

The del Renzio Affair: A leadership struggle in wartime surrealism

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Abstract

The indolence of wartime surrealism prompted Toni del Renzio to attempt to animate the movement in Britain. His endeavours provoked a polemic that divided the group and gave rise to a protracted leadership struggle. To date, the sensationalism of these events has both dominated and clouded their scholarly appraisal. By focusing on an historical analysis that circumvents biased testimonies, this study aims to re-evaluate del Renzio's contribution. Through his manifesto *Incendiary Innocence*, del Renzio elaborated a detailed intellectual context within which surrealist activity could have flourished. Mesens, who thwarted these endeavours, offered no such conceptual framework during his leadership of the group.

In April 1935 André Breton announced that 'a vast exhibition of Surrealist works will take place this winter in London.'¹ A collaboration between the Paris-based surrealists André Breton, Paul Eluard, George Hugnet, Man Ray and Salvador Dalí and an English committee comprising Hugh Sykes Davies, David Gascoyne, Humphrey Jennings, McKnight Kauffer, Rupert Lee, Diana Brinton Lee, Henry Moore, Paul Nash, Roland Penrose and Herbert Read achieved just that in the summer of 1936 with the assistance of the Belgian E.L.T. Mesens and the Scandinavian Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen.² From 11 June to 4 July 1936 a large-scale, highly publicized *International Surrealist Exhibition*, the first ever to take place outside France, was staged at the New Burlington Galleries and took London by storm with its spectacular array of works by all the continental celebrities of surrealism. The commotion generated by this event paralleled the intense interest in surrealism in the United States, where a subsequent major exhibition, *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism*, was staged from 7 December 1936 to 17 January 1937 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and included work by Eileen Agar, John Banting, Reuben Mednikoff, Moore, Paul Nash, Grace Pailthorpe and Penrose. The New Burlington Galleries exhibition was to be the first of eight group exhibitions held in London between 1936 and 1947, when British surrealist group activity is generally considered to have come to an end.³ The magnitude of the 1936 event was such that 25,000 visitors were drawn to it and, at the opening, traffic was stopped along the length of nearby Bond Street.

The activities of 'The Surrealist Group in England', as it came to be known, flourished during the latter 1930s, particularly from 1938, when Mesens, former secretary of the Brussels Palais des Beaux-Arts, assumed the role of group leader. Once war broke out, however, this impetus diminished. The



Surrealism Today exhibition at the Zwemmer Gallery in 1940 did, it must be said, create a brief focus for surrealism. Anton Zwemmer followed the exhibition with another, similarly dominated by surrealism. His *Summer Exhibition*, held between 13 July and 15 August 1940, included works by Dalí, Raoul Dufy, Juan Gris, Paul Klee, Moore, Picasso and Georges Rouault. After this manifestation, surrealism in Britain lay silent. The following year, 1941, marked a lull in British surrealist activity that was so apparent that it prompted Breton to write from New York to urge 'collective' action in London.⁴ His entreaties, however, fell on deaf ears: Penrose, to whom the letter was addressed, had become engaged in experimental work in camouflage design, as had Julian Trevelyan. S. W. Hayter, Gordon Onslow-Ford and Sam Haile had left for the United States, whilst F. E. McWilliam had joined the Royal Air Force. The actor Jacques Brunius had, somewhat fittingly, taken a position as head of BBC French programmes. Mesens had already closed the London Gallery, which had acted as a nerve centre for surrealism in Britain, and at the end of July 1939 and in June 1940 he stopped publishing *London Bulletin*, which had become the British surrealist mouthpiece. He began to divert his energies to war work and took up a position at the BBC, where he was involved in broadcasting Allied propaganda to Belgium. The mood was sombre in the early 1940s, with the war becoming only too real: Germany had attacked the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 and Japan had bombed Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941.

It was into this climate of artistic inactivity that a 24-year-old aspiring surrealist of Italian and Russian origin, Toni del Renzio, arrived from France and soon set about animating the waning surrealist group. Rather than creating stability and direction, however, his efforts gave rise to an unforeseeable turbulence that left a trail of split loyalties, betrayal, violent outbursts and public humiliation. The tumult culminated in a virulent and passionate leadership struggle in which no holds were barred, even the most iniquitous. Perhaps inevitably, the sensationalism of these events has dominated and clouded their appraisal in the annals of surrealism. The aim of this paper is to look beyond the colourful and compelling testimonies of biased witnesses in order to re-evaluate del Renzio's wartime endeavours objectively.⁵ Given del Renzio's earnest conviction that his role has been deliberately 'misrepresented' for over half a century, it would appear all the more imperative that the veritable significance of his exploits and their impact on the movement's evolution in Britain be established. As he has reasonably pointed out, his unexplained exclusion from the supposedly comprehensive 1978 *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*



exhibition was just one example of an 'unspoken intention to write [him] out of the history of Surrealism.'⁶ Moreover, del Renzio remains convinced that this design rests on less than honourable motivations.⁷

The ancestry of Toni Romanov del Renzio dei Rossi di Castellone e Venosa can be traced back to the Tsars, and it was from his birthplace of Tsarkoe Selo in Russia that his family fled, first to Yalta and from there to Italy during the 1917 revolution. In the 1930s Toni del Renzio, as he had chosen to call himself, was inducted into Mussolini's Tripolitan cavalry and soon found that he was destined for Abyssinia. An unwilling combatant, del Renzio was to lose his nerve on hearing the rumours that, as a matter of routine, the Abyssinians castrated their prisoners, a practice, it must be said, that was matched in its brutality by the Italian army's policy of hurling prisoners alive from aircraft in flight. Del Renzio deserted and managed to flee across North Africa to Morocco by disguising himself as a Bedouin and joining a camel caravan, travelling west across the desert. Eventually he reached Spain and found himself in the onset of the 1936 civil war. It was not long before he became involved in the conflict and took up arms with the Trotskyites and anarchists. Del Renzio supported the Republican cause for about a year, but eventually, weary of combat and in fear of his life, he set off again, this time east to France. He eventually reached Paris and, in 1938, he met Picasso and the surrealists, getting to know André Masson, Pierre Mabilie and Benjamin Péret, whose experiences in Spain had been similar to those of del Renzio.

What was significant about del Renzio's nomadic experiences is that they had exposed him to a vibrant international European avant-garde, which he had first encountered during a pre-university holiday spent travelling in Eastern Europe. Whilst in Prague he met Viteslav Nezval and became conversant with the then nascent Czech surrealist group. Another influence was that of the Catalan surrealists, whom he had met in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. When he eventually established himself in Britain, at some time between 1938 and 1939, he was fuelled with creative enthusiasm and seized surrealism as a focus for his scholarly energies. He saw the movement as the perfect vehicle for what had become a conscious revolt against British intellectual and literary cliques.





Toni del Renzio, *The Cock Crew*, 1941, gouache on paper, 35.5 x 45.5 cm., private collection

Besides his encounter with Banting, whom he had met in Paris, del Renzio's contacts with the London surrealists had been confined to sporadic visits to the London Gallery. He remained on the margins until the *Surrealism Today* exhibition at the Zwemmer Gallery in June and July of 1940. It was there that he met Onslow-Ford, whose commitment to the movement's ideals and enthusiasm made a deep impression on the recent refugee: 'Onslow-Ford was the most Surrealist of the English group,' he later commented.⁸ But del Renzio was to find no such inspiration or exemplary allegiance to surrealist principles in most of the other members of the group. Once Onslow-Ford had left the country, soon after the Zwemmer exhibition, artistic inertia seemed to prevail. 'Nothing,' del Renzio complained, 'was proposed by Mesens and Penrose in the way of action or any publication or discussion of developments in Surrealist theory and principles.'⁹ Del Renzio had felt that Mesens' stance on surrealism was



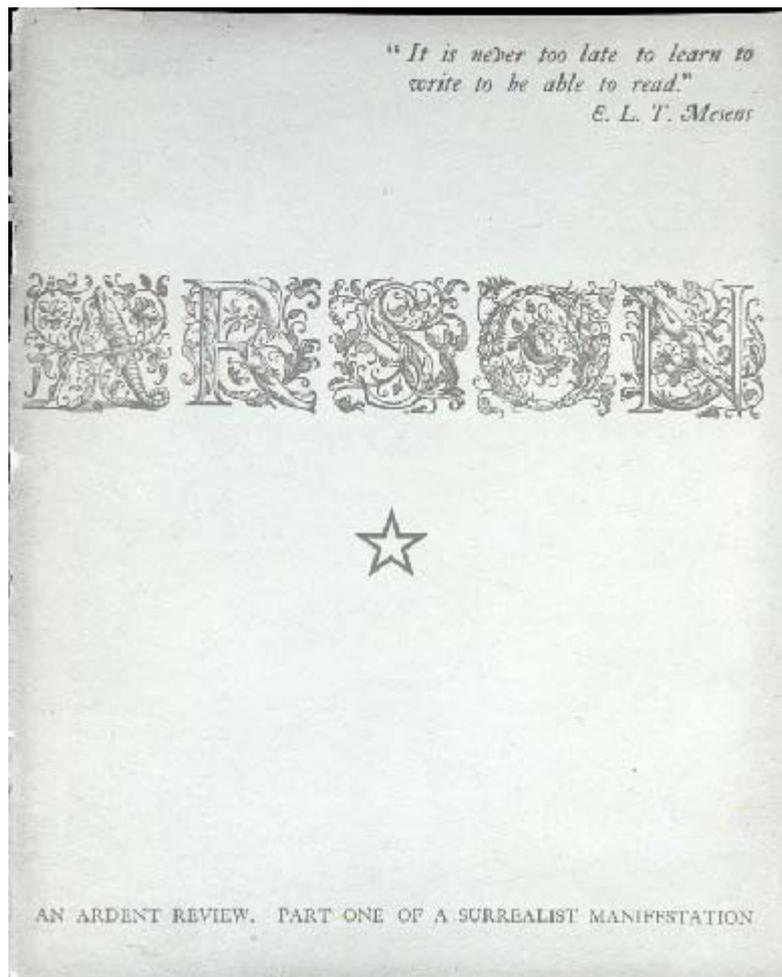
'indeterminate' and was alarmed by the fact that the Belgian had contemplated establishing links with the mystico-religious 'Apocalyptic Movement' that had been founded by Henry Treece, G.S. Fraser and J.F. Hendry in 1938 and had published its first anthology, *The New Apocalypse*, in 1939.¹⁰ Mesens, according to del Renzio, had even toyed with the idea of drawing Dylan Thomas into the surrealist group.

Del Renzio's principal concern about Mesens was that, unlike Onslow-Ford, he provided neither mediation with Breton, nor an allegiance to his principles, particularly as interpreted by Nicolas Calas and Georges Heinein. Moreover, the benefit of fifty years of hindsight has only served to reinforce del Renzio's view: 'Onslow-Ford represented the closest link with Breton while Mesens, whatever he suggested, had no direct communication.'¹¹ In this doctrinally nebulous climate, as he saw it, del Renzio strongly felt that 'a pure Surrealist alternative ought to be presented if the movement was to stand any chance of staying alive.'¹² Intensely aware by the beginning of 1942 that surrealist activity had been allowed to dwindle into insignificance for a whole year by what he regarded as Mesens' ineffectual leadership, del Renzio decided to take the bull by the horns and revitalise the movement himself: 'War or no war, there was nothing being done about Surrealism. Hitler had to be defeated, yes, but Surrealism also had to carry on.'¹³

At no time had del Renzio joined the surrealist movement officially but, during a brief period, he found himself at the centre of its fight for survival, an endeavour undertaken in response to Breton's pronouncement that continued action was necessary despite the war.¹⁴ In March 1942, after a year of preparation, and with financial help from Ithell Colquhoun, del Renzio published the sole issue of a magazine entitled *Arson*, with the intention of giving a clear focus to surrealism and of re-establishing the group.¹⁵ His intention was 'to provoke authentic collective Surrealist activity.'¹⁶ Robert Melville, whose writings had impressed del Renzio, played a key role in the conception of the journal. The publication placed itself at the heart of surrealist discourse, announcing itself as: 'An ardent review. Part One of a Surrealist Manifestation.' *Arson* was, in effect, the first surrealist publication since the demise of *London Bulletin* and had all the trappings of a manifesto, particularly in that it appeared to mark a new beginning. It professed to be 'a testimony of vital life lived among the ruins, not only of bombed houses, but of exploited people.' Conroy Maddox, Robert Melville, John Melville, Eileen Agar, Edith Rimmington, Emmy Bridgwater, Breton, Nicolas Calas, Giorgio de Chirico, Esteban Francés, Pierre Mabilie, Onslow-Ford, Marguerite Salle, del Renzio himself and Roberta, Robert Melville's daughter, were listed as the



'collaborators.' Conroy Maddox, officially a member of 'The Surrealist Group in England' since 1938 and principal activist of the Birmingham group since 1936, was represented by his violently anti-religious text 'From "The Exhibitionist's Overcoat",' as well as reproductions of two drawings and his painting *Anthropomorphic Landscape* (1941). Breton's inclusion took the form of a reprint of an interview with Calas, first published in *View*, whilst de Chirico was represented by an extract from *Hebdomeros*. Robert Melville provided a text on Masson.



Arson, 1942, Jeffrey Sherwin, Leeds (Photo: Richard Littlewood)

Del Renzio's principal contribution was the semi-autobiographical text 'The Return to the Desolation.'¹⁷ The piece is addressed to 'my English Comrades' and thereby implicitly announces and consolidates not only del Renzio's recent advent in wartime, bombed Britain (evoked through images of nude bones and gaunt frameworks), but also his insertion into the 'Surrealist Group in England', which, as



it turned out, was never to receive official ratification. Del Renzio, a recent refugee, writes of himself as marginalized and diminished; he regards himself as being in 'this country that we have strayed upon like a mangy cat upon a rubbish dump.' The sense of ostracism, conveyed by the image of despised vermin, is no exaggeration given that, as del Renzio explained, 'I was on the hit lists of the agents of both Stalin and Franco and not considered by the British authorities to be a candidate for protection: there was no one to regret my elimination.'¹⁸ He later described the text as a whole 'as seizing the incoherence of my mere condition when I was isolated, threatened and perplexed.' The counterpoint to his brutal self-disparagement and censure appears in the use of the royal plural personal pronoun. Of course, del Renzio's Romanov descent is a historical fact, as is his renouncement of his inherited titles: 'we have renounced our royalty. We who are a prince of the Steppes, a lord of Calabria.' However, the text elevates its author to an alternative supremacy: it is a subtle, but nevertheless unmistakable, declaration of primacy within the surrealist entourage that del Renzio had, by then, clearly assumed. Whilst steering clear of overt claims to leadership, the piece subtly suggests that del Renzio possesses a particular aptness to lead the movement: it is only he, after all, who is said to be capable of certain privileged oneiric insights: 'For who, save us, can hear the mute cries of statues?' A 'statue,' we are told, 'has been a regular visitor to our dreams.' More significant, however, is that del Renzio claims to be receptive to a 'hot wind' blowing from 'the north-west,' that is to say from the United States, where Breton and other surrealists were then based.

Maddox and Robert Melville welcomed del Renzio's initiative, seeing it as a constructive response to the group's inertia in the early 1940s:

Toni's proposal was not unwelcome, since we both felt that the semi-Surrealist efforts of the past years had produced superficial details and idiosyncrasies without making any real contact with Surrealism. In such a 'conspiracy of silence' we saw no reason not to collaborate with Toni. We assumed that he had had the support of Mesens and Brunius.¹⁹

Arson made a point of demonstrating its allegiance to French surrealism: it not only printed texts by Breton but also promised its readers a future publication of Breton's poem 'Fata Morgana' in French. Del Renzio's own fidelity to the movement was evinced, even before the publication of *Arson*, by his writing to Maddox to say that he had decided to forego exhibiting at the Leicester Galleries 'because of the need to adopt an unequivocal position in opposition to everything outside Surrealism.'²⁰ The standing of



Mesens within the surrealist movement was certainly acknowledged in *Arson*: the editorial, 'For André Breton ...', addressed to the various surrealists throughout the world, included the name of Mesens in its enumeration and Mesens was quoted on the front cover.²¹ In addition, an advertisement for his *London Bulletin* occupied half a page. At the same time however, these gestures also excluded the Belgian from first-hand involvement in the *Arson* venture and thereby indirectly pointed to fissures in his leadership. Del Renzio insisted that he had never had the intention of challenging Mesens, but in his enthusiasm to revive and invigorate surrealism in London, he, unwittingly perhaps, expressed a criticism that rang true with many around him. The reproach implicit in *Arson* probably had the tacit consensus of many of the group. According to Maddox, there was certainly a mood of frustration at the time: 'we felt that he [Mesens] was doing very little, that he was lethargic.'²² Indeed, the existence of a sense of group failure is confirmed by an editorial note in *Arson* reporting that Conroy Maddox had prepared an enquiry on 'the problems confronting Surrealism in the present crisis.' The idea of such an enquiry had, in fact, been preoccupying del Renzio from as early as January 1942, when he corresponded with Maddox on the subject. In his letter, del Renzio offered lengthy suggestions and particularly insisted on 'questions to determine adherence to Surrealism.'²³

Not that del Renzio had omitted to attempt to stir Mesens into action. Well before the publication of *Arson*, del Renzio had discussed the possibility of a renewed scrutiny and revitalization of surrealism with the Belgian. In a letter to Maddox dated 31 March 1942, del Renzio shows that he was still hopeful that Mesens would resume his former active role:

Mesens and Brunius with whom I have spoken feel that now is the time to take stock of who is with us and who against. Whoever endeavours to compromise us must be considered against. Now more than ever that enquiry must be sent out.²⁴

As it turned out, Mesens did not take steps to conduct any such investigation and in a subsequent letter dated 24 July 1942, from del Renzio to Maddox, Mesens' passivity is confirmed and lamented: 'It was difficult to get him down to any solid work on the questionnaire.'²⁵ Such deliberations on the subject of Mesens' intransigence were actually not infrequent in the correspondence between del Renzio and Maddox during the early forties. Moreover, the fact that del Renzio confides in Maddox in these exchanges, and feels confident about disclosing potentially inflammatory views, reveals an increasing



allegiance between the two. As surviving correspondence suggests, there was considerable discussion between the two on specific theoretical issues. The two debated the importance of the experiments of Jean-Martin Charcot on hysteria and in a letter dated 23 October 1943, del Renzio was prompted to ask: 'Does your research into hysteria and painting continue to reveal a perpetual renewing of one's fantasy?'²⁶ Del Renzio later pointed out that, had his journal extended to a second edition, Maddox would undoubtedly have contributed a text on hysteria. In any case, del Renzio had planned to ask Maddox for such a text as part of the projected surrealist number of *Horizon*, that, as del Renzio has insisted, 'was scuttled by the rift with Mesens.' It would appear that such a text had been so debated that, in the October 1943 letter, del Renzio had gone so far as to anticipate its appearance, remarking 'I certainly look forward to seeing your essay on hysteria.' The cordiality of the rapport between del Renzio and Maddox may well have led the latter to question his confidence in Mesens as group leader, although it must also have been clear that Mesens' employment in the BBC Foreign Service must have been considerably taxing.

Del Renzio's second surrealist endeavour, an exhibition entitled *Surrealism*, held between 27 November and 15 December 1942 at the International Arts Centre in London, alienated Mesens once again. The participants were Maddox, who exhibited an oil painting entitled *Knight and Devil* (1942), Colquhoun, del Renzio, John Melville and Agar. Penrose became involved by lending some paintings by French surrealists. Mesens, however, consciously decided not to be connected with the event and actually refused a request for his help.²⁷ The gesture was highly significant and, together with his deliberate absence from the exhibition, marked the beginning of a split in the group. For the first time Maddox and John Melville found themselves involved in surrealist activity that had not been initiated by Mesens.

As a result of his two ventures, the publication *Arson* and the International Arts Centre exhibition, del Renzio became known as an active proponent of surrealism, and it was not long before the editors of *New Road 1943*, John Bayliss and Alex Comfort, invited him to contribute a surrealist section to their publication.²⁸ With texts solicited from Ithell Colquhoun, Maddox and Robert Melville, in addition to his own contribution, del Renzio compiled an anthology that appeared in the spring of 1943. Maddox's contribution was 'From "The Exhibitionist's Overcoat",' a text previously published in March 1942.

Del Renzio had also wanted to include a poem by Mesens but, once again, the Belgian distanced himself from del Renzio's venture and vetoed the text. The refusal to be published was unrelenting even



though its tardy announcement was to result in considerable typesetting problems. Mesens, as del Renzio recalled, was against the anthology altogether and even seemed intent on impeding its realization. Faced with such hostility, del Renzio found it impossible to continue his acquiescent attitude towards Mesens. 'As much as I wanted to accept Mesens' authority,' del Renzio recalled, 'I refused to concede on the point of the anthology.'²⁹ It was this clash that gave rise to 'the beginning of a sharp disagreement' between the two.

Mesens' poem was summarily removed from the galleys, and what finally appeared in the compilation were texts by Calas, Breton and Mabille. These, in turn, sparked an inflamed reaction by Mesens, who protested that such inclusions implied the collusion of the French surrealists. The possible repercussions of such misrepresentations prompted an intense mistrust on the part of Mesens, who began to regard del Renzio as a pretender to his leadership of the group. Admittedly, del Renzio made no secret of his desire to rally a new grouping and even to issue a new manifesto, but he always denied having had such an aspiration, maintaining, on the contrary, that he would have welcomed Mesens' leadership had it been effectual:

I felt I could be a mouthpiece, at best, and saw myself in a role like that of Calas in relation to Breton. But, the whole time, I would have been only too happy for Mesens to play a part in our plans. I certainly wanted to act under his aegis.³⁰

The eventual appearance of the *New Road 1943* compendium provided just the excuse that Mesens may have been seeking to launch a discrediting attack on del Renzio. Mesens addressed his disapproval to the October 1943 issue of *Horizon*, which, in any case, carried a caustic review of *New Road 1943* as a whole. This condemnation, written by Ivor Jacobs, was total:

With the greatest goodwill in the world towards a generation faced with such a complicated *expérience* as that of *New Road*, I cannot discern in their poetry the slightest hint of promise or in their critical prose a single iota of critical sensibility.³¹

Significantly, the criticism concludes with a particularly disparaging account of del Renzio's anthology: 'The unbelievably scrappy Surrealist section reflects nothing more than its editorial vulgarity.' It was immediately after this harsh reproof that *Horizon* printed a virulent letter to the editor written by Mesens, Brunius and Penrose, all of whom had been excluded from the *New Road 1943* anthology.³² The trio



denigrated the anthology by alleging not only that it had no sanction from the official English movement, that Mesens, Brunius and Penrose insist they represented, but also that it was inconsistent with and invalid as surrealism: 'We in England formally refused to associate ourselves with this caricatural and bewildering publication.' The enterprise was flippantly dismissed as 'not very important.' But the core of the invective was a personal attack on del Renzio himself, who was subjected to churlish denigration: he was described as 'a spam-brained intellectual,' as a 'buffoon' and as meriting to be counted among 'nonentities.' The letter presented del Renzio as no more than an opportunist who had seized upon surrealism as 'a means of arrival' and had 'smuggled himself into the Surrealist wagon.'

It is arguable that the letter of attack may also have been motivated by a desire to thwart a projected surrealist number of *Horizon*, that was to have been edited by del Renzio. Mesens had felt aggrieved when, on the strength of the *New Road 1943* anthology, Peter Watson, who managed and financially backed Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*, had approached del Renzio with the proposal. Mesens, according to Watson, had coveted the editorship for himself and it was no coincidence that Mesens should have chosen to address his attack on del Renzio to *Horizon*, which, after all, had had no connection with the *New Road 1943* publication. Mesens may well have calculated that such a strategically placed criticism would persuade Watson that del Renzio had no group support and, consequently, would be an inappropriate editor. Whether or not this had been Mesens' ploy, Watson lost faith in del Renzio and withdrew the offer.

Del Renzio's isolation was compounded, probably unwittingly, by Maddox's collaboration during 1942 in Stefan Schimanski's apocalyptic *Kingdom Come: The Magazine of Wartime Oxford*.³³ Del Renzio regarded this affiliation with a journal that, in his view 'denies everything for which Surrealism stands and fights' as unacceptable.³⁴ He totally rejected Maddox's justification that 'appearing wherever possible' could be admissible. Even before the November 1942 exhibition, differences between the two friends over the status of Schimanski had already become apparent in a letter from del Renzio:

I have written to Robert about my attitude over the collaboration with Schimanski. I am too moved by it all to want to repeat it to you ... I am delighted you like my section of 'New Roads'. Its power is reduced, I feel, by what I can but regard as your compromise. It is of course your own option where you choose to publish your work but I must regard it as a



denial of militancy and solidarity.³⁵

This reprimand makes it all the more surprising that del Renzio's reaction following Mesens' acrimonious attack should have been to express his outrage to Maddox. There was evidently still an expectation of some support and allegiance. It is also possible that del Renzio may have wanted to sow the seeds of his disapproval of Mesens and Penrose. In a letter dated 23 October 1943 del Renzio wrote:

You have probably seen the letter of Mesens and Brunius and their financier. Believe me, I can find no sign of any objectivity in this manifestation of theirs, only the desire to confuse ...

I shall find it impossible to come to terms ever again with these renegades.³⁶

Del Renzio goes on to encourage Maddox's support by asking him to suggest a response to the *Horizon* attack on *New Road*: 'As a collaborator in this 'New Road' Surrealist section what action do you propose?' As though to goad Maddox into an unfavourable view of Mesens, del Renzio had earlier related how he had been angered by Mesens' having allowed the anarchists to use Magritte's *Drapeau Noir* (1937) for political ends.³⁷ Further drawing Maddox into 'solidarity,' del Renzio also asked for a contribution to a projected anthology on 'the great animators of history.'³⁸

Del Renzio responded publicly to Mesens' October 1943 statement with a communiqué in the December 1943 issue of *Horizon*.³⁹ Firstly, he accused Mesens of supporting 'that dismal renegade Eluard, with whom, as long ago as 1939, Breton and the Surrealists found it impossible to continue any dealings,' and secondly, he accused the principal proponents of English surrealism of years of procrastination:

For more than three years they have skulked in silence, sitting as a dead weight upon a movement that is alive and has demanded a voice. Small wonder they should be understood as ceasing to consider Surrealism, ceasing to represent its thought.

Del Renzio goes on to identify Mesens with 'senility' and proposes that 'younger and livelier men with reputations neither to make nor to lose should become the voice of Surrealism.'

Mesens' next offensive appeared in March 1944, when he and Brunius published *Idolatry and Confusion*, which attacked Eluard, Aragon and Vercors' so-called 'resistance' poetry for its 'conformismes.'⁴⁰ But the pamphlet was also a vehement and personal response to del Renzio.⁴¹ It claimed that it was only on the basis of rumours and hearsay of a disagreement between Breton and



Eluard that del Renzio had launched his attack on Eluard. *Idolatry and Confusion* then proceeded to accuse del Renzio of being an opportunist and ridiculed him by deliberately distorting his unusual name: neological insults such as 'Ranci del Conno' and 'Vomi du Pinceau' succeeded each other.

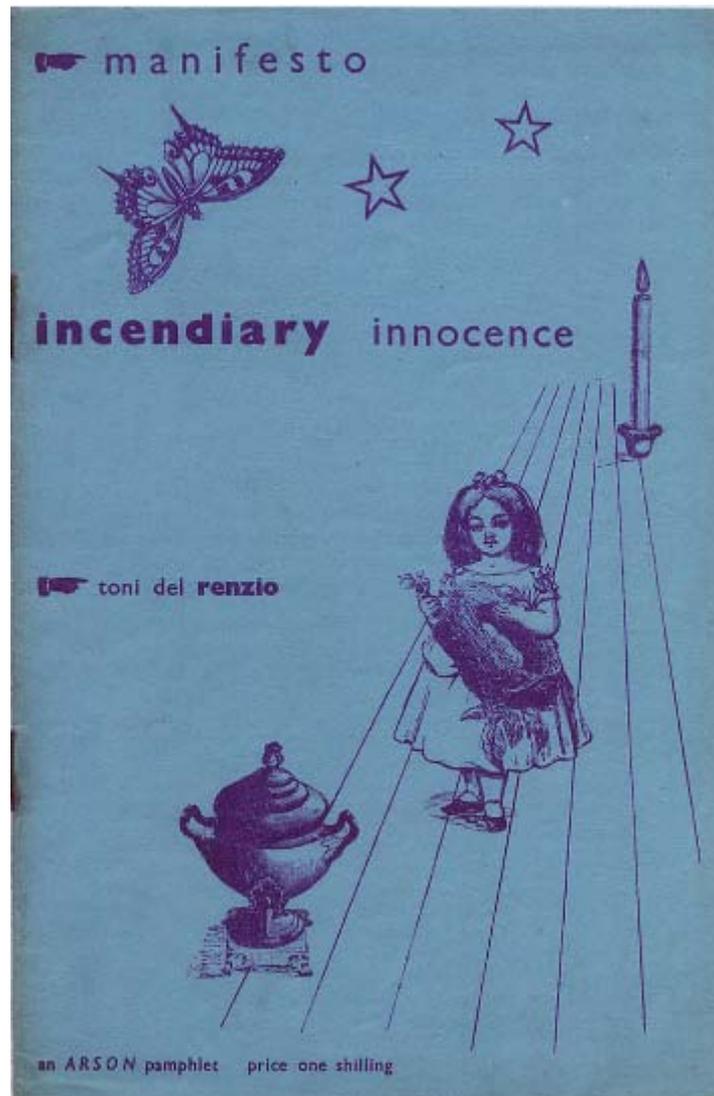
The extreme measure of the animosity engendered within the surrealist grouping was demonstrated in the early spring of the following year. When, in 1944, del Renzio arranged a poetry reading with Ithell Colquhoun at the International Arts Centre, Mesens and his supporters, including George Melly, Simon Watson Taylor and the anarchist Ken Hawkes, took the decision to sabotage the spectacle.⁴² As the performance progressed, the saboteurs became increasingly clamorous and unruly. The disruptive behaviour escalated and culminated in the throwing of food and detritus. Del Renzio felt nothing but scorn for the 'loutish gang Mesens brought to the Centre.'⁴³ With Ithell Colquhoun, he ended up suffering the indignity of having to take refuge behind a piano that was on the stage. Watson Taylor was to have taken part in the poetry reading himself and only at lunch with del Renzio on the day of the performance did he announce his intention to withdraw. What he did not tell del Renzio was that, as he knew only too well, there was to be a disruptive intervention and that he himself was to take part. Del Renzio now feels that Watson Taylor's animosity 'stems from guilt.'⁴⁴ Maddox too had decided to opt for allegiance to Mesens at this time and subscribed to the wholesale desertion of del Renzio.

The reason for this wholesale defection, it could be argued, can be found in the nature of the intellectual climate of the time. The increasing prominence of Mesens on the surrealist stage made 1944 a confused time for individual members of the movement. Their loyalty was being vied for by two irreconcilable individuals. Maddox and Robert Melville, for instance, deliberated at length on the issues in question and came to the conclusion that, in the final reckoning, Breton's endorsement would rest with Mesens. The Birmingham duo were anxious not to lose their surrealist status and strongly felt that a continuing attachment to del Renzio would result not only in rejection by the French surrealists, but also in exclusion from the inevitable re-establishment of the circle led by Mesens and Penrose, which, after all, had had the sanction and direct involvement of Breton, Eluard and Man Ray eight years earlier.

Del Renzio's rapid response to Mesens and Brunius' *Idolatry and Confusion* of March 1944 was the eight-page manifesto *Incendiary Innocence*, which appeared on 'Lautréamont's day April 4, 1944.'⁴⁵ In the six pages of text of this 'Arson pamphlet' del Renzio declares total allegiance to Breton and redefines



the surrealist position with a fresh and vigorous vision for the group in Britain, which, clearly, he regarded himself fit to provide.⁴⁶ The piece goes on not only to question the appropriateness of Mesens' leadership, but also to criticise the Belgian's continued support for Eluard, whose 'war poetry,' del Renzio insists, is doomed to be included in Péret's condemnatory *Le Déshonneur des poètes*.⁴⁷



Incendiary Innocence, 1944, Jeffrey Sherwin, Leeds (Photo: Jeffrey Sherwin)

Such laments, however, do not dominate del Renzio's manifesto, which opens with positive and quasi-doctrinal statements. From the outset, the text distances itself from Aragon's reduction of poetry into a vehicle of political expediency. It describes this aberration, as Breton had seen it, as a 'failure of nerve.'



In concert with Breton's views, del Renzio affirms that 'the poet cannot as *poet* be reduced to merely embellishing such political banalities the epigones of Stalin and of Kropotkin may benevolently permit.' [sic.]⁴⁸ As opposed to this form of acquiescent doctrinal empathy, termed 'la honte de la poésie' and seen as representing a 'treasonable disregard for poetry,' del Renzio advocates a contentious role for the poet: the true role of poetry, of 'poetic integrity,' he maintains, is that of 'resistance.' For him, poetry must not only be 'pure,' but it must also be motivated by an engagement with the 'real world.' Its primary objective, he assures us, is 'to transform that world.' Not surprisingly, del Renzio is quick to condemn the emerging solicitous wartime British poetic movements, 'new apocalypse' and 'new romanticism,' which he dismisses as a 'crop of failure and collapse.' They are regarded as no less than 'old' and 'outworn' and as resting on obfuscation; 'severing the sign from the signified.'

What, on the other hand, is regarded by del Renzio as the most significant interbellum poetic impetus is the prospection of the notion of 'automatism.' This undertaking, which, for him, remains surrealism's overriding assignment, is then evaluated and defended by means of five numbered proclamations. Del Renzio begins by qualifying automatism as 'the first visible example of a general reform of methods of knowledge.' He then points to it as the supreme means of surpassing the limitations of a 'perception by opposites' whereby, he continues, 'fictitious' antinomies inhibit thought and action. Above all, he sees automatism as a means of dispelling the contradiction that persists 'between human and natural necessities.' The unconscious, del Renzio argues, is imbued with 'natural necessity' and thereby colludes in a symbiosis between the mind and reality, that manifests itself through the essentially 'objective' nature of what is regarded as randomness, chance and coincidence. In a fourth postulate, del Renzio indicates that, 'in certain situations pregnant with danger and repression,' automatism manifests itself as '*humour noir*,' that is the emergence of the unconscious into the sphere of 'exterior reality' as a means of surmounting the 'traumas' posed by it.⁴⁹ Finally, del Renzio advances that surrealism, and, by extension, automatism, involves an '*alienation of sensation*' that tends towards 'occultation.' The solution to this 'conflict,' he proposes, lies in what he terms the 'intervention into mythic life.' Through this notion, closely akin to that of objective chance, del Renzio expresses a conviction that 'certain facts destined to be realized in the real world' are capable of being prefigured in 'a work of art,' an affirmation of the transformative potential of the unconscious, that squarely aligns del Renzio with fundamental Bretonian



tenets.

Having determined the constituents of his mission, del Renzio proceeds to clarify its pragmatic ramifications. He first expresses dismay that the *status quo* is one of 'collapse into confusion' and of a generalised loss of surrealist focus. What is pressing, he insists, is a 'rediscovery of the appetite for universal knowledge' to replace the prevailing 'banality,' which, as he sees it, has been permitted unchecked by 'those intellects which could so well attend this evil.' In this thinly veiled reference to Mesens, del Renzio accuses the incumbent leader of a 'failure of nerve' that has allowed surrealism in Britain to become debased into 'just a series of pedestrian puns and doubtful jokes.' In the place of this 'intellectual collapse' del Renzio insists on reinstating a vision of 'pristine clarity,' a vision that he terms 'innocence.' For him, not only is 'innocence' an apposition to 'ignorance,' but it also encompasses '*furor*,' the 'capacity for anger' that 'indicates more than a regrouping of words or images, an authentic state of alienation, in fact, definitely freeing the imagination in all the transmutations the *alchemy of the word* can promise.' With such 'furiously' liberated imagination or 'incendiary innocence,' as he terms it, del Renzio hopes that 'poets in English' might 'take serious places alongside ... French writers in the glory of solving the problems our time has set for us;' in other words, that they aspire to 'poetry which reunites the sign to the signified thing and at last *begins to say something*.' In a flamboyant and stirring manner del Renzio dramatically announces his agenda:

Astrologers, poets, seers, stars in the sky, stars in the hand, shiver with the first thrills of innocence when thrown overboard is all we have ceased to regard that might have deterred our sailing. Liberty alone will serve to excite in us the hope that this April we shall see, also, the springtime of revolt.

But, to del Renzio's annoyance, the deterrent to this sailing was still on board. The energetic enthusiasm of *Incendiary Innocence* continued to be dogged by an awareness that the efforts to thwart its author's endeavours were unrelenting. In frustration, del Renzio responded to what he saw as Mesens' continuing pettiness with nothing short of acerbic animosity:

It would be idle to particularize and catalogue the list of little men whose pitiful announcements exhaust all meaning from epithets of abuse, and who, for all they intend, succeed only to accuse themselves ... Enough of futile discussions, enough of pats on the



head and stabs in the back, enough of sneers and stupid snobberies, of reputations for good or for evil, of shocks still in the exhibitionist stage of infantilism, enough ... how can it be said? – enough of submission to the ambitions *in this world* of old men – often old before their time – who seek to sit on the shoulders of the poet like the Chimaera of Baudelaire.⁵⁰

Notwithstanding these apprehensions, del Renzio provided a much needed direction and focus for a group that had become increasingly dispersed and whose surrealist doctrinal integrity had suffered significant dilution. Whilst *Incendiary Innocence* can be viewed simplistically as an overview of surrealist activity in 1944, it was also, arguably, a valid and effectual vehicle for future revolt that confronted the internal conflict and dormancy that was stifling the surrealist group in England at the time.

But the intransigence that del Renzio was attributing to Mesens was, in reality, diminishing. In the first months of 1944, London Gallery Editions had published both Eluard's *Poésie et vérité 1942*, in Mesens and Penrose's translation, and a bilingual collection of poems by Mesens entitled *Troisième front*.⁵¹ Also, plans were announced for the publication of works by Valentine Penrose, Brunius, Breton and Aimé Césaire. Equally demonstrative of resurgent activity connected with Mesens was Feyyaz Fergar's *Fulcrum*, which appeared in July 1944 in an edition of 500 copies.⁵² The twelve-page pamphlet was not initiated by Mesens, though it contained poems by him and contributions from the surrealists Brunius, Valentine Penrose, Rimmington and Watson Taylor. The front cover was by Rimmington and the back cover was by Banting. Not being a surrealist publication, *Fulcrum* also included contributions by Henry Treece, James Kirkup and John Atkins of the New Apocalypse movement. Other contributors included Hardiman Scott, Barbara Norman, Jean L. Davy (Jean Vidal), and the Turkish poets Sadi Cherkeshi, Feyyaz Fergar and Jula Fergar. Vidal, like most of the other French refugees in London, was a member of the Free French forces and had to hide his identity. Cherkeshi and Fergar produced another magazine, *Dint*, that in its second issue of autumn 1944, contained a surrealist poem by Watson Taylor, although surrealists did not otherwise contribute. In addition, Kurt Schwitters, who had arrived in London from Norway in 1940, held a solo exhibition in 1944 at Jack Bilbo's Modern Art Gallery.⁵³ Later, in March 1947, Mesens was to involve Schwitters in the programme of the London Gallery, where he gave two public recitals of his poetry.

Del Renzio's onslaught continued regardless, and in *Tribune* of 14 July 1944 he published



'Surrealism, or else ...' in which he criticised the two recent London Gallery Editions publications, Eluard's *Poésie et vérité* and Mesens' *Troisième front*, along with two other texts.⁵⁴ Mesens' poems are condemned in an openly sardonic manner for their imagery 'drawn from the privacy of the author's bathroom and watercloset,' for 'feeble jokes' and for 'extreme pettiness.' What emerges most strongly in this review is del Renzio's unrelenting allegiance to Breton. The publication of this critique was seized upon very rapidly by the circle consolidating around Mesens as a further opportunity to condemn del Renzio. In the August 1944 issue of *Tribune*, Watson Taylor engages in a virulent attack, which, as well as opposing the ideas expressed in the July review, sets out to humiliate del Renzio personally:

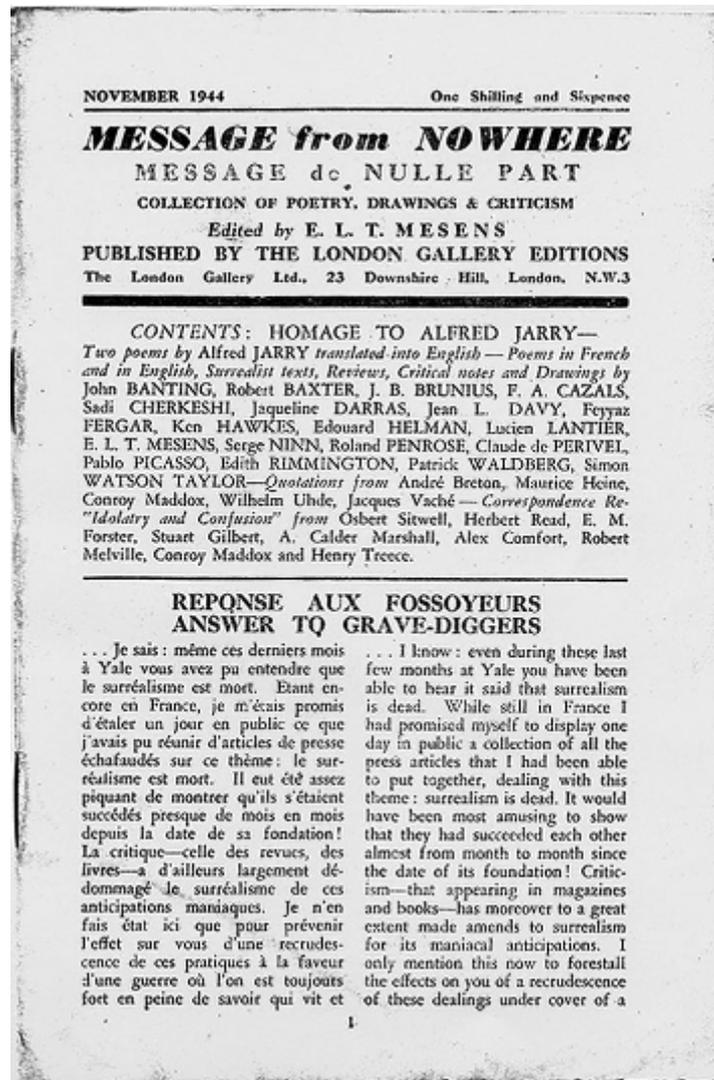
Mr del Renzio's comments on the surrealism of today are themselves so obviously 'sapless variations on a threadbare theme' that one is surprised that *Tribune* should be so gullible as to give him the opportunity of making a fool of himself. His trite, slick use of such words as 'cursed' and 'obscure' to qualify modern French poetry shows a pitiful ignorance of the real feeling and import of such writing; his slimy criticism of Eluard is genuinely revolting and seems prompted merely by a naive hope to ingratiate himself like a toady with Surrealists who, he has heard, are at odds with Eluard; his malicious comments on Mesens' poetry can only be explained by an infantile desire for petty revenge – having been quite properly smacked in the Mesens-Brunius pamphlet, *Idolatry and Confusion*; the utter aridity of his own mind is perfectly exemplified by his desperate reliance on a string of quotations 'ad nauseam' and torn recklessly from their context.⁵⁵

As late as 1986, del Renzio was to recall this attack with indignation: 'It was a despicable example of precisely what he held against me. Orwell, who was literary editor of *Tribune* then, had no wish to publish it because it was so childishly spiteful but I persuaded him, thinking it did more harm to its author.'⁵⁶

The final nail in the coffin of del Renzio's surrealist aspirations was hammered home in November 1944, by the publication of the twenty-four page *Message from Nowhere/Message de nulle part* edited by Mesens and published by the London Gallery Editions. In no uncertain terms the occasion secured a more resolute regrouping of the English surrealists around Mesens. The pamphlet described itself as a 'collection of poetry, drawings & criticism' and was, effectively, a stocktaking of surrealist enmities and hopes that called the roll of faithful once again. It marked the moment when allegiances had to be



declared. The contributions were both in French and English and comprised texts by Mesens, Brunius, Maddox, Robert Melville, Watson Taylor, Penrose and the two editors of *Dint*, Cherkeshi and Fergar, as well as drawings by Robert Baxter and Banting. Rimmington also contributed a drawing and her name may justifiably be added to this 1944 grouping.



Message from Nowhere Message de Nulle Part 1944, Jeffrey Sherwin, Leeds
(Photo: Jeffrey Sherwin)

Particularly surprising, given his former collaboration with and amicability towards del Renzio, was a contribution by Maddox in the form of a remarkably scathing letter written as part of the correspondence relating to *Idolatory and Confusion*. Maddox, who is openly described, along with Robert Melville, as one of



'two former friends of "del R" , ' confirmed his shift to the Mesens camp by launching a caustic denigration of his erstwhile confidant and collaborator, condemning:

those 'bright ideas' of the very young intellectuals whose conventional paralysis clutters art and literature to-day. The puffs from these smoking façades never seem to achieve more than a very inane metaphysical-mystical speculation, all very dim and wordy, and quite carefully divorced from those aspects that call for careful analysis and intelligent consideration. But then they are not really concerned with any more serious approach than that clarified as the most delicate breezes of sentiment, and least calculated to disturb the even and orderly surface of their rational conception of reality ... the vomitus outpourings of a moral and aesthetic anxiety ... dismal wreckage that wants clearing.⁵⁷

Not surprisingly, this scornful rebuke immediately gave rise to a deep rift between Maddox and del Renzio that was to last decades. For someone who saw himself as striving to rekindle a dying surrealist flame it was the ultimate aspersion. Also, *Message from Nowhere* managed to open old wounds with its renewed the attack on the *New Road 1943* anthology. It argued that some of the texts selected were inadmissible on the grounds that they were not surrealist and, with evident glee, Mesens singled out del Renzio's own poems 'Morgenroth, (to Darling Ithell)' and 'The light that will cease to fail' for particular ridicule.⁵⁸ Mesens then went on to voice his disapproval of the inclusion of other poems in the anthology on the grounds that the permission of the poets in question had not been obtained, a criticism that could reasonably be regarded as picayune in view of the fact that the war would certainly have frustrated any attempt to contact absent surrealists behind enemy lines. Regardless, Mesens openly protested to the editor of *New Road 1943* that:

the fellow in question was asked by you to select an anthology of Surrealist texts and poems, which he did without asking either authors' or publishers' authorisations, in cutting some texts in the most absurd and unscrupulous way and in grasping the opportunity to include his personal tripe under the same cover.⁵⁹

As a final mark of animosity, *Message from Nowhere* intensifies the public humiliation of del Renzio, firstly with some scathing personal remarks and secondly by gleefully reporting the sabotaged poetry reading staged with Colquhoun:



Mr. del Renzio's vulgar little poem 'Morgenroth (to darling Ithell)' ... bore no conceivable connection with Surrealism. After reading this nonsense one was forced to the conclusion that the only link between del Renzio and Surrealism was that of a tape-worm in a man's intestines. When, therefore, during the early spring, Mr. and Mrs. del Renzio were advertised to give a 'Surrealist' poetry reading at the International Arts Centre, Bayswater, the meeting was attended by a number of French, Belgian, American and British Surrealists who were determined to prevent the further discrediting of the movement by the quaint couple ... Mr. del Renzio ... referred, in his opening remarks, to 'his friends' Pierre Mabille and Aimé Césaire! The remainder of his address was inaudible, due to the fact that the brave couple were covering behind a grand piano, until, after half-an-hour, three quarters of his audience left the meeting in protest ... As we left the room, Mr. del Renzio's white silk tie flapped symbolically.⁶⁰

Such sustained and unrelenting censure had, in the end, brought about its intended objective: the group's support for Mesens was now solidifying. *Message from Nowhere* achieved its editor's purpose and marked the end of the 'del Renzio affair,' with the definitive marginalization of the initiator of *Arson*. Even at the height of his influence, it must be said, del Renzio had never managed to permeate the core of the group or secure any type of official group approval. He had never, for instance, been invited to any of the Barcelona Restaurant meetings, although he said that he did occasionally have 'unofficial' deliberations there with Maddox and the Melvilles.

Confirmation of the curtailment of del Renzio's influence on group activity came with his failed attempt to stimulate a collective response to the sensational death of Sonia Araquistan on 3 September 1945. The twenty-three-year-old painter and daughter of the ex-ambassador of the former Spanish Republic had committed suicide by jumping naked from the roof of her father's Bayswater home. Del Renzio was captivated by the incident, seeing it as the focus for a surrealist celebration of the power of irrational and unconscious forces. To this end, and with prompting from the Egyptian surrealist Georges Henein, who had been incensed by the press probing, he tried to gather poems and drawings inspired by the young woman's gesture. Apart from Ithell Colquhoun's painting *Dreaming Leaps* (1945), that bore the subtitle 'in homage to Sonia Araquistan' and a poem by Henein, del Renzio found no support, and despite



the precedent of the French surrealists' collective action in the case of the 'Violette Nozières' affair in December 1933, the endeavour came to nothing.⁶¹

The last time that del Renzio appeared alongside members of the English surrealist group was when he contributed an answer to a questionnaire about what one hates and loves most, published in the Belgian magazine *Le Savoir-Vivre* in October 1946.⁶² Colquhoun was included as well, alongside Rimmington, Banting, Bridgwater, Brunius, Maddox, Robert Melville, Mesens and Watson Taylor. But this carried no significance with regard to del Renzio's standing in the group. Mesens' strengthening authority resulted in the total frustration of any further efforts by del Renzio's to muster group activity. The ostracism was entirely effectual and, as it turned out, painfully enduring: as late as 1947 del Renzio, together with Colquhoun, by then his wife, were consciously excluded from the *International Surrealist Exhibition* in Paris despite their attempts to participate.⁶³

The reinstatement of Mesens as leader, it would seem, carried an endorsement so unanimous that it extended beyond national frontiers. It would, however, be erroneous to discount del Renzio's role in the history of the English surrealist group.⁶⁴ Arguably, the resurgence of Mesens' activity, together with all ensuing surrealist ventures, are attributable to del Renzio's spirited, albeit provocative, intervention on the surrealist stage. Without his enthusiastic attempts to salvage the remains of a former activity and to rally a diluted circle of individual surrealists, a resurgence of the surrealist group in England may never have occurred in late 1944. Justifiably, del Renzio regarded his role as pivotal: 'If I hadn't done something,' he maintained, 'Surrealism may not have been mentioned again.'⁶⁵ It is not an overstatement to claim that the only *organized* surrealist activity in Europe during the war after the departure of Onslow-Ford was due to the efforts of del Renzio. It is not surprising that the animosity that greeted his efforts left him feeling permanently aggrieved and betrayed: some sixty years on he retained vivid memories of 'the trauma' and the 'psychological wound of the rift.'⁶⁶ Comments made in 2004 make no attempt to disguise his anger about what he still regards as unmerited contemptuous treatment:

I must confess that those events, so long ago, still upset and sadden me. I have never recovered from the effects of so much betrayal and duplicity along with the discovery of the total absence of any shame or honour. Much of this was not unexpected but the utter lack of any candour towards me exacerbated my sense of betrayal. Unable to take in my somewhat



exotic origins and experiences everything was sullied by their refusal to acknowledge who and what I was and to doubt and ridicule me.

As he saw it, the rebuff arose not so much from intellectual polemic as from personal covetousness and malevolence:

I quite soon understood the ulterior motives of so many people not only in their swift run to Mesens but in their previous dealings with me. Everyone in this whole sorry business had some axe to grind, some personal ambitions to realize. Some are all too painfully obvious and what one can only guess is that subsequent roles were, up to a point, remarkably satisfactory. I am referring to Simon Watson Taylor and Ken Hawkes particularly, both of whom had reasons of their own, stemming from a certain animosity to pervert their narratives, and were as capable as Mesens in the exercise of spite. They showed a shameless willingness to lie and misrepresent in order to carry favour with Mesens.⁶⁷

Paradoxically, it is also true to say that, much to the chagrin of Mesens, the commotion surrounding the rift served only to focus attention on del Renzio's initiatives.

In a way the very virulence of Mesens' vendetta misfired and gave me an importance he was bent on denying. There were some people who thought that there had to be something he was so anxious to denigrate and that I really was an alternative leader.⁶⁸

In one sense, Mesens can be said to have been del Renzio's best publicist.

In the final analysis, del Renzio's endeavours can only be viewed as a manifestation of an earnest allegiance to Breton. Fifty years of hindsight have left the would-be revitalizer of the English group convinced that Mesens' remonstrations and personal attacks were not only doctrinally misguided, but that they also demonstrated a flawed leadership strategy and engendered an alienation from Breton:

It is significant that Breton was to write to Brunius, not to Mesens, to express his concern over what was going on in England and his disapproval of *Idolatry and Confusion* and the manoeuvres of *Message from Nowhere* that seriously confused Surrealist issues. Contrary to what he implied, Mesens did not conform to Breton's notion of Surrealism nor was his way of running the group in England in any way based on Breton's model of the group in Paris. Breton had been suspicious of Mesens since the tardiness in publishing the F.I.A.R.I.



manifesto, and many subsequent actions of Mesens did nothing to allay this.⁶⁹

On another level, the emotional blows dealt by this protracted conflict left the erstwhile friendship between del Renzio and Maddox in tatters. The episodes of what can only be described as sabotage and betrayal resulted in a bitterness that was to last for over a quarter of a century, during which the two did not even speak to each other. It was only in the mid 1970s, when the two met by accident at a reception at the Danish Embassy in London, held after the opening of an Asger Jorn exhibition at The Barbican Centre, that del Renzio and Maddox were to re-establish reasonably friendly relations. But, even half a century after the initial clash, the wounds had clearly not healed and as late as 1998 del Renzio reacted with enmity to a suggestion that he might share an exhibition with Maddox: 'it would be a way of making sure,' he commented, 'that we would again be at each other's throats.'⁷⁰ Maddox, for his part, never stopped dismissing del Renzio's role as 'a mere blip in history.'⁷¹ Del Renzio's endeavours, Maddox continually insisted, had no place in any serious account of the history of surrealism.

A tenuous form of appeasement did take place with Mesens as well, when, during the 1960s, the latter was visiting Milan, where del Renzio was then living.⁷² The meeting proved to be a revelation as well as a reconciliation: in an emotional outpouring Mesens made 'various comments and allusions, more often than not, tearful' that left del Renzio in no doubt that there had been more than a solely intellectual clash all those years before.⁷³ A quarter of a century after the event, del Renzio began to realize that, in part at least, 'the reason for the rift between Mesens and me had been sexual.'⁷⁴ It had been no secret that Mesens had had designs on Ithell Colquhoun, whom del Renzio had married. But, the quasi-confession in Milan brought it home to del Renzio that

the truth, as I experienced it, was somewhat more complex and derived from the fact that Mesens was a monstrous sexual predator, utterly indifferent to the gender of his prey. Of course, he envied what he thought was my success with women. But, on top of this he had a homosexual lust for me, which I had found embarrassing and was not disposed to accommodate, least of all his crude efforts at seduction.⁷⁵

If Mesens, indeed, had perceived himself as a twice jilted lover, it is not surprising that he should have fought tooth and nail not to have been jilted by the surrealist group as well.

However much del Renzio may have been attacked and belittled during the 1940s, it is undeniable



that he filled a blatant intellectual void. This, in turn, provoked group activity at a time when surrealism was inert. He may have been hated, betrayed and ridiculed, but he certainly was not and could not be ignored. Del Renzio claims that *Arson* inspired many communications from all over Nazi-occupied Europe, as well as from Australia, Argentina, Egypt (Heinen) and Romania. Significantly, none had come from Fascist Italy. As he saw it, he unwittingly acquired the status of representative for free thought in a repressed and oppressed world: 'I was therefore, without any effort on my part, transformed into the voice of a certain international Surrealist resistance.'⁷⁶ But del Renzio provided more than a platform and focus for surrealism in Britain. With his manifesto *Incendiary Innocence* he elaborated a detailed intellectual framework within which surrealist activity could have flourished and against which it could have been measured. Surpassing Mesens' *modus operandi*, which, after all, was obliged to accommodate the commercial exigencies of gallery management, del Renzio equipped the group with a much-needed conceptual criterion that would underpin and sanction its activity. His notion of 'incendiary innocence,' in particular, could have navigated a course that not only steered clear of banality, but also rose to the challenges posed by Breton's *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, which demanded 'the deep and genuine occultation of Surrealism.'⁷⁷ The denuded 'signs' that del Renzio was seeing in the activities of those around him could thus have been accounted with their forfeited 'signification.' Admittedly, Mesens, for his part, did initiate publications during the 1940s and organized exhibitions, including one of international stature in Paris in 1947. But even this achievement proved to be ephemeral: it was to be the last communal manifestation of the surrealists in Britain. It also cannot be forgotten that Mesens had discontinued *London Bulletin* by 1940 and, without a single manifesto to his name, had failed to provide any substantial form of leadership on the intellectual level.

In a statement made in 2004, del Renzio demonstrates that he had always been convinced that, had his direction been seriously espoused, surrealism in Britain would have made a prominent and meaningful statement in the history of ideas.⁷⁸ These were hopes, however, that were never to be realized. On the contrary and notwithstanding Mesens' ostensible resumption of activity, del Renzio's exclusion was to mark the beginning of a spiral of decline for surrealism in Britain. This intensified with the increasing popularity of Abstract Expressionism, which had the effect not only of marginalizing surrealism, but also of turning it into the object of public scorn. Probably for commercial reasons and, almost certainly against his



inner convictions, Mesens increasingly stood back from the surrealist cause. By 1948 he was already conceding that 'the new, and if anything, more disgusting, psychological condition of today demands a new solution.'⁷⁹ He even went as far as to remove one of Maddox's works from a 1948 exhibition at The London Gallery on the basis that 'too many people know you are a surrealist.'⁸⁰ Whatever Mesens' motives might have been, they certainly were enduring. When, in 1967, John Lyle enterprisingly set about instigating a surrealist revival in Exeter, Mesens was actually reluctant, albeit initially, to have any involvement in the project.

To dismiss Mesens as a disenchanted former champion of the surrealist cause is, however, an over-simplification. It is both significant and paradoxical that, during the year in which Maddox's work had been withdrawn from public exhibition, the London Gallery had shown overtly surrealist work: one of its exhibitions was specifically on *Automatism*, while others included works by Scottie Wilson, Rimmington, Banting, Peter Rose-Pulham, Austin Cooper and Lucian Freud. Prior to that, in 1946 and 1947, Mesens had shown Wilfredo Lam, Ernst, Dalí, Leonora Carrington and Lucian Freud. The trend continued into 1949 with exhibitions of the work of Masson, de Chirico, Penrose, Francés and Cooper. Even in its final year, 1950, the London Gallery remained the focus for surrealism, with exhibitions of Miró, Ernst and Desmond Morris. Indeed, the latter, who had visited every exhibition at the London Gallery from September 1947 to its closure in 1950, regarded it as 'a surrealist sanctuary in the bleak atmosphere of post-war austerity.'⁸¹ Morris has argued that 'from the time he re-opened the London Gallery in November 1946 until its closure in 1950, Mesens did everything in his power to re-kindle interest in the pre-war surrealist cause.'⁸² The evidence is conflicting and, at this juncture in the study of surrealism in Britain, the last word on the del Renzio Affair remains to be written.

Appendix: Statement by del Renzio made on 28 September 2004

At that time, it was unclear that many of the Surrealists who had sought refuge in the U.S. (in New York in particular) in the West Indies and Mexico and wherever in Latin America, were freely willing to return to Europe (to Paris in particular), and Andre Breton was no exception. In Paris the intellectual climate no longer favoured Surrealism in any but a debased version while one of the consequences of the war had been to dissipate francophone intellectual hegemony. Indeed the major intellectual current in Paris itself bred out of German thought and philosophy, including



Marxism in versions well apart from those current in pre-war Paris! However, the New York Experience had been welcomed by hardly anyone but Marcel Duchamp while everywhere in the world Surrealists looked for a firm centre. It seemed to me not at all fanciful to dream of a Surrealist grouping in Britain that would draw its participants from everywhere and anywhere. This would have important outcomes wherever it was manifested – first, the freeing of Surrealism from Francophone dominance and, second, the freeing of English Surrealism from its supposed inheritance from and debt to Lewis Carroll and thence its subservience to a much more rigorous theory and practice that drew upon many sources in many different cultural traditions. This would enable the development of Surrealist theory to pursue a course that was only partially realised by Breton in Paris after his eventual return there and submission to the narrower needs that Paris appeared to demand of him, the problems, for example paid by the internationally acclaimed new directions of painting represented by Abstract Expressionism, that was opposed to certain vigorous Surrealist practices which also took root within its canon and which would have been recognised by an international grouping in London. Moreover, this grouping would have been quite able to counter the CIA's appropriation and exploitation of tendencies that it aimed to promote as a specific US contribution and in no way understood. There was nothing specifically American about these tendencies and Harold Rosenberg's thesis that, somehow, the Action painters were the equivalent of the North American rebels in the War of Independence, while the Europeans were the equivalent of the Red Coats, were historically ignorant and, in the context of the post-war situation, were little more than ludicrous apologies for New York dealing scams.

Thus it appears to me an international Surrealist grouping in London would have had unimaginably vast consequences across the cultures of the world. It would have had far-reaching influences on British issues, avoiding many of the aspects that occurred, and cutting the ground from under the feet of the Independent Group. This was something that Mesens somehow glimpsed when he thought that I could have led the Independent Group into some sort of Mesens-dominated Surrealist group, but since this was not the end of grouping that I had envisaged, it would in no way have appeared an attractive proposition.

Further to this, Surrealism itself would have taken another intellectual lease with many developments only hitherto vaguely suggested in Breton's writings, particularly the introduction to the series of international Surrealist exhibitions in Paris. In this vein, much of Duchamp's contribution to Surrealist thought would have been countered and eliminated, perhaps provoking the break between him and Breton earlier, in a sort of damage-limitation series of actions or perhaps disqualifying the break altogether.

In a certain way, the inner trajectory of Surrealism would have been strengthened and redirected. Certainly the American taste for a version of Surrealism founded by Bataille would have been avoided or at least denied any real significance, with the assertion of Surrealism's fundamental opposition to capitalism and the incompatibility of Surrealism with the academic



ideology of American intellectual thought, and the discrediting of all forms of art-dealing as simply no more than the attempt to accommodate the commercial values of capitalism with the achievements of contemporary artists and the appropriation of intellectual properties by men better suited to promoting advertising and reducing all art to that level. This Surrealist grouping would prevent the emergence of men like Charles Saatchi and of trends like 'Brit-Art', which cannot be taken seriously. At the same time Bataille's important contribution to Surrealist theory would have been clarified and defined and Bataille, himself, would have been accorded his real importance in Surrealist political orientation. Moreover, the importance of the identification with Trotskyism would have been underlined.

¹ André Breton, 'Interview de Halo-Noviny' in *Position Politique du surréalisme*, Paris, 1971, 46-7. All translations into English are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

² This list of collaborators appeared in the exhibition catalogue. The report of the exhibition that appeared three months later in *International Surrealist Bulletin, Bulletin International du Surréalisme*, no. 4, September 1936, 1-2 changed the list as follows; 'Hugh Sykes Davies, David Gascoyne, Humphrey Jennings, Rupert Lee, Diana Brinton Lee, Henry Moore, Paul Nash, Roland Penrose, Herbert Read, assisted by E.L.T. Mesens. The French organizing committee were André Breton, Paul Eluard, Georges Hugnet, and Man Ray.'

³ Although London-based group activity effectively came to an end in 1947, it continued in Birmingham after this date. Conroy Maddox, its principal animator, was active until November 2003.

⁴ Letter dated 7 November from Breton to Penrose. SNGMA archives GMA.A.35.RPA.703.

⁵ George Melly, *Rum, Bum & Concertina*, London, 1978; George Melly, *Don't Tell Sybil: An Intimate Memoir of E.L.T. Mesens*, London, 1997.

⁶ *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, Hayward Gallery, London, 11 January-27 March 1978.

⁷ 'This [animosity] was perhaps illustrated by the exhibition *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, to which I was not invited to contribute, thanks, I have been told to Penrose's intervention, but he was unable to keep all reference to me and *Arson* from the texts in the catalogue.' Unless otherwise indicated, comments attributed to del Renzio were made directly to the author.

⁸ Email to the author, 2004.

⁹ Toni del Renzio, 'The Absent Text – The Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else', catalogue of the exhibition *Surrealism in England 1936 and After*, Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury College



of Art, 1986, 59.

¹⁰ J. F. Hendry and Henry Treece, eds, *The New Apocalypse*, London, 1939. Robert Melville was a contributor. Treece wrote *Invitation and Warning*, London, 1942, a collection of poems that included a sonnet sequence 'Towards a Personal Armageddon'. He was also author of *Thirty-Eight Poems*, London, 1939 and *How I See Apocalypse*, London, 1946, a collection of essays with a drawing by John Tunnard. His *The Black Seasons*, London, 1946, included 'The Black Book, to Conroy Maddox'. George Sutherland Fraser was born in Glasgow on 8 November 1915 and studied at St Andrews University. He served in the Middle East during World War II. He then worked as a journalist and critic. He became a lecturer at the University of Leicester in 1959 and remained there until his retirement in 1979. *Kingdom Come: The Magazine of Wartime Oxford* (1939 to 1943) was another apocalyptic journal and incorporated the Oxford University magazines *Bolero* and *Light and Dark*. It was founded by John Waller, but when, in autumn 1941, army service took him to the Middle East, the editorship was taken over by Stefan Schimanski, Henry Treece, Kenneth Harris and Alan Rook. Robert Melville was the art editor. Del Renzio expressed the view that the journal 'denies everything for which surrealism stands and fights.' Schimanski and Treece also edited *Transformation* (published by Gollancz). This had four issues, the first of which appeared in 1943. It succeeded *Kingdom Come* and was based on the 'Personalist Ideal.'

¹¹ Toni del Renzio in 1998.

¹² Email to the author, 2004.

¹³ Email to the author, 2004.

¹⁴ André Breton in *View*, no. 7-8, Surrealist double number, October-November 1941.

¹⁵ The title 'Arson' was inspired by del Renzio's reading of excerpts from Nicolas Calas' *Foyers d'Incendie* (1939) in *The Partisan Review*, New York, October-November 1941.

¹⁶ Toni del Renzio, 'Memories of Polemics Past', unpublished lecture given at a symposium in conjunction with the exhibition *Surrealism in England 1936 and After*, Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury College of Art, 1986.

¹⁷ Toni del Renzio, 'The Return to the Desolation. For my English Comrades', *Arson*, 1942, 22.

¹⁸ Email to the author, 2004.

¹⁹ Conroy Maddox, 1994.

²⁰ Letter to Maddox dated 31 March 1942. The exhibition in question was due to be organized by Ithell Colquhoun, whom del Renzio regarded 'essentially a mystic, and therefore individualist, conscious of being an artist.'



²¹ Del Renzio had no idea at the time that Brunius was in London. He first met Brunius through John Banting in the winter of 1942.

²² In conversation with the author, 1996.

²³ Letter dated 19 January 1942.

²⁴ Del Renzio in a letter to Maddox, 31 March 1942.

²⁵ Letter from del Renzio to Maddox, 24 July 1942.

²⁶ Jean-Martin Charcot was regarded by the surrealists as the most celebrated investigator of insanity. He had entered the Parisian Salpêtrière hospital in 1848 and had become its principal in 1866. It was under his direction that novel ideas about mental illness and its treatment were first introduced into the medical repertoire, particularly in the sphere of hysteria, which, at the time, baffled medical thinking. Despite having been discredited by the time surrealism saw the light of day, Breton nevertheless considered these ideas as pertinent to the movement's underlying assumptions. The following provide useful insights: Georges Guillaum M.D. *J.-M. Charcot. His Life-His Work*, London, 1959; Jean Vinchon *L'Art et la Folie*, Paris, 1924; J. Spector *The Aesthetics of Freud*, London, 1972, 149; A. R. G. Owen *Hysteria, Hypnosis and Healing. The Work of J.-M. Charcot*, London, 1971.

²⁷ Letter dated 28 April 1943 from del Renzio to Maddox.

²⁸ *New Road 1943*, edited by Alex Comfort and John Bayliss, Billericay, 1943. The surrealist section, edited by Toni del Renzio, occupied pages 180 to 230. Del Renzio's contribution was 'The Light that will cease to fail', 180-3. The invitation extended to del Renzio to contribute to the magazine was influenced by a friendship between Ithell Colquhoun, del Renzio's future wife, and John Bayliss.

²⁹ Email to the author, 2004.

³⁰ Dissatisfaction with Mesens' leadership is clear in del Renzio's letter to Maddox dated 28 April 1943.

³¹ Ivor Jacobs, 'Auden Aftermath', *Horizon*, vol. 8, no. 46, October 1943, 286.

³² J.-B. Brunius, E.L.T. Mesens, Roland Penrose, 'Correspondence', *Horizon*, vol. 8, no. 46, October 1943, 289, recto of back cover. Del Renzio had been shown the letter by Cyril Connolly, the editor, before its publication and had been offered the opportunity to veto its inclusion in *Horizon*. Del Renzio allowed the letter to be published, believing that it would provoke the intervention of Breton in support of the *Arson* and *New Road 1943* initiatives.

³³ Conroy Maddox, 'From Infiltrations of the Marvellous', *Kingdom Come: The Magazine of Wartime Oxford*, vol. 3, no. 11, winter 1942, 16-18.



³⁴ Email to the author, 2004.

³⁵ The letter is dated 'Wednesday Evening', but must have succeeded Maddox's article published in 'winter 1942' and preceded the exhibition at the International Arts Centre, which opened on 27 November 1942.

³⁶ Letter from del Renzio to Maddox, 23 October 1943.

³⁷ In a letter to Maddox dated 28 April 1943. It had been Simon Watson Taylor who had persuaded Mesens to allow this.

³⁸ Letter to Maddox dated 23 October 1943.

³⁹ Letter dated 31 October 1943 from del Renzio and published as 'Correspondence', *Horizon*, vol. 8, no. 48, December 1943, 433-4.

⁴⁰ Vercors was the pseudonym of the novelist and essayist Jean Bruller. He wrote *Le Silence de la mer*, which launched the *Éditions de minuit* in 1942.

⁴¹ J.-B. Brunius and E.L.T. Mesens, *Idolatry and Confusion*, March 1944, 6 pages. The tract was written originally for publication in *Tribune*, but it had been refused.

⁴² Del Renzio has written of Hawkes: 'I had come across Ken Hawkes through a little group of radical pacifists with strong anarchist tendencies and we collaborated in various projects. He retained all the prejudices of his petty bourgeois origins and held me responsible for his own failings. As part of the anarchist rent-a-mob that Mesens enlisted he achieved a sort of notoriety and recognition in anarchist circles. He never grasped what Surrealism was, as examination of the few feats he contributed to the publications of the era demonstrates.'

⁴³ Toni del Renzio, 'Memories of Polemics Past', unpublished lecture given at a symposium in conjunction with the exhibition *Surrealism in England 1936 and After*, Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury College of Art, 1986, 3.

⁴⁴ Email to the author, 2004.

⁴⁵ Isidore Ducasse was born on 4 April 1846 in Montevideo. He subsequently took the pen name 'Comte de Lautréamont'.

⁴⁶ *Manifesto. Incendiary Innocence. An Arson Pamphlet*, London 1944, seven pages, unpaginated. Further unattributed citations from this publication refer to this note.

⁴⁷ Mesens and Penrose had translated Eluard's *Poésie et vérité* and had published it through London Gallery Editions in 1944.



⁴⁸ In Greek Mythology the Epigoni were the sons of the seven champions who had fallen at Thebes and who had sworn to avenge their fathers.

⁴⁹ Del Renzio may well be referring to the general wartime violation of liberty and security. He may even intend a reference to his own appalling experiences in North Africa and Spain

⁵⁰ Del Renzio is suggesting that, at the age of forty, Mesens should be regarded as part of an older, less enlightened, generation.

⁵¹ E.L.T. Mesens (trans.), Paul Eluard, *Poésie et Vérité 1942*, London 1944; E.L.T. Mesens, *Troisième Front, poèmes de guerre, suivis de Pièces Détachées*, London 1944, translated by the author and Roland Penrose.

⁵² Feyyaz Fergar was head of the BBC's Turkish service during the war.

⁵³ Schwitters kept a low profile during the Third Reich and emigrated to Norway in January 1937. In 1940 Nazi troops invaded Norway and he was forced to flee for his life to England, where he was interned until November 1941.

⁵⁴ Toni del Renzio, 'Surrealism or Else ...', *Tribune*, 14 July 1944, 17.

⁵⁵ Simon Watson Taylor, 'I note that ...', *Tribune*, 18 August 1944, 14.

⁵⁶ Toni del Renzio, 'Memories of Polemics Past', unpublished lecture given at a symposium, in conjunction with the exhibition *Surrealism in England 1936 and After*, Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury College of Art, 19-31 May 1986.

⁵⁷ *Message from Nowhere*, November 1944, 22.

⁵⁸ Alex Comfort and John Bayliss, eds, *New Road 1943*, Billericay, 1943, 228 and 180-183 respectively.

⁵⁹ *Message from Nowhere*, 22.

⁶⁰ Ken Hawkes, 'Epitaph', *Message from Nowhere*, 17.

⁶¹ André Breton, René Char, Paul Eluard, Maurice Henry, E.L.T. Mesens, César Moro, Benjamin Péret, Guy Rosey, Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, Victor Brauner, René Magritte, Marcel Jean, Hans Arp, Alberto Giacometti, *Violette Nozières*, Brussels, December 1933. In the summer of 1934 a nineteen-year-old Paris engine driver's daughter was put on trial for murder. She used to escape from her claustrophobic home life by inventing hospital appointments. She was, in fact, working as a prostitute by day and spending the proceeds in the Latin Quarter in the evenings. She murdered her father and attempted to poison her mother to steal their life savings for her student lover. She was regarded as a subversive and aroused the sympathy of the surrealists. The surrealists' book of poems and drawings was a celebration of her attack on the



restrictions and hypocrisies of middle-class values. Nozières was condemned to the guillotine but her sentence was commuted to life imprisonment by President Lebrun. In 1943 she was freed from prison. Conroy Maddox's 1971 painting *Communal Living* depicts a young woman leaping from the top of a building.

⁶² *Le Savoir-Vivre*, Brussels, October 1946.

⁶³ *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, Galerie Maeght, Paris, June 1947.

⁶⁴ In one sense, del Renzio's surrealist convictions were redirected rather than extinguished after his definitive exclusion. In the early 1950s, he became increasingly involved with The Independent Group, a precursor of Pop Art, which challenged accepted modernist assumptions. The IG embarked on a subversive, anti-academic and iconoclastic objective that embraced mass culture and anti-elitism. In doing so, artists such as Richard Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull drew on Dada, futurism and surrealism. Their refusal to accept the dichotomies that separate high and low culture led them to embrace Hollywood, American advertisements, science fiction and consumerism. Del Renzio not only participated in the activities of the IG, but he also organized their public manifestations.

⁶⁵ Email to the author, 2004.

⁶⁶ Email to the author, 2004.

⁶⁷ Email to the author, 2004.

⁶⁸ Email to the author, 2004.

⁶⁹ Del Renzio in 1998

⁷⁰ Conversation with the author, 1998.

⁷¹ Conversation with the author, 1998.

⁷² In 1963 del Renzio had moved to Milan from Paris, where he had been living for a year. It was during the sixties that Mesens visited Milan in connection with dealings with galleries. Mesens knew the artists the Pomodoro brothers well, as did del Renzio.

⁷³ Email to the author, 2004.

⁷⁴ Email to the author, 2004.

⁷⁵ Email to the author, 2004.

⁷⁶ Email to the author, 2004.



⁷⁷ *Manifesto. Incendiary Innocence. An Arson Pamphlet*, London 1944, seven pages, unpaginated.

⁷⁸ Statement made on 28 September 2004 reproduced in appendix.

⁷⁹ Letter dated 16 July 1948 from Mesens to Maddox and written on London Gallery headed paper.

⁸⁰ Letter dated October 1948 from Robert Melville, secretary of the London Gallery, to Conroy Maddox.

⁸¹ Email to the author, 2004.

⁸² Correspondence with the author, October 2004.

Silvano Levy has published studies on René Magritte, E.L.T. Mesens, Paul Nougé and J-M Charcot. His research on the 'Surrealist Group in England' produced the book *Conroy Maddox: Surreal Enigmas* in 1995, as well as a film on the artist, while a wider interest in the movement led to the publication of *Surrealism: Surrealist Visuality* in 1996, re-published in 1997 (New York University Press). Levy's study *Desmond Morris: 50 Years of Surrealism* (Ebury) appeared in 1997 and was followed in 1999 by an enlarged re-edition entitled *Desmond Morris: Naked Surrealism* (Pandora). Further research on Morris culminated in 2001 with the publication of *Desmond Morris. Catalogue Raisonné. 1944-2000*. Levy then produced *The Scandalous Eye. The Surrealism of Conroy Maddox* (Liverpool University Press) in 2003. In 2004 he contributed a chapter on 'Menace. Surrealist Interference of Space' to the book *Surrealism and Architecture* edited by T. Mical (Routledge). He has curated national touring exhibitions of the work of both Maddox and Morris and has appeared on BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4 as expert commentator. Silvano Levy is a senior lecturer at Keele University and extramural lecturer at The University of Manchester, England.

