

A L i s m

Translated by Vivian Folkenflik

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Jacqueline Cbénieux-Gendron

Translator's Preface

This book presents a number of challenges to the translator. Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron's prose is often allusive; I have sometimes felt it necessary to provide English-speaking readers with a context for these allusions in the text. In my notes, I have identified the many poets and artists mentioned in the text, explained technical terms, and interpreted Surrealist puns and wordplay. Wherever possible, I have supplied page references and dates that might be helpful to readers.

I have used the standard English translations of the major texts, not for my own convenience—I would often have preferred to translate crucial passages myself—but as a way of enabling readers to make further explorations of this material. The notes thus offer English-speaking readers access to some English translations not listed in Chénieux-Gendron's bibliography.

I am very grateful for the generous help I was given in the course of this work by a number of people. Robert Folkenflik provided valuable references as well as steady encouragement and interest. David Folkenflik gave willing help at a crucial time. Dickran Tashjian cheerfully offered his expertise and a careful reading of the manuscript. Renée Riese Hubert made several useful suggestions. Jennifer Crewe of Columbia University Press helped me solve various procedural problems. Karen Mitchell, also of Columbia, once again proved to be a thoughtful editor, sensitive to the demands of both text and reader. I would like to thank them all.

Vivian Folkenflik
Laguna Beach, California

Surrealism

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Prohibition and Meaning

Three great systems of exclusion and division allow the human word to lay claim to purity: the play of prohibitions, the strongest of which is the prohibition of desire; the division between reason and madness; and the will to truth.

We know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything, that we cannot simply speak of anything, when we like or where we like; not just anyone, finally may speak of just anything. We have three types of prohibition, covering objects, ritual with its surrounding circumstances, the privileged or exclusive right to speak of a particular subject; these prohibitions interrelate, reinforce and complement each other, forming a complex web, continually subject to modification.¹

These prohibitions certainly surround the act of speech in a very powerful way. Moreover, added to them is the obligation to say *only* what is reasonable, and according to the codified modes of “non-madness.” If pre-nineteenth-century Europe sometimes discerned signs of lucidity and marks of portent in the speech of the mad, this was another way of reinvesting that speech through reason, of denying its absolute *difference*. More subtly, too, as Michel Foucault shows, the very opposition between true and false defines a constraint on truth involving *power*. “Certainly, as a proposition, within a discourse, the division between true and false is neither arbitrary, nor modifiable, nor institutional, nor violent.” But there *is* a will to truth, which takes different forms according to the various historical periods in the West, and which tends to exercise on other discourses, such as literature, or on other forms of expression, “a sort of pressure, a power to constrain.”² If we just think about the references to “verisimilitude” in Western art and literature until the naturalist period and probably beyond, we can measure its indirect force.

From the time of its foundation in France in 1919, Surrealism responded to these games of division by revolting against them. Surrealists saw these divisions with a lucidity and a violence sharpened by the postwar despair and a sense of there being no reason to go on living. After the rupture and bloodshed of World War I, in opposition to the clear conscience of Europe, which was reshaping and healing itself, the movement launched a wave of global contestation and wove a network of *other* differences. In its most far-reaching projects, Surrealism claims to mingle desire with human speech, and eros with human life—not just to tell, or to describe, desire and eros. It claims to abolish the notion of incongruity or obscenity, to let the subconscious speak, and to simulate different pathologies of language. It claims to overturn the quest for the probable in art by making an astounding bet on the imagination, presented as the central power of the human mind, from which emerges a whole life-in-poetry. In this life-in-poetry the improbable, the extraordinary, the incongruous would grow in abundance; sincerity would no longer have an absolute referential value; what would be sought for its own sake would no longer be truth but living, living *otherwise* than in everyday mediocrity, living *outside* the track to which society assigns each of us.

This displacement of the system of moral and intellectual values on which centuries of Western culture were based has been and still is sometimes perceived as a perversion, or a biasing of human activity: an antihumanism.

Now that we can define it more clearly, differentiating it from other poetic movements that arose in Europe at the same time, the French Surrealist project once again makes possible and legitimizes all sorts of behaviors and practices which are not completely *new*, but which had tended to become marginalized or encysted in the tissue of social life and poetic practice. Surrealism preaches the reversal of this tendency and the totalizing assumption of responsibility for all human behavior. Human violence had indeed been marginalized and neutralized by social life, by the norms of bourgeois capitalist society, but still rose up unpredictably and found an outlet in wars: in the example of the “just” war, as the French saw it, that was the butchery in Europe from 1914 to 1918. Surrealism proposes a recognition and a taking of responsibility for human violence in *revolt*, in every sense. It is on this very general if not symbolic level that we should understand the proclamation of André Breton’s *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*:

one can understand why Surrealism was not afraid to make for itself a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination, of sabotage according to rule, and why it still expects nothing save from violence. The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd.³

But also, and without any contradiction, Surrealism tried to channel this potential energy, until then burning away “in the open air,” into an action at once inventive and concerted:

Once again, the question here is the whole problem of the transformation of energy. To distrust, as people do out of all proportion, the practical virtue of imagination is to be willing to deprive oneself at any cost of the help of electricity, in the hope of bringing hydroelectric power back to its absurd waterfall consciousness.⁴

Also marginalized were eroticism and the powers of love in French society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Surrealism struggled constantly against the ruling hypocrisy on the double front of eroticism and the recognition of love. An article on “research into sexuality” appears in the eleventh issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1928); daringly, clinically accurate for a time when Robert Desnos and Kra, his publisher, were brought into

court for supposedly pornographic passages of *La liberté ou l'amour!* (1927). And there was a recognition of love's power to disturb the mind in the same issue of the review (no. 12, 1929) in which appear the answers to a "Questionnaire on Love," written in a tone of intense but unidealistic urgency. In the sixties, with no contradiction, Breton discounted "sex education" as a force for liberation in order to preserve love's power to disturb (Jean-Claude Silbermann, 1964, *Le surréalisme et la peinture*). Marginalized, too, were the practice of automatic writing and the use of dreams as the springboard of "inspiration"—both of which had fostered the writing of all sorts of great texts (from Horace Walpole's dream to Mallarmé's resonant obsession, "The penultimate is dead"), but neither of which had ever been explicitly advocated as a systematic exercise. In twentieth-century society, all sorts of magical behavior was veiled which the Surrealist group was to concentrate on exhibiting.

Surrealism therefore presents itself to us as a machine for *integration*—having refused the cultural divisions we have discussed, even the division between true and false, that have been the basis for language in the West since the nineteenth-century industrial and scientific revolution. This movement of integration implies a reversal in the manifestation of a function hitherto marginalized both in social life and in literary and philosophical tradition: I am referring here to the imagination. All Platonic philosophy shows the human being as a chariot guided by the intellect and carried along by the will, while imagination, the lead horse, tries to make the team run off its course. Before Surrealism, the "classical" and rationalist philosophical tradition in France, while insisting on the infinite character of will and its primary importance in defining human liberty, had thrust imagination to the side of life, of animation, of warmth, of vivacity, and thus "prepared our minds to recognize the primacy of the imagination, from the moment when life appears no longer as a secondary fact, but as a primary, primitive fact and as an indivisible energy."⁵ The meaning of the Romantic revolution (to which Surrealism is connected, from this point of view) was to give imagination a *cognitive* function.

But Romantic philosophy is a philosophy of being, in which imagination can rediscover paradise lost. The implicit philosophy of the French Surrealists, playing on the level of existence and not of essence, of beings and not of being, gives imagination a leading role: not to *recognize* something that

had previously been veiled, but to give existence to its own unprecedented forms. The power of (poetic) imagination becomes, by definition, practical. The play on words *must* become its own object (Duchamp), dreamed forms *must* be materialized in a tangible object (Breton, *Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité*).⁶

But if Surrealism is a machinery for integration, it is also, in the same impulse, or perhaps from another point of view, a machinery for negating. Surrealism negates everything implied by the divisions and prohibitions on which the majority cultural structure is founded: negating ready-made “orders,” denying the pertinence of codes (social, but also stylistic, linguistic, and even logical). Surrealists therefore suspect everything that organizes the sense of things, the *direction* of things, in space and in time, especially any kind of taxonomy and any presentation of evidence that has *signification* for us. Various games take shape: one consists of trying to capture the meaning of time, or of space, or of language, in the moment of their arising—in a kind of original space, with mythical evidence. The practice of automatic writing or drawing is a response to this intention: “to create a universe of words [or of forms, I should add] in which the universe of our practical and utilitarian perceptions will be completely disoriented.”⁷ Is this a question of *either* refusing ready-made meanings *or* creating the conditions for the epiphany of a new meaning? What we have here is rather the two intentions at the same time, the first being the reverse side of the second. Another game (Bataille’s own game, but, at one time, also André Masson’s or Hans Bellmer’s and the particular form eroticism takes in them) consists of negating the meaning of space and of the human body, by the introduction of all possible meanings in a dionysiac investment of space, even at the price of tearing apart and scattering the human body.⁸ The absence of “meaning” can also be seen in the practice of exhibiting as equivalent the two sides of things and of manifesting the plurality of meanings of signs: as if one had to show that “meaning” could be transparent, or that things and signs had the same value as their opposites. This is Marcel Duchamp’s enterprise. For example, the *Female Fig Leaf* is the printed stamp, the “negative” of a feminine sexual organ, so that hiding the masculine organ—the role of the fig leaf in classical statuary—or exhibiting the feminine organ amounts to the same thing. In the realm of signs and letters, this is also the enterprise of Robert Desnos. And to this practice we must add the use Surrealism makes of the reverse of cultural content. I am thinking not only of Paul Eluard and Benjamin Péret’s collection of updated proverbs (*152 proverbes mis au goût du*

jour), but also of the reversal of the content of myths. In *Au château d'Argol*, Julien Gracq turns the myth of the Savior into a myth of the ambivalence of the mediator. Savior? Perhaps, but condemner as well.⁹

This is a great attempt to demolish the sense of reality, stigmatized in 1947 by Jean-Paul Sartre, who put Surrealist thought in the same class as the (eternal) current of scepticism, emphasizing certain manifestations which he interprets as idealist. According to him, the Surrealists preach, particularly through automatic writing, the dissolution of the individual consciousness and also, by the symbolic annulment of "object-witnesses," the dissolution of the objectivity of the world.

But Surrealism responds to this threatening spread of idealism steadfastly with two firebreaks. One is political action, whose sparks we will see fly with some regularity in the historical part of this work; the other is the attempt, in the very heart of practical activity (ethical *or* artistic), to make *another* sense emerge, discovered by some people in and through pleasure and by others in and through the seizure of a projective desire (that is "objective chance"). Pleasure on one side, in which the body rediscovers its sense and sensibility rediscovers its comforts; on the other side, a new ethic of desire, in which time rediscovers an undeniable orientation.

Thus, the massive denial of prohibition, as it functions in Surrealism, is also a game of *displacement*. The aim—to take back the move that implicates human conduct and language in prohibitions and power structures—is turned upside down and becomes an immense confidence in "pure" desire, in "absolute" revolt, in the powers not of society but of the word. Now on the one hand this involves mythical terms ("pure" desire, "absolute" revolt), which function as the horizon of an ever-disappointing quest, or as its completely fictional premises. But more especially, in the order of speech, this voice, which the Surrealists originally gave in its full strength to *everyone* ("Secrets of the Surrealist Magical Art," in the first *Manifesto*), has been appropriated by a *few*. Is this the necessity of experimentation or the displacement of prohibitions? It is the ineluctable ambiguity of Surrealism finally to have reinforced the privileged right of the speaking subject within an already privileged group. Surrealism has reinvented, in fact, as the privileged place in which the "miracle" arises, the *group* constituted around a dominant personality. This elective constellation reproduces, with its rites of initiation, exclusion, and rehabilitation, the characteristics of a micro-society ruled by magical thinking:

The group never presents itself here as the picture of an open community, swollen with uncontrolled contagion; on the contrary, it is rather the idea that seems to have imposed itself on Breton from the beginning: the idea of a closed, separate *order*, of an exclusive companionship, of a phalanstery which tends to be shut in by vaguely magical walls (the significant idea of a "castle" is hovering about somewhere nearby).¹⁰

Membership in the group, in what Jules Monnerot calls the *Bund*, is a central condition of Surrealist life in its French definition: the place in which sensibilities are exacerbated and creativity exalted. Thus the Surrealist word sometimes becomes collective, or impersonal, and does not depend on the power of the speaking object. It replaces this power by that of Surrealism.

Is this displacement of "divisions" and cleavages a perverse effect of preaching liberation, or is it the necessary means? The Surrealist reply is obviously the latter. Moreover, it would be inaccurate to see this displacement as parallel, or the various called-for prohibitions as symmetrical. The prohibitions linked to the functioning of the group life are explicit and artificial. The prohibitions denounced by Michel Foucault, which eternalize their own everyday immediacy, are implicit and even repressed by the communal consciousness. A language and behavior that refuse the division between reason and folly, as between truth and error, in favor of imagination, analogy, and desire are words and behaviors that insert within their process an awareness of their relativity. Their intoxicating liberty and the preciousness of their discoveries are bought by an awareness of their precariousness, which is no doubt very hard to maintain without the structuring, securing interplay of *other* divisions.

The origin of new hierarchies and new differences thus lies not only in group life but in certain Surrealist "values": the search for eros, the search for political and social liberty, the search for poetry. But the functioning of these "values" is quite different from what can be seen in a morality of prohibition. It involves, by repeated transgression, reinventing a certain orientation of the world. To be exact, for Michel Leiris, we must reinvent the sacred by transgressing the taboo, "a limit in regard to which things abandon the unoriented, amorphous character of the profane and polarize themselves into left and right."¹¹ And Breton, after having incriminated Judeo-Christian religion as both "blood-curdling and congealed," cannot help but subscribe to Francis Ponge's suggestion: "Perhaps the lesson we

must learn is to abolish all values the instant we discover them.”¹² Value, poetic and practical, is discovered in the same moment in which it is transgressed.

We must therefore be wary of the oversimplified image of Surrealism as the breaker of prohibitions, a word on which Pierre de Massot puns when he calls his homage to Breton “Breton le septembriseur,” the revolutionary:¹³ as a “pure” movement, free from any compromise with what has been repressed. But it is also too simple to see in Surrealism, as was fashionable in the criticism of the sixties, a locus for stubborn, confusional idealism, for the celebration of some sorts of vaguely conceived transgression—or, as those who are nostalgic for Dadaism believe, the proud fortress of a coercive morality whose high priest was supposedly André Breton. Some people think that the “fringe” figures and fellow travelers of Surrealism (expressions they use, as I do, in the least uncomplimentary way possible, to refer to figures like Georges Bataille and Antonin Artaud)¹⁴ should be relocated at the heart of the adventure of the avant-garde, lived by them in a *more* revolutionary way. Others believe that Bretonian hypocrisy must be unmasked, and authenticity tracked down amid the make-believe. Critical distance today permits us to relate the projects of some Surrealists to others without automatically establishing hierarchies and demarcating boundaries within and outside the historical group: in short, to weigh the differences with passion but without projecting preconceived schemas upon them.

A Promethean and Totalizing Enterprise

The Surrealists seem to have always perceived their own movement as referring to something beyond their experience, so that they possess both great ancestors and a master plan that transcends individual achievements. Everything happens as if there were a *Surrealist idea*, a spirit of Surrealism, whose demands were absolute. Expressions such as the apparently mysterious phrase, “a system in which I believe, to which I slowly adapt myself, like Surrealism”;¹ the peremptory formulation, “Were there to remain not a single one, from among all those who were the first to measure by its standards their chance for significance and their desire for truth, yet would Surrealism continue to live”;² the whimsical title of no. 12 of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, “The Surrealist Millennium (929: Death of Charles the Simple)”³—these all express the fact that Surrealism responds to a fundamental