

Against the Current. The Story of the Surrealist Group of Czechoslovakia

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Abstract

As the 2001 exhibition *Surrealism: Desire Unbound* at the Tate Modern demonstrated, there is a trend in contemporary interpretations of surrealism to focus greater attention on Czech artists. In their time, they were naturally integrated into the international surrealist movement. After Paris and Brussels, Prague was one of the most important centres where surrealism was developed by several generations of artists. While the work of figures such as Teige, Nezval, Štyrský, Toyen and Heisler, who were in direct contact with Breton, has attracted notice from foreign scholars, the work of other Czech surrealists has yet to be considered in the international context.

The poet Vítězslav Nezval, the initiator of the surrealist movement in Czechoslovakia, was a keen reader and translator of *Nadja*. When recalling his first meeting with Breton in Paris on 9 May 1933, Nezval could not hide this source of inspiration. When he and the theatre director Jindřich Honzl arrived at no. 42 rue Fontaine, they learned that Breton had just left.

Nezval, who was always effusive, described the incident thus: 'I'm tired, I'm crushed. I ask Honzl if we can rest in the café on the corner of the square. We enter. We choose the first empty table. André Breton is sitting across from us. "It's like a scene from *Nadja*," I say to the man whom I had to meet at some point in my life [...] when we walk up to his table. The people who would later be our only friends meet there, turning up, one after another, at regular intervals. Paul Eluard, Benjamin Péret, Max Ernst. I recognise them. It's like a scene from *Nadja*. We looked for André Breton at home. I was tired. It's chance that we entered this very café. "We are the same thing that you are."' ¹

The next day, Nezval handed Breton a letter in which he proposed concrete co-operation with the surrealist movement, in the name of the Prague avant-garde association *Devětsil*. The text was immediately printed, on May 15, 1933, in the fifth issue of the journal *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. For the moment, Nezval still sheltered under the name of the *Devětsil* artistic association, which united almost all of the Czech avant-garde in the twenties.² At the beginning of the 1930s, however, joint activities had already fizzled out and Nezval therefore had to establish a new base: the Surrealist Group of Czechoslovakia. Its core membership consisted of a few friends from the former *Devětsil*. Originally it had eleven members – nine men and two women. They included the poets Vítězslav Nezval and Konstantin Biebl,³ the director Jindřich Honzl, the painters Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen, the sculptor Vincenc Makovský, the composer Jaroslav Ježek⁴ and the young author of



psychoanalytic studies Bohuslav Brouk. The theoretician Karel Teige joined the group a little later, after settling a dispute, of several years' duration, with Štyrský. Nezval's enthusiasm for astrology, his life-long interest, was apparent in the formation of the group. Like Breton, Nezval saw in astrology, with its analogies and symbolism, the essence of poetry. Nezval founded the surrealist group in Prague on the spring equinox, March 21, 1934, at the beginning of the astronomical and astrological year. He was intrigued by the constellation of the spring horoscope, which promised the success of the romantic avant-garde collective activity, with its distinctly utopian orientation.⁵

After Paris and Brussels, Prague became one of the most important centres of surrealism. One has to ask, however, why surrealism took hold in Prague so late, almost ten years after Breton's first *Manifesto of Surrealism*. The founders of the Prague group pointed out that they had developed their own artistic programme in *Devětsil* from the very beginning of the 1920s. They stressed that the manifesto of their artistic trend, poetism, was published in 1924 before the Surrealist Manifesto and that the poetist and surrealist standpoints gradually drew closer together. But the idea of an idyllic analogy between poetism and surrealism was an expedient retrospective construction. That is, in the linear model of development of the time, the Czech avant-garde of the twenties had considered itself more mature, politically and artistically, than the surrealist movement. From the communist standpoint, it criticised the anarchist features of the surrealist revolt. It also had reservations about the principle of psychic automatism. It criticised the surrealist paintings as a step backwards, a return to the descriptive figurative trend before cubism.⁶

The change of view was motivated in part by the Second Surrealist Manifesto, in which Breton endorsed dialectical materialism, the classics of Marxism and co-operation with the Communist Party of France. In December 1930, Nezval included a translation of the Second Manifesto in the second (and last) issue of his proto-surrealist journal *Zvěrokruh (The Zodiac)*. After the Charkov congress, which focused on socialist realism and rejected the European avant-garde, Nezval and Teige shared Breton's fear for the future of contemporary art, which was condemned by the right for being too revolutionary and by the left for not submitting to the cultural policies of the communist parties. At that time, the hedonistic poetry of *Devětsil* seemed anachronistic. The emphasis shifted to the interior of the individual. There was growing interest in surrealist approaches.



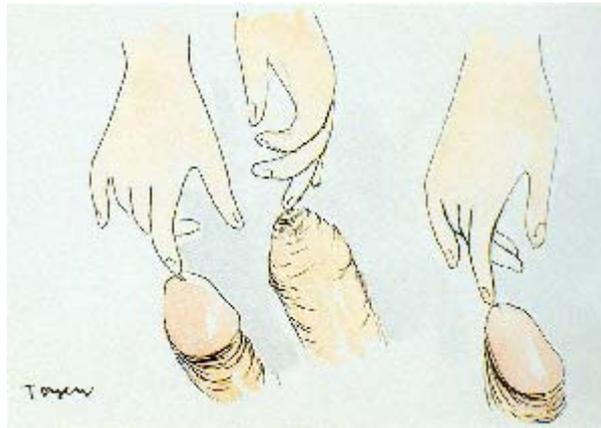


Jindřich Štyrský, *Emily Comes to Me in a Dream*, 1933, collage on paper, 35 x 25 cm, private collection. All images are reproduced from the book: Lenka Bydžovská and Karel Srp (eds.), *Český surrealismus 1929-1953*, Praha, Argo 1996.

Nezval saw surrealism, first and foremost, as an artistic method that offered him new creative experiments. That was why he could desert a few years later, unlike Štyrský and Toyen, who accepted surrealism as an existential stance and became surrealists once and for all. In the transition to surrealism around 1930, a strange psychological inconsistency was manifest in both Nezval and Štyrský: on the one hand, they had hitherto distanced themselves from surrealism in their works of criticism; on the other hand, they were clearly attracted to it in their artwork. At the beginning of the thirties, Štyrský concentrated on the theme of eroticism: in 1930-1933 he issued a private publication for subscribers, *Erotická revue (The Erotic Revue)*, with illustrations by a wide range of well-known Czech artists. Toyen, for whom the eroticisation of the world was a life-long theme, was one of the most uninhibited.⁷ She also contributed to the erotic *Edice 69 (Edition 69)*, which Štyrský founded in 1931. It started off with Nezval's *Sexuální nocturno (Sexual Nocturne)*, supplemented by Štyrský's own collages. While Nezval's text was not of the same quality as the daring prose of Georges Bataille or Louis Aragon and developed around infantile sexuality and taboo words, Štyrský lived up to the model of Max Ernst's xylograph collages. *Edice 69* culminated with the poetic text of Štyrský's *Emilie přichází ke mně ve snu (Emily Comes to Me in a Dream)*, accompanied by the artist's photo-montages and a psychoanalytic interpretation by Bohuslav Brouk. By that time, dreams had already become an important source of inspiration for Štyrský. He had been recording them since 1925, first in words and



later also in drawings. It is possible that he was inspired to do so by the records of dreams published in *La Révolution surréaliste*. It was dreams that led him to re-evaluate his ideas about art: through dream fragments, he returned to concrete features and achieved a distinct individualisation of the object. He agreed with Teige that the dream state was not creative in itself and that one could not deny the free act of artistic creation. He understood dreams as a storehouse of motifs that he could join to form new units, which would not refer back to the empirical world.

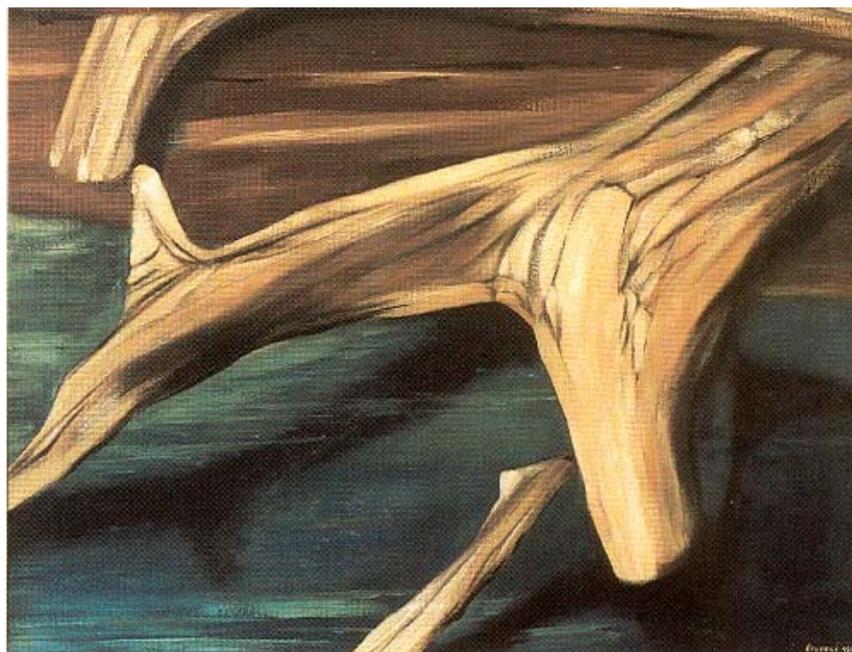


Toyen, *Erotic Drawing*, 1937, water-colour, Indian ink on paper, 9.5 x 14.5 cm, private collection.

The cycle *Kořeny (Roots)*, from 1934, dominated the paintings that Štyrský included in the first exhibition of the Surrealist Group of Czechoslovakia, at the beginning of 1935. For Nezval, it was the embodiment of Breton's words about convulsive beauty. The cycle shows how Štyrský treated a single theme, reinterpreted each time in a different way, with its own content and aim. The provocative erotic connotations referred back to dreams recorded in the twenties - the dream about the mandrake and dreams about snakes - and also to the common dream motif of the cleft or crack. At the same time, Štyrský worked with found objects: during his stay in the Šumava (Bohemian Forest) region in the summer of 1934, he was fascinated by the intricate tree roots, often reflected in water, in the woods by the Black Lake. He recorded them in working photographs, which he never exhibited or reproduced. Jan Mukařovský, a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, found Štyrský and Toyen's work particularly interesting. He observed that Štyrský built a painting from an outline, and thus denied the cohesiveness and depth of the space of the painting. Mukařovský described this approach as an expression of the painter's epistemological outlook on reality. By contrast, in Toyen's work one often saw the object connected with its milieu. The spectres in her paintings were formed from the structure



of the amorphous, 'informel' background, which recalled tree bark or the surface of a wall. According to Nezval, the main shift between artificialism and the first phase of surrealism in Toyen's work consisted in the attempt to restore emotion in the object, without illustrative tendencies and without slipping into representational painting. Toyen drew on her experiences from 1928-1929, when, in her striking work with paints, including the relief layering of the paint materials, roughening with sand, cutting, scratching and spilling, she was able to evoke emotions that were based on tactile as well as visual impressions. While Toyen concentrated mainly on paintings, Štyrský also focused intensively on photographs. In these, inspired by Atget, he exposed the concrete irrationality of the most ordinary surroundings. He was also interested in collages, in which he combined psychoanalysis with Gestalt psychology. The large set of collages, *Stěhovací kabinet* (*Moving Cabinet*), from 1934-1935, treats variations on the theme of sentimentality and cruelty. Štyrský ironised and fundamentally changed the meaning of the banal kitsch reproductions.

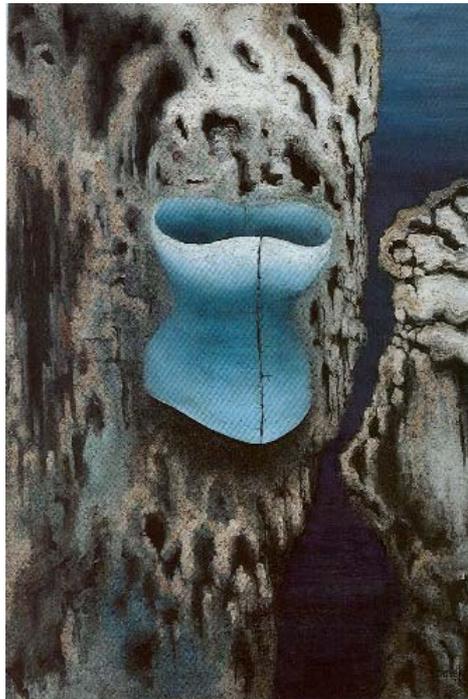


Jindřich Štyrský, *Roots*, 1934, oil on canvas, 50.5 x 65 cm, private collection.

Like Toyen, the sculptor Vincenc Makovský created an innovative work with materials in his relief *Žena s vázou* (*Woman with a Vase*) from 1933, combining cork, wax, tar, fabric, twine, matches and cardboard. Through the destruction of the corporeal form, he suppressed the visual cohesiveness of the whole; he stressed the abstract, 'informel' side, which was one of the expressive boundaries of



surrealism. He turned to the other pole of surrealism in the sculpture *Dívka s děckem* (*Girl with Child*, 1933-1935), a unique persiflage on the sacred theme of the Madonna. He fit into the line that had begun with the famous painting by Max Ernst of the spanking of Jesus, *The Blessed Virgin Chastising the Child Jesus Before Three Witnesses*, 1926, and would end with the late anti-Catholic collages of Jindřich Štyrský (1941). Along with Štyrský and Toyen, Makovský exhibited at the first surrealist exhibition in Prague, but he lost his enthusiasm for experiments and concentrated more on traditional sculpture and official commissions. In 1936, this led to his expulsion from the group.



Toyen, *Deserted Den*, 1937, oil on canvas, 113 x 77.5 cm, Státní galerie výtvarného umění v Chebu.

The activity of the Prague surrealists was concentrated around exhibitions (1935 and 1938) and debates, and their publications consisted of both original texts and translations of French surrealist literature. At their invitation, André Breton, his wife Jacqueline and Paul Eluard came to Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1935. According to Breton, they were given a triumphal welcome. Breton made thorough preparations for the trip, writing two important lectures for his visit to Prague. These were: 'The Surrealist Situation of the Object – The Situation of the Surrealist Object'; and 'The Political Standpoint of Art Today.' In addition, he delivered his Brussels lecture from the previous year, 'What is Surrealism?', at Charles University. All three lectures were later published in Czech



translation in *Co je surrealismus?* (1937), with a cover by Karel Teige. In the Prague lectures, which drew large audiences, Breton analysed contemporary surrealist ideas. His reflections corresponded to the 'reasoning' phase of surrealism, in which the first 'intuitive' phase became material for study. At the same time, he reacted to the deepening political crisis. It was by 'objective chance' that in the same year, Edmund Husserl delivered key lectures about the 'crisis of the people of Europe' in Prague; Rudolf Carnap worked at the Prague German university and the Prague structuralists began to publish the journal *Slovo a slovesnost* (*Word and Literature*). Thus, disparate intellectual currents crossed in Prague in 1935 – surrealism, phenomenology, logical positivism and structuralism – which at that time were united by the attempt to diagnose the contemporary state of crisis and to propose a course for the future.⁸



Jindřich Štyrský, *The Infant Jesus*, 1941, collage on paper, 46 x 26 cm, private collection.

Breton and Eluard came to an agreement with the Prague surrealists about the first issue of *Mezinárodní bulletin surrealismu* (*The International Bulletin of Surrealism*), which was published in a Czech-French edition in the following year. Štyrský and Toyen gave them some of their works, which then regularly appeared at international exhibitions of surrealism. The Prague surrealists were incorporated into the international movement. Breton urged Štyrský and Toyen to investigate objective



surreality. This is confirmed by Štyrský's monumental painting *Trauma zrození* (*The Trauma of Birth*, 1936), which the artist described as a panel of objects, which create an object-entity, which is in itself a painting. He drew on his own existential experience during his stay in Paris in 1935, when, in the grip of a serious illness, he hovered between life and death. The title refers to the popular book by the psychoanalyst Otto Rank, *Das Trauma der Geburt* (1924), excerpts of which were translated in Nezval's *Zvěrokruh*. Rank was also popular among the Parisian surrealists and clearly influenced Breton and Eluard's book *L'immaculée conception* (*The Immaculate Conception*). At the same time, Štyrský came to grips with Dalí's small oil painting in the collage *The Accommodations of Desires* (1929). After the mid-thirties, Toyen combined 'informel' artistic approaches with the veristic depiction of concrete irrational objects. When considering her work, Mukařovský raised the question of whether the objects depicted were things or beings, and came to the conclusion that there was a movement in both directions, with one latent in the other.



Jindřich Heisler, *Rake*, 1943, photograph of an object, 68 x 97 cm, private collection.

Teige gradually moved closer to Breton's position, both in terms of his understanding of the theory of the internal model and of the danger of fascism and Stalinism. The other surrealists, with the exception of the communist Nezval, shared his critical view of the terror in the Soviet Union. In March 1938, Nezval came into conflict with the rest of the group when he approved of the death sentences passed in the Moscow trials. In the tense situation, he decided to dissolve the group. Both the communist and the fascist press welcomed this decision, but the other members resisted and continued to co-operate without Nezval. A similar problem occurred in the Parisian group in 1938



when the communist Eluard left the group. In the polemical brochure, *Surrealismus proti proudu* (*Surrealism against the Current*), Teige wrote a scathing analysis of political and cultural Stalinism. As a result, he was labelled a Trotskyite and won the enduring hatred of the communists. In 1938, the poet Jindřich Heisler, a generation younger, joined the group, bringing fresh inspiration. He immediately became involved in joint projects with Štyrský and Toyen and moved in his experiments from a literary to a visual type of expression. During the occupation, the group continued to function illegally, until the death of Jindřich Štyrský in March 1942. In the subsequent years, Teige, Toyen and Heisler continued to work together, but the other members abandoned surrealism.

The influence of surrealism was in no way limited to the Surrealist Group of Czechoslovakia. This was true as early as the thirties, but paradoxically, surrealism greatly expanded in the Czech lands during the war, when it was banned. In the stifling atmosphere of the Protectorate, it represented, for the young generation, an alluring challenge to engage in free creative thought. There were illegal groups of young surrealists in various districts of Prague and in other Czech and Moravian cities. Immediately following the liberation, surrealist activities bubbled up to the surface from the conspiratorial underground. In Czechoslovakia, however, the period of freedom lasted just under three years. During this time, there were debates in Prague, as in Paris and Brussels, about the contemporary state of surrealism and its future orientation, including polemics with revolutionary surrealists and existentialists. Jindřich Heisler selected a set of new surrealist works from the famous Parisian exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947*. In November 1947 they were exhibited in Prague at an exhibition entitled *Mezinárodní surrealismus* (*International Surrealism*), for the catalogue of which Breton wrote 'Druhá archa' ('The Second Ark'). In it this text, he defended the viability of surrealism and its independence of any kind of external pressure: 'In art, no military-political command can be accepted or declared without a betrayal. The only obligation of the poet and artist is to utter his unchangeable NO to all disciplinary decrees.'⁹ In Czechoslovakia at that time, his challenge had a particular urgency. The first Czech envoys to Breton, Nezval and Honzl, did not rise to the challenge; they submitted to the communist dictatorship. Toyen, Heisler and Teige, by contrast, followed this principle – Toyen and Heisler in exile in Paris, where they joined Breton's group; and Teige in Prague, where he was at the centre of a friendly circle of young, independent artists. He kept in contact with them until the henchmen of the communist regime hounded him to death in the autumn of 1951.

1 Vítězslav Nezval, *Neviditelná Moskva* (*Invisible Moscow*), Prague, 1935.



² František Šmejkal and Rostislav Švácha (eds.), *Devětsil: Czech Avant-Garde Art, Architecture, and Design of the 1920s and 1930s*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford and Design Museum, London, 1990.

³ Much less important members were Imre Forbath, Josef Kunstadt and Katy King (Libuše Jíchová).

⁴ By including Ježek in the group, Nezval, a passionate lover of music, showed how greatly he differed from Breton, who couldn't stand music. In the inter-war period the Czech surrealists did not have close contact with the Brussels group, in which music played an important role.

⁵ Pavel Turnovský, 'Nezval, astrologie a surrealisté' ('Nezval, Astrology and the Surrealists'), in Lenka Bydžovská and Karel Srp (eds.), *Český surrealismus 1929-1953*, Prague, 1996, pp. 214-219.

⁶ The impact of Josef Šíma on the group *Le Grand Jeu*, founded in 1927, constitutes a separate chapter.

⁷ Karel Srp, *Toyen*, Prague, 2000.

⁸ Miroslav Petříček, 'Setkání surrealismu s fenomenologií v magické Praze' ('The encounter between Surrealism and phenomenology in magical Prague'), in Lenka Bydžovská and Karel Srp (eds.), *Český surrealismus 1929-1953*, Prague, 1996, pp. 106-111.

⁹ André Breton, 'Druhá archa' ('The Second Ark'), in *Mezinárodní surrealismus (International Surrealism)* Topičův salon, Prague, 1947, unpaginated.

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