

Fag-End of Romanticism: The Nationalist Impulse in English Surrealism

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Abstract

Literary Surrealism in Britain was a unique manifestation of the French incarnation, which took on board some of the founders' poetic and aesthetic claims, but then fused them with an already developing structural trend that I identify as a shift away from high modernist aesthetics to late modernist culturalism. It is this later culturally and politically-invested phase of Surrealism that was primarily imported to Britain in the mid-1930's, and was greeted with some sympathy as another face of the British Popular Front, which incorporated a broad range of Leftist discourses to combat the rise of Fascist sentiment in Britain and on the European continent. In other words, Surrealism's textual innovations were muted in favour of cultural claims that could be made in service of not only anti-Fascist sentiment, but also in terms of an English literary tradition. In addressing the competing discourses over Surrealism's role in Britain, a picture develops of a periodical formation that carried out a vibrant exchange, but one that sacrifices poetic production for cultural claims.

Keywords: Surrealism, modernism, cultural nationalism, literary periodicals, poetry

Abstrakt

Brytyjski Surrealizm literacki był wyjątkowym uosobieniem swojego francuskiego odpowiednika, który początkowo przyjął część poetyckich oraz estetycznych postulatów

założycieli nurtu, a następnie połączył je z wpływami wówczas rozwijającego się nurtu strukturalistycznego. Ów zwrot nazywam odejściem od „wysokiego” modernizmu na rzecz kulturalizmu modernistycznego. W owej późniejszej, zorientowanej kulturowo i politycznie, fazie Surrealizmu, którego wpływy pojawiły się w Wielkiej Brytanii w latach 1930-tych, i który był przychylnie odbierany jako kolejne oblicze Brytyjskiego Frontu Ludowego, posługiwano się szeroką gamą dyskursów lewicowych w celu tłumienia rosnących sympatii faszystowskich w Wielkiej Brytanii i całej Europie. Innymi słowy oryginalność językowa Surrealizmu była tłumiona na rzecz teorii kulturowych, które miały przysłużyć się nie tylko propagacji anty-Faszyzmu, ale również konsolidacji angielskiej tradycji literackiej. Powołując się na sprzeczne teorie dotyczące roli Surrealizmu w Wielkiej Brytanii, należy zwrócić uwagę na ówczesnie kształcące się wpływy stanowiące dynamiczne zjawisko kulturowe, które jednak poświęciły działalność poetycką na rzecz postulatów kulturowych.

Słowa kluczowe: Surrealizm, modernizm, nacjonalizm kulturowy, periodyki literackie, poezja

Contrary to the popular consensus of Surrealism’s “failure to take” in Britain, it is more useful to characterize the advent of British Surrealism as a stage in the development of British poetry that ultimately had little to do with the orthodox tenets put forward by its Parisian counterparts.¹ Read in this way, we can more fruitfully understand Surrealism’s belatedness in Britain as a part of a larger condition of British poetry in the late 1930s: namely, that Surrealism was only fully countenanced once it had developed a culturalist approach to literature that paralleled a similar shift in British poetry, which itself became more broadly politicized as the decade wore on.² It will be read as part of a broader structural development in British literary practice that can be characterized by the shift away from high modernist aesthetics to late modernist culturalism. I identify this shift

¹ See especially Paul C. Ray’s *The Surrealist Movement in England* (76–82); Alan Young’s *Dada and After: Extremist Modernism and English Literature* (152–8); and Michael Remy’s *Surrealism in Britain* (30–1).

² The implicit focus in this essay is on Surrealist texts. Surrealist painting in Britain enjoyed a more fruitful and diverse life than its poetic counterpart. See especially Michael Remy’s *Surrealism in Britain* (2001) for an exhaustive treatment of British Surrealism across multiple aesthetic forms.

as developing unevenly amongst multiple considerations and debates over the fate and direction of British letters. As the literary magazines involved in the conversation over Surrealism will illustrate, the movement was not taken on board “wholesale,” but rather used in service of the aforementioned literary and political developments. As a result, Surrealism never flourished as a writerly practice in Britain. Instead, it was treated as a weak form of Romanticism, or dismissed as a bourgeois practice that could not service the political Left with whose cause it most identified itself. The rejection of Surrealism was not a provincial rejection of the continental avant-garde, but the unique development of a parallel, yet ultimately disparate, more writerly practice.

This approach, then, will not take British Surrealism as a brief flirtation with continental modernism, which has been a view long upheld mainly on the evidence of the spectacle of the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London (that will be addressed below), and the relative paucity of Surrealist publications following the Exhibition compared to continental Surrealist movements. Such a view discounts or ignores the lively debate surrounding Surrealism in several British literary periodicals in the late 1930s. With that in mind, “periodical formations” best illustrate the contentiousness and uncertainty of these ideas in process. Raymond Williams uses the term “formations,” whose “internal organization” can be characterized by “formal membership,” “conscious association or group identification,” or, and most relevant here, by some “collective public manifestation”: “such as an exhibition, a group press or periodical, or an explicit manifesto” (1981, 68). Andréw Thacker, with David Peters Corbett, in discussing “cultural formations,” argue that the “point of the term ‘formation’ rather than ‘group’ is that it expresses its relation to the general social history, and its extension into the specific forms and practices of the group, aesthetic or otherwise” (1993, 91). Citing Williams’ “The Uses of Cultural Theory,” they establish why treating artistic developments as “formations” is most useful. They point to Williams’ argument that cultural activity as “extending and interpenetrating” and thus it is “the *congruence* of discourses – the intersection of, say, the aesthetic and the economic – that create the character of the formation” (97). To treat literary periodicals as “formations” is to foreground their own complex social character as the character of the groups they are traditionally associated with. For example, the nationalist impulse of Hugh Sykes Davies discussing Surrealism in a 1930 issue of *Experiment*, who conflates the “local” with the “national,” exhibits a tendency in late modernist British writing to synthesize the complexity of emerging discourses into a unitary model of knowledge. This tendency, often characterized as “empiricist,” inflects the development of Surrealism in Britain with a populist tone, and in turn, the overarching feature

of this particular formation is its drive to treat its project as involved in an understanding of culture, where “culture” is read uniformly as a national one. British Surrealism’s moment will be reviewed, but with a specific eye on how long-simmering literary debates combined with emerging political concerns overrode considerations of the movement simply as an aesthetic practice.

Surrealism and Its Import(s)

David Gascoyne’s *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (1935) popularly marks the beginning of a short period of intensive focus on Surrealism by British writers. Surrealism’s belatedness in Britain meant that writers seriously engaged with the movement were faced with the difficulty of reviewing over a decade of contentious claims concerning what Surrealism was and how it was to be practiced. Furthermore, the advent of Surrealism in France came soon after World War I, and the revolutionary social and cultural claims by Breton and others had undergone transformation as the movement’s French practitioners took on board the theories of Marx and Freud. Finally, in literature, the 1930s saw the transition from “high” to “late modernism,” which Tyrus Miller characterizes as the “weaken[ing of] the relatively strong symbolic forms still evident in high modernist texts...[that] also registers the ways in which intense social, political, and economic pressures of the period increasingly threatened the efficacy of high modernist form” (1999, 20). As opposed to previous attempts to understand the development of Surrealism in Britain simply as a process of cross-cultural exchange, which in turn frames this development ahistorically, this writing will also attempt to consider how the structural development from high-to-late modernism impacts on the particular character of British Surrealism. One way to understand the particular shape of this development requires a revisiting of the initiating documents to see how people such as David Gascoyne and Herbert Read framed their writing in terms of “order” and “tradition,” and thus appealed to what Perry Anderson has identified as core aspects of English national character: tradition and empiricism (1992, 31). Following Jed Esty’s articulation of the “anthropological turn” in the late 1930s and 1940s that describes a process by which artists and writers “begin to deemphasize the redemptive agency of *art*, which, because of its social autonomization, operates unmoored from any given national sphere, and to promote instead the redemptive agency of *culture*, which is restricted by national or ethnolinguistic borders” (2–3), this writing will engage with British Surrealism as the domestication of se-

lectively convenient claims by the movement's orthodoxy (represented here by Breton's two manifestoes) by writers involved in a broader trend that sought political and cultural solutions in literary form.³ Before engaging with Surrealism in Britain, it will be useful to review how Surrealists envisioned their practice. In André Breton's First and Second Manifestoes of Surrealism (1924 and 1930, respectively), Surrealism is initially defined as "[p]sychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual function of thought" (26). Surrealism primarily embraced "automatic writing" as a key into the mind's subconscious, thus revealing to writers aspects of their selves previously unnoticed. Peter Nicholls understands automatic writing "to provide an *unmediated* experience not of the body...but of the unified self, the self in its waking *and* dreaming life" (*Modernisms* 285). The problem which arises for the Surrealists in this process is that the "word gives us, then, the meaning of the thing, but in doing so replaces what it names, thus condemning the thing to a kind of non-being" (285). This "negation" presented the Surrealists with their "political aesthetic, for language's negation of the real, the absence which always echoes within it, is potentially a rejection of reality-as-it-is, that world which, codified by law and logic, exists by exiling what-it-is-not to the fantastic realms of art and the imaginary" (286). It is with this view of language that Surrealists felt that their approach blurred the distinctions between discourses of art, literature, politics, and science, as "our interaction with the world may bring us back to a full sense of ourselves by disclosing the ways in which reality is shaped by and responds to our desires" (288). Furthermore, this attitude brought Surrealists into engagement with other rigorously codified discourses without ever fully embracing the ideology of these discourses. As for their political involvement, Surrealists felt that "contemporary social organization (capitalism) hadn't eradicated the marvelous in the everyday...[and] the existence of the marvelous in the everyday was alienated from consciousness by forms of *mental organization*...[which required] a systematic attack on such mental bureaucracy" (Highmore 2002, 49). It is precisely because Surrealists saw their project concerned with the everyday that discursive compartmentalization was viewed as a symptom of a society that needed radical rethinking. In Britain, Surrealism became part of what Jed Esty

³ Esty goes on to argue that the "relativization of England as one culture among many in the face of imperial contraction seems to have entailed a relativization of literature as one aspect of culture...the late modernist generation absorbed the potential energy of a contracting British state and converted it into the language not of aesthetic decline but of cultural revival" (8).

calls the “romance of retrenchment,” or, “[t]o reclaim territorial and cultural integrity for English culture was to disavow the history of British expansionism while assimilating the anthropological (and colonial) notion of solidarity back to the core” (2004, 39). Read in the context of the shift from high-to-late modernism in the 1930s in Britain, this means that “if *cosmopolitan-aesthetic* mediation of universal perspectives and their local antithesis [of which Surrealism was an example], then late modernism represents a new *national-cultural* mediation of the universal and the local” (ibid., 36). Put another way, Surrealism in France arose out of a metropolitan high modernist sensibility that when it arrived in Britain in the mid-1930s was faced with a late modernist trend that saw writers invested in a culturalist approach that prioritized national identity.

Madge, Gascoyne, and New Verse: Surrealism Comes Into Focus in England

The bulk of Surrealist writing, and writing on Surrealism, in Britain in the late 1930s primarily occurred in the pages of literary magazines. While there are examples of attention to Surrealism in magazines such as *Experiment* (Cambridge), *This Quarter*, and *Criterion* before 1935, it was not until *New Verse* brought sustained attention to the movement that it became a central part of literary conversation in Britain.⁴ Subsequently, magazines such as *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, *Arson: an ardent review*, and the *London Bulletin* regularly published Surrealist work, and magazines such as *Twentieth Century Verse* and *Left Review* adopted serious, if critical, attention to the movement’s aims and efforts. *New Verse* is best remembered for W.H. Auden’s presence and Geoffrey Grigson’s editorship – and scant attention has been paid to other equally interesting and significant aspects of the magazine’s make-up.⁵ Contrary to the hegemonic narrative, *New Verse* was

⁴ The full history of Surrealism’s reception has been well-documented by various authors: Paul C. Ray’s *The Surrealist Movement in England*; Alan Young’s *Dada and After: Extremist Modernism and English Literature*; and most recently, with an emphasis as well on the visual production, Michael Remy’s *Surrealism in Britain*. While these books provide a deep historical perspective, their conclusions seldom trouble the nationalist frame the original practitioners implicitly worked under.

⁵ Adrian Caesar argues that Auden’s publicity, and not his poetry (as it was found in the pages of the magazine), contributed to this myth. He points to the statistic that “Gascoyne, [George] Barker and [Dylan] Thomas, three poets associated...with Surrealism in the 1930’s, and whose

not the hermetically-sealed core document of the Auden Generation, but rather a complex, often contradictory, and heterogeneous expression of poetic trends that occupied Grigson's attention. *New Verse's* own success facilitated wider attention to topics under review, even if they were not centrally trumpeted. Even though *New Verse* was neither a Surrealist magazine in the strict sense of it being the sole focus of its editorial agenda, nor the first to pay attention to the movement, the confluence of Grigson's interest, and as we will see, Gascoyne's sustained advocacy, generated the conditions in which Surrealism briefly became *the* topic of conversation in literary Britain.

Surrealism is first addressed in the 6th issue (December 1933). Charles Madge used the occasion of some art exhibitions in London (Joan Miró and Max Ernst) to address the growing interest in Surrealism in England.⁶ His essay, "Surrealism for the English," makes the argument that if Surrealism were to become relevant to English writers, then it needs to arise out of cultural and literary conditions in England. "Close study of the philosophical position of the French surrealists is needed to extract the essential purpose from the formal appearance of their work. But English writers will need something more: namely, a knowledge of their own language and literature" (14). For Madge, English writers need to turn to their own writing traditions and the development of English poetry to gauge the appropriateness of Surrealist practice in a specifically English context: "[i]n France, the history of the poetic word has been very different from its history in England" (17). For this reason, Madge doubts the arrival of Surrealism as a workable practice in England, as a "contemporary period of poetic acceleration must needs be part of the same historical process as gave rise to the surrealist group in Paris" (18). It is notable that at this point Madge does not name any contemporary examples of Surrealist writing in English, but it is also equally notable that he frames his discussion around

work is often placed in the shadow cast by the Audenesque, between them published more poems in *New Verse* than Auden, Day Lewis, and Spender put together" (117, 119). Caesar does not go as far as to say that *New Verse* was a Surrealist magazine, but its undeniably frequent presence in the magazine speaks to the diversity of form Grigson was willing to engage with. (120)

⁶ In *Dada and After: Extremist Modernism and English Literature*, Young divides English reception of Surrealism into several phases ("English critics and French Surrealism" (1922–27), "English critics and post-Dada" (1927–1936), and "Surrealism and English Literature" (1935–1950)), which suggests both that awareness of the movement was present from the start, but secondly that rather than perceiving a gap between French instantiation (1922) and English practice (1935), it is more useful to think of it as a development from critical (and distanced) reception to creative embrace. See especially pages 127–187.

nationalist lines, as he conceives of literary tradition and development as occurring from within specific language groups (French, English, etc.). What is important to stress here is that Madge's nationalist framing is by no means novel, and indeed, as will be shown, future discussions of Surrealism in England follow his framing.

In the meantime, another frequent contributor to *New Verse* – David Gascoyne – published the first sustained study of Surrealism in English.⁷ *A Short Survey of Surrealism* consists of an introduction to the movement by Gascoyne, as well as his translations of a small selection of writings by Breton, Paul Eluard, Tristan Tzara, among others. Gascoyne's introduction is divided into 6 sections, which consist of the majority of the pages in the publication. In this writing, Gascoyne not only outlines Surrealism as a "French" movement, but also argues for its "internationalist" potential.

For a writer, or anyone else, to object to an attempt to establish Surrealist activity in England, on the grounds that this would mean an "importation from Paris," is just as stupidly provincial as a doctor would be if he objected to the practice of psychoanalysis in England because it originated in Vienna. Surrealism itself, as it is today, is by no means wholly the product of previous French culture; there is a very strong element both of German and of Spanish thought in it, synthetising [sic] as it does the philosophy of Hegel, Feuerbach, Engels and Marx, and the distinctly southern "lyricism" of painters such as Dalí, Miró and Picasso. For Surrealism transcends all nationalism and springs from a plane on which all men are equal (2000, 94).

Despite Gascoyne's explicit rejection of nationalist logic, he characterizes Surrealism's influences within nationalist categories. "English Surrealism" would potentially be a unique process within Britain, and could furthermore develop out of a nationally-conceived literary tradition. Gascoyne takes pains to cite English precursors – "Shakespeare, Marlowe, Swift, [Edward] Young, Coleridge, Blake, Beddoes, Lear, and Carroll" (94) – and thus frames Surrealism not so much as the revolutionary practice he desires, but rather as a logical development of an English tradition.

⁷ In the 5th issue (October 1933), David Gascoyne's "And the Seventh Dream Is the Dream of Isis" was published. *New Verse* would continue to publish Gascoyne's poems and translations in subsequent issues: 6 (December 1933), 7 (February 1934), 12 (December 1934), 15 (June 1935), 16 (August-September 1935), 18 (December 1935), and 21 (June-July 1936). Yet it was the advertisement and review of Gascoyne's *A Short Survey of Surrealism* in the 18th issue (December 1935), combined with the magazine's own success to that date, which provided Gascoyne's efforts with a wide audience.

The book also includes work in translation by 7 Surrealists totalling 21 pages. Given the vast output of Surrealist texts by 1935, one might expect some variety, but surprisingly, again and again, the texts published contain a recurring feature: references to nature and landscape. André Breton's three selections – "On the Saint Genevieve Mountain...", "The Spectral Attitudes," and (with Paul Eluard) "Force of Habit" – name various locations, but most are pastoral. In "On the Saint Genevieve Mountain...", the title itself sets the scene, with lines such as "[the] flora and fauna of this country" (99). "The Spectral Attitudes" moves through various settings: initially urban – "The circus always enchants the same tramlines," the poem quickly moves to the fields, mountains, and seas – "I have a boat detached from all climates"; "I cut and cleave the wood of this tree that will always be green"; "In the gorges which hide themselves between two mountains" (100–101). Finally, "Forces of Habit" is littered with nature references: water, leaf, flower, weather, stream, river, plants (119–20). René Char's poems variously name swamps, a rose garden, a "quarry of unworkable ochre," leaf, foxglove, "and mountain weeds wither" (102–3). Paul Eluard's "At the End of a Long Voyage..." includes boats, storms, and voyages, while "What the Workman Says Is Never to the Point" contains lines such as: "Take the landscape by force"; "flower of flax"; and references to plantations and harvest, all set against imagery of the city (parks and buildings) (107, 108–9). Georges Hugnet's poems chrysalis, fern, sea, beaches, ponds, tree, river, and a Barbary fig (110–1). Benjamin Peret's "Three Poems" reference honey, protozoans, seahorses, a cowshed, a field, hedges, and harvest, and contains lines such as "[the] rains and the winds will bless you" (112–3). Tristan Tzara's "The Approximate Man" portrays a violent and treacherous landscape: "the mountains' whooping-cough charring the escarpements of the gorges"; "whose typhoon stigmatizes your forehead"; "it means suffering when the earth remembers you and shakes you off" (114–8).⁸

This list is selective and does not pretend to present a complete analysis of each individual text, however, the consistency of nature or landscape references in each of the selections, does reflect on Gascoyne's editorial choices. David Matless, in his *Landscape and Englishness*, argues that landscape works "as a vehicle of social and self identity, as a site for the claiming of a cultural authority" (1998, 12). The 1930s saw a marked increase in the publication of domestic travelogues, as well as travel and nature guides in Britain. Esty interprets this development thusly: "[w]ith its increasing

⁸ Salvador Dalí's "Love and Memory" is the lone exception to this otherwise consistent set of nature or landscape references.

cultural isolation in the 1930s...English culture moved from expanding imperial modernity to preservationist national past” (2004, 42). This preservationist mode was ruralist in nature, and while Gascoyne never claims Surrealism as a kind of neo-agrarian movement, his selection illustrates a canny understanding of the mode of English life in the ‘30s. In short, Gascoyne’s mission throughout his *Survey* had been to “sell” Surrealism to the British. It is my contention that he accomplishes this in a twofold manner: first, with an extended rationalist and historical justification of Surrealism, especially by emphasizing its validity within an English literary tradition; and second, by supplying examples of the movement’s leading names whose work contained traces of a ruralist thematic that may have appealed to a culture “becoming self-consciously historical” (Esty 2004, 42).

One of the earliest reactions to the book was a review printed in *New Verse*. In *New Verse* 18 (December 1935), Charles Madge returns to the topic of Surrealism with a review of Gascoyne’s book. While Madge is not dismissive of Gascoyne’s effort (he describes it as “really admirable” (20)), he finds a lot to fault in the book, arguing that Surrealism’s revolutionary claims seem anachronistic in a period of history that Madge reads (ironically from our vantage point) as largely stable and peaceful. He concludes with the thought that “Surrealism is now in its academic period – the period of explanation and anthologies – the wider public” (21). Madge’s cynicism about the book is curious, as up to this point (outside of Gascoyne), he had been the most visible proponent of Surrealism in the pages of *New Verse*. Madge’s objection may be rooted in his misreading of the contemporary political situation, and thus he finds the revolutionary rhetoric overblown. Yet, in two ways Madge would be largely prescient about the future of Surrealism in England: “the period of explanation” and “the wider public” would be two ways to characterize Surrealism’s presence in England in the two following years. The well-attended and widely-reviewed International Surrealist Exhibition in London in the summer of 1936 brought broad attention to Surrealism in Britain, which was followed by a series of talks, debates, and publications assessing Surrealism’s role in English literature as well as engaging with its revolutionary political potential (or lack thereof).

The International Surrealist Exhibition and the Debate over Surrealism

A few facts concerning the International Surrealist Exhibition are worth mentioning to provide a context for the ensuing lectures and epistolary exchanges in various liter-

ary magazines.⁹ The event was organized by a committee that included Hugh Sykes Davies, David Gascoyne, Herbert Read, and Humphrey Jennings, and had received official sanction by André Breton who was in attendance for its opening. The event opened in London on 11 June 1936 and during its run through to 3 July, it hosted over 20,000 attendees. The commercial success of the event, combined with the largely incredulous and dismissive reviews it received in the press, resulted in a general sense that the Exhibition was nothing more than spectacle. In an effort to rationalize the Exhibition to its audience, a series of lectures and poetry readings were given throughout June.¹⁰ A series of lectures occurred in conjunction with the Exhibition that were later collected in the Herbert Read edited *Surrealism*. The book was published in lavish fashion, and featured an introduction by Read with essays by Breton, Hugh Sykes Davies, Paul Eluard, and Georges Hugnet, with accompanying illustrations of Surrealist art. Read's introduction attempted to claim Surrealism's relevance to the English Romantic literary tradition naming English precursors to the movement, and stressing Surrealism's English qualities. Read even goes so far as to translate Surrealism as "superrealism." In Read's attempt to frame Surrealism's appropriateness to an English literary tradition, he devalues the movement's more radical claims for the form's revolutionary potential, and reduces it to the reiteration of a historical literary form.

Davies' emphasis in "Surrealism at This Time and Place," is on the "tradition" of Surrealist writing within English literature. Davies' key phrase in this essay is "dialectical materialism," a concept which he sees the Surrealists valuing "for [the] critical examination of the history of all the arts; and as a matter of course they accept the principle of the continuity of history" (1930, 123). This way of understanding Surrealism devalues the change explicit in dialectical materialism in favour of an organic and naturalized

⁹ In his book *The Surrealist Movement in England*, Paul C. Ray devotes a chapter to describing the planning, execution, and fallout of the International Surrealist Exhibition. See "The Exhibition (134–66). The Exhibition receives brief mention by most other writers who address Surrealism in England in the 1930's, but Ray's is the most exhaustive to date. See also Alan Young (171–2), Peter Nicholls' "Surrealism in England" (403–4), A.J. Tolley's *The Poetry of the Thirties* (227), and Samuel Hynes' *The Auden Generation* (219–20), and even a token mention in the most recent Dylan Thomas biography by Andréw Lycett (130–2).

¹⁰ 16 June: André Breton, "Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism"; 19 June: Herbert Read, "Art and the Unconscious"; 24 June: Paul Eluard, "L'Evidence poetique"; 26 June: Hugh Sykes Davies, "Biology and Surrealism" (later that day a reading was given by several French and British writers).

understanding of the past. Davies defends this focus by arguing that Surrealism, rather than being the “fag-end of romanticism” has “enlarged, co-ordinated and enriched” romanticism’s “inchoate, disorderly, [and] intuitive” structure (168). Davies, similarly to Read, has defined Surrealism not as an internationally developing literary form, but rather in an effort to rationalize its function in Britain, as a logical outgrowth of an English literary tradition represented by Coleridge (and thus, again similarly to Read, he needs this tradition as a Romantic one).

Read’s and Davies’ mutual emphasis on Surrealism’s logical presence within an English Romantic tradition accomplished two things: it muted Surrealism’s revolutionary potential as an aesthetic form and political philosophy and rendered it obsolete as a “new” development in writing by emphasizing its relation to romanticism. In Alan Young’s estimation, “[s]o much of the English literary past has been cited in support of Surrealism that the new movement was almost comically revealed as a very small and unoriginal aspect of Romanticism from which the English poet, fully aware of the literature of his past, could have very little to learn” (186–7). Peter Nicholls concurs with this assessment, asserting that Davies and Read managed to develop this lineage so as to obscure the avant-garde character of Surrealism and to make it instead something thoroughly domesticated and familiar” (“Surrealism” 405).

The most rigorous critique of the rhetorical moves found in *Surrealism* came from a magazine which itself was concerned with both the aesthetic and the political – the *Left Review*. As David Margolies characterized it, *Left Review*’s attitude stressed that “[m]ore fundamental than their immediate role, writers in their activity *as writers* were considered to be political,” and further that “[l]iterature was not merely a reflection but a part of life, an agent of revolutionary change and an activator of the great reserves of human potential” (1998, 2). As such, the magazine became affiliated with the British Popular Front, and published writers with broadly Left-leaning or anti-Fascist positions. The *Left Review*’s attention to Surrealism prior to the Exhibition was mainly skeptical, with a disparaging review of Gascoyne’s *Short Survey* (January 1936), as well as publishing an interview with Louis Aragon, who had by then broken with the movement and joined the Communist Party (May 1936). The 1936 Exhibition served as an occasion for further comment, mostly reserved and cynical, with a few contributions by Anthony Blunt and Alick West (July 1936 (as a supplement)). Blunt is critical of Surrealism’s “bourgeois” origins and counters that “propaganda” is the “new art...the product of the proletariat, which is again performing its true function” (vi), and he stresses that “[Surrealism] pretends to free language and thought from all conventions, but takes no account of the fact

that they are using bourgeois conventions in a negative form all the time” (viii). When Herbert Read, himself a regular contributor to *Left Review*, published *Surrealism* the full force of the magazine’s critique of the movement was brought to bear. A.L. Lloyd’s review (January 1937), entitled “Surrealism and Revolutions,” judges Surrealism broadly as counter-revolutionary given its individualist, as opposed to a favoured collectivist, focus. For Lloyd, responsibility to the proletariat is of the utmost importance as “[i]n dividends and masses are only passive, inasmuch as they have illusory consciousness of activity within the frame of the bourgeoisie, *individual* activity” (148). Lloyd invests in an idea of political revolution that necessarily entails a cultural revolution collectively experienced and expressed. In his estimation, English Surrealism fails because, despite its radical formal pronouncements, it still announces a poetics of self-investment.

Read and Davies were given an opportunity to reply to Lloyd’s review (February 1937), and they chose to zero in on the latter’s charge of Surrealism’s non-revolutionary “lyrical impulse.” It is necessary to note that Lloyd never uses this precise phrase, instead using “lyrical capacity,” “lyrical bases,” and “discreet interior lyricism” all implying an internalized emotionality set in contrast to rational processes (145, 148). Additionally, the term does not appear in *Surrealism* itself, so the duo’s use here is unique to this reply, which presents the reader with the challenge of deciphering their specific use. Read and Davies argue that the way they think about the lyrical impulse is in relation to “other impulses and other kinds of human activity,” yet they only cite English writers who illustrate such a combination (Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning) (149–50). Their sense of the “lyric” is vague as well, but Read has elsewhere defined this term in two ways: 1.) “in lyrical poetry what is conveyed is not mere emotion, but the imaginative prehension of emotional states; and 2.) “we might define the lyric as a poem which embodies a single or simple emotional attitude, a poem which expresses directly an uninterrupted mood or inspiration” (Preminger 715; Read *Form* 62). Despite taking issue with Lloyd’s characterization of Surrealism as a manifestation of a lyrical impulse, their thinking on this phrase appears to fall in line with his: the lyric is presented as a byword for the emotional and irrational aspects of individual expression.

In the last analysis, their “Reply” reworks their original claims in the book: namely, they defend Surrealism within the tradition of English Romanticism, and thus fail to counter the critique of their domestication of the movement within a limited understanding of English writing. They further argue that they “found it necessary to step outside the bounds of bourgeois criticism, and to study the ‘lyrical impulse’ not from a literary point of view of general psychology, taking evidence from mental disease, other

abnormal conditions, from anthropology, and from actual experiment” (150). This claim is misleading as they primarily cite literary figures and literary production in the book and in this reply as well. Ultimately, the thrust of the review and the reply tars Surrealism’s literary potential with the brush of bourgeois complacency, and favours the political as the litmus test for any literary production. In this way of thinking about Surrealism, the movement’s justification in terms of literary development has been handcuffed to the past (and thus critiqued as not a development at all), which results in a faultily-conceived back-up defense of its political revolutionary potential. The result is that Read and Davies alienate those who value Surrealism’s innovatory aesthetic potential, as well as fail to convince the more hardline Leftist radicals of Surrealism’s role in a cultural revolution.

Roger Roughton, editor of *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, on the other hand, avoided the pitfalls of wedding his Communist sympathies and his interest in Surrealism. While, on the surface, the magazine never explicitly argues for a nationally-defined Surrealist movement, it conceives of itself as arising out of a need for a domestically-grown Surrealist practice intertwined with a need for a revolutionary class uprising in Britain. *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* began its run around the time of the Exhibition, and achieved the tag as the “only Surrealist” magazine of the 1930’s in the UK.¹¹ The magazine is interesting not only for the high frequency of Surrealist contributions from British and French writers (in translation), but also for its unstinting support for the anti-Fascist cause in the Spanish Civil War.¹² With this complex combination of focuses, *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* was better able to handle the “political” side of Surrealist claims than Read or Davies, but also more generously considered Surrealism’s formal potential than the *Left Review*. The particular shape of the editorial focus was in part due to where the magazine was published: “The Arts Café” on Parton Street, a street which also housed the David Archer Bookshop (which was a “hotspot” for likeminded Leftists in London), as well as the offices of Wishart & Co. (the publisher of *Left Review*). Despite Roughton’s eventual inability to establish a convincing wedding of Surrealism and

¹¹ Rod Mengham, following Adrian Caesar (174–5) and Peter Nicholls, questions this characterization that Roughton’s “working definition of Surrealism must have been extremely flexible, given the wide range of work that he published” (689).

¹² The list of Surrealist poets published in translation is quite long. For example, in the 2nd issue alone, dubbed the “Double Surrealist Number,” 12 poets are published: Paul Eluard, Benjamin Peret, André Breton, E.L.T. Mesens, Salvador Dalí, Georges Hugnet, Gui Rosey, René Char, Maurice Henry, Alfred Jarry, Charles Cross, and Edit Sodergran.

Communism, he did manage to publish a wide variety of poetry across an international spectrum. However, the magazine retained a nativist perspective in its editorial selections. Rod Mengham has noted Roughton's "attempt to locate Surrealism in terms with other traditions of writing," and thus his publishing of non-English writing can be better understood as a comparativist move in an effort to legitimate an English brand of Surrealism. *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, while offering a more culturally complex vision of writing, in actuality highlights the core tension predominant in discussions surrounding Surrealism in Britain: the condition and development of an English literary tradition.

The evidence of Surrealism's presence in British poetry in the 1930s can be mainly found within the pages of literary magazines: Gascoyne's *Survey* and a few small books of poetry, Davies' novel *Petron*, and Read's *Surrealism* represent the main extent of non-periodical publications. There has thus been a lasting insistence that given the ephemerality of literary magazines, it (erroneously) follows that English Surrealism itself was an ephemeral matter as well. This writing hopefully dispels this notion to some extent. The periodical formation outlined here cannot be reduced simply to an English variant on a French theme. English Surrealism's production and theorization within magazines, which themselves did not hold an overtly orthodox Surrealist editorial mission, meant that the shape of that production was inflected by debates over the role of tradition in contemporary English writing, as well as the cultural politics of literature.

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