis Aragon? Walter Benjamin? All those associated with the Soviet effort during the Spanish Civil War?

To reinforce the Breton/totalitarianism association, we have long quotations about the SS (from Alfred Rosenberg, pp. 78-79), from Hitler's table-talk (pp. 79-80), from Trotsky (p. 80 – not bad as a connection, since Breton actually produced a manifesto with him). Do we have a proportionate amount of quotation from the work of the main object of this study? One would expect so, but the answer is: not really. In a book of about 200 pages I counted 14 quotations from Breton, some of them the same quotation, most of them short, none of them analysed. At one point (p. 91), Aragon is cited, but it is an example of his later, patriotic alexandrine verse – hardly an example of automatist spontaneity. Jean Clair is also one of those people who think that Breton wrote a text entitled *Le Premier manifeste du surréalisme* (e.g. p. 15). If I wanted to get really pedantic, I would refer to the fact that Alain Chevrier's article on Breton that is appended to Gauchet and Swain's volume, *Le Vrai Charcot*, is here (p. 161) attributed to Marcel Gauchet.

One could multiply these criticisms, but it would be like taking cake from a baby. No doubt the present review will be considered another example of Bretonian totalitarianism trying to crush all opposition, eradicating all free speech. But my objection is not to the idea that there should be criticism of Surrealism, but to the fact that it should be done in such a slapdash way. Jean Clair is capable of better. He uses quotations from Carl Einstein's work of 1935-1937, *Die Fabrikation der Fiktionen*, as epigraphs to each of his chapters. This promised to be interesting, if only something more developed could have been built thereon. Why should Einstein, the great commentator on primitivism turn against the avant-garde, as he does in this late 1930s volume? What are the tensions within the avant-garde - indeed within all utopian movements - between totalitarianism and freedom? These are really interesting questions, but the answers are not here.

Jeremy Stubbs,  
University of Manchester



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<sup>1</sup> 'Confisquée par les universitaires et par les dévots, son historiographie est à peu près inattaquable. [...]. Mais après les années cinquante, la critique s'est tue, l'image s'est faite simpliste et manichéenne. Elle brille aujourd'hui dans les hommages, les colloques et les expositions pour le grand public.' (p. 17).

<sup>2</sup> 'Contrairement à des pays où l'on a tendance à joindre le geste à la parole, et, à considérer que l'action doit suivre le discours, demeure en France la tradition d'une autonomie de la parole, mais aussi de sa gratuité, sinon de sa gloriole. Elle n'invite guère au passage à l'acte et, même, le décourage. Le mot n'engage en rien. Il y a une « franchise » du verbe, au double sens du terme, où la littérature est exonérée du devoir de rendre des comptes. La *forma mentis* est différente.' (p. 184).

<sup>3</sup> 'Pourtant, quand Breton met son groupe au service du communisme, c'est tardivement, en novembre 1930, à un moment où l'on peut déjà savoir, dans les cercles intellectuels parisiens, ce qu'est la nature du despotisme soviétique. La terreur stalinienne a commencé à la fin des années vingt, les grandes purges en 1934. Cette erreur d'appréciation ne peut se comprendre, sinon s'excuser, que dans la mesure où le mouvement littéraire calquait son fonctionnement sur celui d'un groupe autoritaire.' (p. 21)

