CHAPTER 15

The Gnostic “Sur” in Surrealism: On Transcendence and Modern Art

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1 The Surrealist Experience: Between Spiritualism and Nihilism

It is generally accepted that the modern innovations in early-twentieth-century art have radically reshaped our perception of beauty, art, and creativity. In order to understand the difference between our contemporary aesthetic experience and a traditional perception of art and beauty, a philosophical analysis of the functioning of the aesthetic experience in the twentieth-century avant-garde may be revealing. In an attempt to understand the nature of this experience, I will primarily focus on the artistic movement of Surrealism and its specific conception of the aesthetic experience. This exploration of Surrealism will not aim at a mere aesthetical or stylistic analysis, but will instead attempt to determine the historico-philosophical conditions of possibility of this Surrealist experience.

The Surrealist artist does not perceive the world from a realistic point of view; rather, he experiences reality from the perspective of dreams, hypnagogia, fantasy, opium, imagination, and free association. In one way or another, Surrealist art tries to capture these experiences and attempts to involve the reader or spectator in this surreal perception of reality. In spite of the vast stylistic heterogeneity of these artistic attempts, surrealist artists have generally applied two different though related procedures for presenting these surreal experiences. The first and earliest artistic procedure is epitomised by the method of “automatism.” It is a writing and drawing technique based on free association and unconscious improvisation. The technique of automatism was primarily used by the early Surrealist writers, amongst whom were

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1 “Automatisme psychique pur par lequel on se propose d’exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière le fonctionnement réel de la pensée. Dictée de la pensée, en l’absence de toute contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale.” [André Breton, Manifestes du Surréalisme (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 37.]
André Breton, Philippe Soupault, and Robert Desnos. The automatic style was also adopted by some Surrealist painters such as André Masson (pioneer of automatic drawing) and Max Ernst. This type of Surrealist art strongly rejects any conscious composition or realistic representation. Automatic writing is not a mere reproduction of an independent Surrealistic perception of reality; rather, the Surrealistic experience coincides with the creation of the work of art. Automatic creation is thus not the description of a preceding surrealist experience, but the freely associated and improvised creation is the Surrealist experience in its own right. Instead of describing and reproducing a dream world, automatism opens up a surreal world by uncovering and applying the laws of the unconscious, which are also at work in the process of dreaming.

In contrast with this automatism, the second and better-known Surrealist artistic procedure tries to seize an autonomous Surrealistic experience by recreating, reproducing, or describing this experience in the work of art. Very often, these works of art depict a strange and dream-like reality. They describe an unconscious content, but, unlike the automatic poems or drawings, these works of art are composed consciously. Whereas automatism draws on the unconscious faculties of human thought in order to manifest and express the functioning of a hidden or inner reality immediately, this second Surrealist procedure tries to discover this “surreal” reality by reproducing the strange but conscious experiences of dreams, fantasy, and pareidolia. The first procedure emulates the process of dreaming, while the latter recreates the aesthetics of dreaming. The most familiar examples of this second pole of Surrealism are the paintings of Salvador Dali and René Magritte. Louis Aragon’s Surrealistic novel, Le Paysan de Paris, can be categorised here as well.

In both cases, surrealist art paradigmatically tries to go beyond the ordinary perception of reality. If we want to grasp the nature of the Surrealistic experience itself, we will have to determine the scope of this “beyond,” which is designated by the French prefix “sur” in the notion of “Surrealism” (the English translation of the French preposition “sur” is “over,” “above,” or even “beyond”). Evidently, the choice for the name “sur-realism” reflects the early Surrealists’ aversion to any kind of philosophical or literary realism. In his First Manifesto, the leading figure of the early Surrealistic movement, André Breton, lashes out against the realistic novels and philosophies of his own age: “The realistic attitude, inspired by positivism, from Saint Thomas to Anatole France, 

3 Ernst developed the techniques of frottage and grattage as an implementation of automatism in painting (“Forest and Dove,” “Europe after the Rain”).