# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 112

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# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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# René Crevel
## 1900-1935

French novelist, critic, and essayist.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the brevity of his life, Crevel is remembered as an integral member of the French surrealist movement. Surrealists believed that literary and art movement was dedicated to expressing the imagination as revealed in dreams, without the convention of rational thought. In literature, surrealism was confined almost exclusively to France, in the works of Andre Breton and Paul Eluard, and was based on the associations and implications of words. Throughout his works, Crevel maintained a central theme that logic was confining, and morality futile. In particular, Crevel's novels are noted for their lack of traditional structure, character development, and plot. However, in spite of his work's unconventional traits, they are also praised for tremendous wit and lucidity. In addition to the arts, Crevel was actively involved in politics. When it appeared to him that the two could not exist together peacefully, Crevel ended his life.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Crevel was born in Paris to a troubled family. His father committed suicide while Crevel was a youth, and his death strongly affected the young boy. Despite personal problems, Crevel excelled academically, atttending high school and university in the French capital. After university, Crevel entered the French military. There he befriended several other young writers who introduced him to members of the popular Dada movement. Crevel's new friends included Breton and Eluard, who contributed to the journal *Litterature.* Their journalistic endeavors, in turn, inspired Crevel to introduce his own publication, *Aventure.* At the same time, he began writing novels. Influenced by the French symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, Crevel sought to break the traditional confines of prose and narrative in favor of more uninhibited writings.

As Crevel became involved in politics, he attempted to intermingle the harshly logical world of communism with the surrealist realm of the irrational. In the mid 1920s, Crevel became ill with tuberculosis and retreated to a sanatorium in Switzerland. His illness compounded his already existent depression, and frequent absences from his intellectual milieu diminished his influence among his literary and political peers. At a gathering of communists in 1935, Crevel begged for the surrealists who were present to be permitted to speak. When the communists ignored his request, Crevel went home and hung himself.

### MAJOR WORKS

Crevel's output, though small, is praised for its creativity. Novels such as *La mort difficile* (*Difficult Death*; 1920) and *Babylone* (*Babylon*; 1927) are representative of his free-form style. In addition, these works are considered autobiographical for their reflections on the conflicts and development of a youthful writer. Though difficult to follow from a narrative standpoint, Crevel's novels are remembered for their vivid images and volatile emotionalism.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Uniformly, critics praise Crevel's literary talents, and recent translations of Crevel's work have brought him more

critical attention. Crevel was unabashedly homosexual and his work reflects the conflicts of his sexual identity. Additionally, his work points to the contradictions of the liberation of classes and communism with the surrealist's desire for freedom. In particular, Crevel's black humor offers an eccentric and amusing look at frequently tragic circumstances. Today, as his work becomes more available to readers, the beauty and emotional insights of Crevel's prose continue to be admired.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*La mort difficile* [*Difficult Death*] (novel) 1920
*Détours* (novel) 1924
*Mon corps et moi* (novel) 1925
*Dali, ou l'anti-obscurantisme* (monograph) 1926
*Babylone* [*Babylon*] (novel) 1927
*L'esprit contre la raison: Cahiers du sud* (notebooks) 1928
*Êtes-vous fou?* (novel) 1929
*Paul Klee* (monograph) 1930
*Le clavecin de Diderot* (essays) 1932
*Les pieds dans le plat* [*Putting My Foot in It*] (novel) 1933

## CRITICISM

**Marie-Rose Carre (essay date May 1964)**

SOURCE: "René Crevel: Surrealism and the Individual," in *Yale French Studies,* Vol. 31, May, 1964, pp. 74-86.

[*In the following essay, Carre examines Crevel's role in the evolution of surrealism and discusses his philosophical and literary legacy.*]

"The greatest masterpiece," Jean Cocteau once remarked, "is never more than an alphabet in disorder." For once, his Surrealist enemies might want to agree with him. When, after the thunder of the great war had been stilled, Breton and his friends assumed the task of building up, from its basic notions, the new consciousness of our society, their hope was precisely that of finding a way of arranging the alphabet so new, so striking, and so binding in its force that it would suppress any memory of the old system of verbal expression. Instead it would nurture into the reborn world an outburst of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts, infinitely richer and more luminous than what could be expressed within the limits of Cartesian and Christian systems of reason then imposed on modern man, the victim of his civilization. "Europe is crystallizing; it is being mummified by the wrappings of its frontiers, its factories, its tribunals, its universities. Spirit is frozen and cracking under the mineral planks which press up against it." This was the cry the Surrealist group of 1925 sent out to the "Recteurs des Universités européennes." In the same year, turning to the "Ecoles du Bouddha," they hailed the spiritual freedom which they imagined resplendent in the Orient: "There the soul finds the absolute word, the fresh phrase, the interior landscape . . . create new dwelling places for us."

In the consciousness of European youth at this time, the vocabulary transmitted by generations of writers, all of them suspect, had suddenly lost its inner strength and collapsed into ridiculous intestinal rumblings. In his attack on Anatole France—*Un Cadavre*—, Breton had sounded the trumpet: "Loti, Barrès, and France—mark with a red letter the year that laid low these three sinister men: the idiot, the traitor, and the bloodhound." With such representatives the old order of the well-to-do bourgeoisie was bankrupt, despite what some people insisted on calling a military victory. Why should the words that explained, justified, honored, and exalted this order and its concomitant horrors survive? "The modern age is at an end. The stereotyped gestures, acts, and lies of Europe have completed the cycle of disgust." This text of 1925, published under the title *La Révolution Surréaliste* was signed by fifty-one young men. Since then, their anger has not stopped ringing and tormenting the conscience of our affluent society. Destined to separate and follow their own paths, some failing to pursue an inhumanly arduous task, some toiling in secret toward the new world of their own choice, some falling victim to the immensity of their vision, they had, nevertheless, revealed to the complacent audience surrounding them with derision or smiles of faked sympathy ("il faut que jeunesse se passe") that literature was not a refusal to face one's responsibility toward humanity. The poets of the new twentieth century could not be deterred from claiming the right to criticize and soon destroy a respectable way of life, upset their system of value and take away from science the tools with which to build their new City. Their name, derived from the Greek verb to make, was sufficient justification. "Once again," Breton said in 1926, "all we know is that we are to a certain extent endowed with words and that, because of this endowment, something great and obscure tends imperiously toward expressing itself through us. . . . It is a singular and untiring summons. Perhaps our only duty is to liquidate a spiritual estate which it is in the bests interests of all of us to give up. Yet it is still a matter of life and death, of love and reason, of justice and crime."

Among the young men who committed their lives to creating the new breed of man attuned to this singular and ceaseless appeal, few came with more hope and less confidence than René Crevel. For him, the moment when these promises would tend to be realized meant literally that life might become preferable to death. Tragically dispossessed, nurturing a great nostalgia for an imaginary state in which each gesture would be creative and therefore self-

justifying, he had to give himself to a faith in need of apostles and recreate his own energy in the face of the infinite boredom of the finite world as he knew it. Born in 1900, he had joined the group of experimenters around Breton toward the end of the Dadaist period and was then still caught in the struggle of breaking away from the hold of a bourgeois family. Like Philippe Soupault and Michel Leiris, he had been educated in the XVIe arrondissement and had attended Jeanson de Sailly. "Ivory towers; but the ones that linger on are so phony they could be knocked down with a flick of the finger. They're done in pasteboard, designed to be coffins for mosquito skeletons. . . . A being finds his identity in thought and, in his thought, sees primarily his raison d'être. The 'I think therefore I am' formula was the keystone of all the structures built in a void." Such formulas had stunted his mind and those of everyone around him. "The interior life was offered to us as the supreme goal, the goal of goals; living men were advised to embrace silence and immobility; in all this, the attributes of life turned out to be no different from those of death."

Other attributes of life, projected on planes of still unimaginable richness, were evoked by Surrealist proclamations. "The mind," said Aragon, "is capable of grasping relations other than those found in reality: chance, illusion, the fantastic, dreams. All these species were brought together under a single genus: Surreality." This new faith did not propose, then, to refurbish a worn-out vocabulary, to be used in compositions of various kinds, or to set in motion a political revolution, after which certain powers would fall back into armchairs prearranged for a comfortable occupancy. The goal, clearly and frequently stated, was to create new perspectives, for the investigations of the human mind, new forms of thought and perception, so charged with a still undefinable force that they would be at once image, word, and action. At this point, toward which our age is still toiling, reality would not appear as one and definable, obedient to the Academy's insistence that a self-respecting painter should present it only under this guise; rather it would be multi-shared, susceptible to interpretations from many points of departure, each one as acceptable as the one that might have been substituted for it. The advent of Christianity had, in fact, operated a similar change in the mind of pagan peoples. Now the coming of the scientific age threatened to take the lead in a revolution of the same import, but because of the nature of scientific reasoning, its influence would, in our poets' estimation, contribute more to a stiffening of the satisfied dogmatism of our society than to its liberation. "Idealism, pragmatism, and realism, Crevel says, no longer take on the quality of booby-traps which were thought to be poet-traps." Unlike the nineteenth century romantics, these new poets are not utopians. They are not going to lead the people, in the footsteps of Lamartine and Hugo, to a promised land. The military, the bourgeois industrialists, even the leaders of the Communist party in France, tightening their power over the daily life of the population, had put up barricades against art and poetry, and therefore needed to be swept away. Never had society been so harshly condemned by its youth; the example would set a precedent never to be forgotten; when that had happened, then "l'esprit, l'esprit vainqueur," rearranging words and images in total liberty, would reach a certain, though perhaps temporary truth which would radiate *life*, life as it had never before been sensed. Superhuman as these promises sounded, those who made them stood ready to keep them, and Crevel in 1925 marked with emotion the moment when Lautréamont and his "bague d'aurore" had lead him "to the threshold of his shattering friendship with Breton, Aragon and Eluard."

In 1924 Breton included Crevel in the list of nineteen young men having passed the test of "Surréalisme absolu." Crevel's contribution to this period of surging enthusiasm had been important, for it was Crevel who introduced them to the fruitful practice of hypnotic sleep coupled with automatic writing, as well as with other activities. Matthew Josephson tells of an evening at the home of one of Picabia's friends, "Mme de la Hire," when most of the company had been "put to sleep." Among various incidents, he reports that Crevel was found, a rope in his hand, trying to persuade a group of young men and women to hang themselves from the ceiling light.

In the atmosphere of extraordinary exaltation and assurance permeating the group in 1925, Aragon had written that "Surrealism's data have the value of experimental scientific data." To which Breton, in another tone, had added: "The really extraordinary thing, Madame, is that on the shore where you had tossed us half-dead, we hold on to a wondrous memory of our disaster." Crevel, who had confessed in 1924 that "there was no human contact which prevented him from feeling alone," had learned both to absorb some strength from Surrealist ideas and attitudes and to assert his independence. If necessary, he would set himself apart from a group whose intentions ultimately were different from his own. We know that he very soon withdrew in bitterness from the sessions of hypnotic sleep and later, in his review of *Les Pas perdus*, accused Breton of having prolonged the evenings mercilessly in order to bring his subjects beyond sanity, just to prove that this was not a game, nor simply minds playing with words. For Crevel, the expected reward was to find, by incontrovertible intuition, that he was really a being different from what a distorted system of values let him now perceive himself to be. The result would give him possession of a method of expressing himself and his real, multiformed truth.

Playing with words, then, was criminal when lives were at stake: "I have no idea of what [Breton's] present intentions are. . . . André Breton's responsibilities, which had been dispersed, are now joined in a weighty bundle, are becoming more precise. A bastard vanity gives the impression of fleeing from overly human beaches. Is it a constantly lowering tide? . . . There is no moisture on the sands. *Les Pas perdus?* They are annals of the life of a littérateur—the last littérateur. Victimized by words, Breton is no longer aware that they have meaning and value and

impose a commitment on whoever uses them. . . . Breton's self-assurance is reminiscent of Montherlant's." For Breton had cried: "Drop everything, take to the roads, . . ." and then let the words die on the page. In the manner of the symbolists, they were decorative play-words used for their harmony in a sentence; they revealed how he believed in words for themselves, the way priests claimed God as a guarantee of their precepts, chiefs of state used Fatherland, Duty or Fraternity, and mothers respect, affection, or brushing one's teeth. Breton was seeking to acquire a certain power for himself which he would exert over human beings around him. The century of the new world risked being brought to a stop on the last, fabricated word of "Lâchez tous."

"I would like to set up a combination that would give me the innocence of a checker player. I would not give up happiness, but would live, act, play with thoughts . . . happy to hear, to dance, to drink in order to forget the others who have placed limits on me without aiding me." "To act with thoughts" is precisely the Surrealist dream of supreme power that was still inaccessible to the man "étranger, extérieur au spectacle" who sought in human beings, beyond the trite exchange of words, "tristes simulacres," the revelation of a universal soul. "Unfortunately, the occasions when I could discover afresh the little pile of bones, of pleasurable papillae, confused ideas and sentiments which bore my name were rare."

"Barely tangential to the world" (he uses this expression with pathetic insistence), he knows that discursive intelligence offers no solution but only phrases filled with easy fallacies. Among these "flabby pillows designed for bourgeois ears," none is more dangerous than the ever-present "I think therefore I am." "I think therefore I am—yet, if I think, it's in order to doubt. I think, therefore I don't live. Without doubt what we need is some moral discipline? How useless! Now we can get on to ringing phrases. Yet, what good do they serve, when in the end they have no more sweep than any others?"

Crevel wrote these lines, the authentic confession of a late romantic, in a book he devoted entirely to himself—a strange undertaking for an active Surrealist. But was he not *secrétaire de rédaction* for the *Nouvelles Littéraires* at the very same time he played the part of "Oeil" in Tzara's *Le Coeur à gaz* at the famous performance of 25th July 1924? In these contradictions Crevel found a quality close to that "pensée en action" in which he saw a culmination of human activity. Between "mon corps et moi" (so he called this book—his second) a meditation in solitude must reveal the bond. Total sincerity, without any effort at literary effects, should work the miracle. But the most sincere can never declare themselves pure of any pose or pretension. The very impulse to talk about oneself is the symptom of a diseased ego, always out of reach: "A primary state is sufficient to itself and asks no aid from philosophy or literature. The words we have learned are intellectual policemen whose effects we can in no way abolish. Logic and reflection exist only in the absence of something better." Nothing may be truer in our time than this feeling of the "avilissement" in writing about oneself and often in writing at all. Crushed by the anguish of nonexistence, of loss of contact with a being which at the same time he conceives as himself (and his case is different from Artaud's) Crevel prefigures those writers who deny increasingly the appeal of what they write. One thinks in particular of many of today's avant-garde playwrights whose style, by tending to the trite, the repetitious, and the absurd, tries to involve the spectator in the sense of guilt they feel toward their use of words.

With the possible exception of Artaud, however, orthodox Surrealists believed in words, in their power for suggestion, persuasion, revelation, and finally creation. "What difference does it make if it's by the path of words," Breton asked haughtily in his introduction to the fourth issue of the *Révolution Surréaliste* (1925), "that we had hoped to recapture our primordial innocence!" Crevel, refusing to use them in poetic research, even granting that this research should stop before reaching the stage of literary display, showed that he was in this respect closer than his friends to many artists of our time. He placed words below the level of objects, on the level of tools to be thrown away after use. They could be used to probe, describe and fight; they were scalpels or swords, but never sources of beauty or illumination. Any revelation should burst outside of their too welldefined limits. Whereas Breton, Desnos, and Aragon felt exhiliration and the joy of possession in what they wrote, Crevel was mostly sensitive to the shell-like rigidity of the content of words used for nine or ten centuries and encrusted with a traditional meaning nothing could make us forget.

It is not surprising, then, that Crevel should be a prose writer, filled with mistrust even toward the words he traced: "L'art? laissez-moi rire! . . ." Of course! But still "once the intellect gets to a certain point the only thing it can do is put itself on trial . . . it condemns itself and what a tragedy it is that the most audacious and open of men become receptacles for the deepest despair." Crevel's books mark the itinerary of this despair during the ten years of his activity.

It might be said that each of the Surrealists could become great only to the extent to which he would shake off the hold of Surrealism. Having benefited from its "courant d'air frais," he would have the energy to assert his independence. "In order to be a man or just be," Crevel said, "one has to be a solitary. What I am is characterized by what separates me from others. That makes me incomprehensible to the gaze of their intellects and it makes them incomprehensible to me." With this declaration, which is not innocent of aggression, Crevel refuses access into his life to one of the rules of the Surrealist sect—the rule that led Aragon to write in 1927: "There are still men who prowl the streets in great pride, boasting of the great ideas that have passed through their noggins . . . clear out, you who are living on your laurels." He reminded Chirico, already far removed from a Surrealism he had helped to cre-

ate, that the source of all creativity in art is "the impersonality of the genius . . . Mystery belongs to everyone and is the principle of genuine community." Artaud, expelled violently in 1926 for open transgression of these laws, replied that "the freedom of the individual is a good superior to any other conquest made on a relative plane."

What Crevel revealed was his feeling of tragic isolation, not only within himself, but that of each man within his own self, of each individual cut off from a certain core that held the sense of his own life as a complete and painful mystery of unfathomable depth and darkness inside the animated skeleton that pretended to be alive. It seems that our era, after the cataclysm of a war in which the human being lost sight of himself, has become hypersensitive to this real and fundamental isolation of man. We see it in Beckett's Malone and, more dramatically, in the central character of Boris Vian's *Les Bâtisseurs d'empire.*

But Crevel lived in a time of great exaltation and real optimism in the future of man; the influx of this optimism was necessary to keep alive a man who had outlined as early as 1924 all the details of the suicide he was to execute in 1935. Although he could not refrain from expressing the conflicts that shook his being, he never turned against the Surrealists or their methods. To be sure, from the records we have in the *Révolution Surréaliste,* he does not seem to have taken part in any of the games or investigations of dreams, coincidences and questionnaires that filled the magazine with images of another world. The only exception was his help with the 1933 "Enquête sur la nature irrationelle de l'objet, Boule de Cristal des voyantes." But he did not deride these esoteric pastimes. No provocation came from him, for he found, in the approval of the Surrealist group, a justification of his own tendencies to introspection, of his long and poignant investigations of human conflicts. They emerged from his own experiences and the tragedies of his own life, and aimed at finding a personal expression of his hopes and desires. They were tendencies which flourish in romanticism, and their existence put Crevel in a risky position, for in perpetuating worn-out formulas, he may have been encouraging a regression to a classical form of literature he feared and felt powerless to change. Hundreds of pages of manuscripts, printed by Krâ, the *NRF,* or José Corti had reached the limit of the absurd; by their very existence they demonstrated their total worthlessness. "Ete-svous fous?" asked their author at the end of his fifth volume. "Ete-svous fous? Sinon. . . ."

Thus side by side with self-confident leaders who make a joyous, though sincere display of their "désespoir absolu," we can see Crevel reaching out to the generation then being born who, after spending their adolescence as actors or spectators of a world-wide tragedy, would emerge into the dangerous peace of the years 1945-50 with dull despair and an innate conviction of the absurdity of the world and their existence in it. The young writers for whom Crevel "marked with a fiery stroke the end of the sweetness of living," find in the conditions of life around them the ferment of their inner disquietude. Crevel's feelings, on the contrary, remain for the most part alien to the preoccupations of those around him. For his friends the world was becoming ever wider and more luminous. Carried by the "vague de rêves" they expected to beach on the "Rivieras de l'infini." For him, the breathing space became ever narrower; his own being, "condemned through each day to ignorance of the sensation of being," was dissolving in darkness. People around him offer only the frenzy of a social life in which he found neither oblivion nor a definition of his form. In spite of the "monstrueuse et obscène membrane" which links human bodies, *they* remain "the others in whose existence *I* couldn't believe, but who nevertheless were triumphing over *me.*"

Thirty years later Albert Camus was to be interested by the case of an "étranger" like Crevel, removed from himself by a sort of psychological cecity from the perceptions of other peoples' existence as well as his own. But while Camus' Meursault accepts himself and his fate when men "triumph" over him with laws and prejudices, Crevel, living in a time of boundless confidence in the future of humanity, struggles frantically against his "prideful and naive" weaknesses to break through the strange clouds that smother him, because he knows that powerful men are fighting the great battle somewhere in an open and sunny country. In this anguish he becomes capable of expressing the pure despair of Beckett's or Ionesco's characters, walled within themselves. "A street. It is straight or at least seems to be straight. You have to walk along it without worrying about where it may lead. . . . The *I* is alone. X is alone. Y is alone. Then from their solitude they receive the signs of dignity, as unbelievable as it was predictable."

This dignity, reached in the perfect solitude of death, is what Crevel grants to his hero, Pierre Dumont. It is a manner of reward, a gesture of admiration for Pierre's honesty and fundamental purity. Pierre has understood that most human relationships are based on the possession of one being by another. He has broken away from the openly incestuous hatred of his mother and refused the compromise by which he could secure for himself, during the rest of his life, the sweet and comforting presence of a girl who loves him. "Behind the window panes, in the dining rooms, there are hanging lights whose globes cast a green embrace over family happiness. He sniggers . . . the only thing missing is the soup-tureen. What a pretty kind of happiness!" This bourgeois contentment is the strangulation of real love, the encounter with "the only creature, the only earthly reality which leads a man to live without judging his life," stifling the one state where man, though alive, does not have to use his memory, his intelligence, or his artificial power to assemble words for self-justification or criticism. "We are our own criterion" and therefore "the ethical conclusion is that every being, after having found his moral code, must always accept it." Admirable in his innocence and his brutality is the young American who gives Pierre the certitude of his new unity which "will give precision to those things which seemed vague to his