

Link

André Breton

Translated from French by Austin Carder

When I began searching as early as 1936 for the emotional catalyst of Surrealism (then just starting to find its counterpart in the “surrationalism” that overtook scientific circles), I discovered it right away in the anxiety inherent to a time when human brotherhood was collapsing more and more each day, just as the most established systems—including social systems—seemed struck by petrification. Two years later, in the final pages of *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique*, the philosopher Gaston Bachelard showed what knowledge we stood to gain by constantly *disrupting* reason and how psychological dynamism demands the continual alternation of impulses, some empirical and others rational. It had been a long time since reason, applied to the elucidation of events through which we were living, could hide its embarrassment. A year later, the war broke out.

Since it ended, everyone knows that the ties not only of brotherhood, but of solidarity in the broadest sense, which ought to bind all humankind, have loosened considerably. During that same period, the antagonism of the present social systems has only heightened, threatening us with a conflict that can end only in annihilation. Suffice it to say that the conditions from which it arose being far from bygone, Surrealism cannot yet be relegated to the past, in the same way as Impressionism or Cubism, for example.

The Surrealists have never stopped lamenting the fact that, in the first half of this century, the cultural bonds between Germany and France, which could only improve understanding and create sympathy between the two peoples, held strong until the moment they became definitively compromised. They took every opportunity to acknowledge their debt to German thought as well as the poetry of the German language. This initial contact—a real contact too long deferred—thereby fulfilled their dearest wish.

Surrealism in painting began with the conviction that the emergence of entirely new factors in psychic life (due to psychoanalysis, Gestalt theory, relativism) and the advancement of certain modern techniques (photography, film) rendered obsolete the ambition to *reproduce* what is seen, when even the artist would interpret it according to his own intelligence and sensibility, and as a function of the movement of his time (Neo-Impressionism, Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, etc.). As I observed at one of Surrealism's first international exhibitions, that of Copenhagen in 1935, “painting, up until these last few years, had been almost exclusively concerned with expressing the manifest relations between external perception and the *self*. The expression of this relationship proved less and less adequate, more and more disappointing.”¹ By relying on the material world's structures, painting tended to accord disproportionate interest to certain aspects of it, while once again the evolution of mechanical modes of representation rendered many of its pretensions void. Under these conditions, the Surrealists believed that “the only exploitable domain for the artist became pure mental representation, such as it extends itself beyond true perception.” The important point, I then added, is that the call for mental representation furnishes, as Freud said, “sensations related to processes taking place in the most diverse, even the deepest layers of the psychic apparatus.” In art, the search for these sensations works toward the abolition of the *self* in the *ego*. It tends toward increasing liberation of the instinctive impulse, breaking down the barrier that surrounds civilized man, a barrier unknown to the primitive and the child. The ultimate goal was to

¹ Preface to the catalog for the international exhibition of Surrealism, Copenhagen, 1935. Later incorporated into *The Political Position of Surrealism*, which can be found in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, University of Michigan Press, 1969.

dialectically reconcile these two violently contradictory terms for the adult human: physical perception, mental representation; to permit, on the basis of subjective elements projected by the means of painting, the organization of (new) perceptions with an objective tendency. Surrealism, taken as a whole, has never adopted any other approach.

This appeal to the instinctive, the desire for the “abolition of the *self* in the *ego*,” insofar as they cause the pleasure principle to dominate the reality principle, sufficiently demonstrate the suspicion and disfavor with which Surrealist painters and poets regard the latter, at least such as it is defined in our time. Throughout the years when the sky of Europe was darkened, when grievances on both sides of the borders were sharpening and were about to once again tear the world apart, not only did the Surrealists carefully abstain from making these grievances their own, but they sought, and still seek, to uncover, to lend speech to, beyond what superficially divides people, that which unites them at the deepest level in order to give it once and for all *full scope*. It is in this sense that they reclaim the great sociologist Charles Fourier, more revolutionary than the rest for having concluded that the necessity of “restoring order in the domain of thought” begins when we “forget all that we have learned.”²

Within Surrealism, by definition, the artist has enjoyed complete freedom of inspiration and technique, which explains the considerable external *dissimilarity* of the works gathered here. What strictly qualifies a work as Surrealist, whatever face it may present, is the intention and will to withdraw from the dominion of the physical world (which by imprisoning man in its appearances has tyrannized art for so long) to reach the total psychological field (of which the arena of consciousness is only a small part). The unity of Surrealism as a concept, which becomes a criterion, cannot be found in the well-worn “paths,” which can differ completely. It resides in the profound community of purpose: to attain the realm of desire which everything today is conspiring to veil, and to explore it in every direction until it reveals the secret of how to “change life.”³

PARIS, MAY 1952.

André Breton, translated by Austin Carder. From *Cavalier Perspective: Last Essays, 1952–1966* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2025).



Black Sun Lit 2025

² This is Fourier quoting the 18th-century philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac in *Théorie de l'unité universelle*, Volume III, 1841, p. 278. Available in English as *Social Science: The Theory of Universal Unity*, translated by Albert Brisbane, American News Co., 1850, p. 60.

³ Rimbaud, *Une saison en enfer*, “Délires,” I, *Œuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, p. 104.