

in famously bizarre circumstances at Gough's fancy-dress commune outside Paris.

Mansfield's life, with its inherently tragic quality, a youth spent slowly dying, a sexual freedom for which she paid such a price in mental and physical pain, considerable artistic achievement and the early close clouded by the occult, is bound to make her something of a heroine for our times, not least because the period in which she lived here, 1903-23 now looks as though it was England's last artistically vital one. Indeed, everyone who was anyone put her down - Wyndham Lewis, Bertrand Russell, Gaudier-Brzeska - the list is endless. Virginia Woolf was 'shocked by her commonness'. One wonders, at the end of Alpers's loving, even besotted biography, why someone so gifted, so charming, should have been so universally detested. It is good to get a hint of the reason in a crisp note to a girlfriend of her husband's: 'I am afraid you must stop writing these little love letters to my husband while he and I live together. It is one of the things which is not done in our world.' She must have been formidable.

If magnificent Gudrun in *Women in Love*, the *castratrix triumphans*, is partly about her, then the cutesy-poo way she snuggled up to Murry and indeed, the world, must have seemed to Lawrence a shocking betrayal of her true nature. Which does not excuse the unforgivably cruel letters Lawrence wrote to her in her last illness. But Alpers somewhat underplays the full complexity of the *ménage-à-quatre* of Lawrences and Murrays in Cornwall in 1916. It is surely not enough to say that Lawrence took against Mansfield because he was in love with Murry; wasn't Murry already sniffing after Frieda? And 'Tig' and 'Wig', the Murrays called one another. They used to sit together writing poems about their happiness. Enough to turn a stronger stomach than Lawrence's, especially if you smell the power in her.

Alpers, to some degree, attempts to whitewash Murry, but the outlines of a truly nauseating creep still show through and Mansfield's relation to him seems less true love than a painfully sustained romantic illusion. Since she called her lifelong champion, Ida Baker, her 'wife' and treated her with a truly marital contemptuous affection, perhaps Mansfield had more sense of emotional self-preservation than meets the eye.

And, after all, Alpers doesn't give much impression of his heroine's true nature. Not because he doesn't try, almost too hard, sifting and resifting contradictory evidence about a deeply ambiguous personality. But, then she *was* mysterious and, in the manner of the colonialised, rather than the Colonial, she used her charm to deflect attention from a core of mystery she wished to keep to herself; perhaps the mystery was her very creativity. It is right she should retain it.

ent intimacy of tone. For example, once Alpers has worked out the code Mansfield used in her journals to indicate her periods, she is allowed no outburst of temper or fit of depression without a reference to pre- or post-menstrual tension. He is so protective of 'Katherine', as he always calls her, that he appears to be conducting a posthumous affair with her. Presumably this is the fate of any attractive, mysterious and sexually experimental woman at the hands of a gallant male biographer.

Guardian, 1978

The Alchemy of the Word

Surrealism celebrated wonder, the capacity for seeing the world as if for the first time which, in its purest state, is the prerogative of children and madmen, but more than that, it celebrated wonder itself as an essential means of perception. Yet not a naïve wonder. The surrealist did not live in naïve times. A premonition of the imminent end of the world is always a shot in the arm for the arts; if the world has, in fact, just ended, what then? The 1914-18 war was, in many respects, for France and Germany, indeed the end of the world. The Zurich Dadas celebrated the end of the world, and of art with it. However, the Russian Revolution of 1917 suggested the end of one world might mark the commencement of another world, one in which human beings themselves might take possession not only of their own lives but also of their own means of expressing the reality of that life, i.e., art. It is possible for the true optimist to view the end of the world with sang-froid. What is so great about all this crap? Might there be something better? Surrealism's undercurrent of joy, of delight, springs from its faith in humankind's ability to recreate itself; the conviction that struggle *can* bring something better.

Any discussion of surrealism must, first of all, acknowledge that it was never a school of art, or of literature, as such. The surrealist painters and poets were not in the least interested in formal art or literature, and if they started to show signs of becoming so, André Breton, the supreme arbitrator, kicked them out of the group. It was the irreducible psychological element that makes a wonder out of the commonplace, the imagination itself that obsessed them. As for art, anyone can make it; so they made art, out of word and image, though their techniques were haphazard and idiosyncratic, and it must be said that some of them were better at it than others,

touchpaper of the imagination and then retire, which a more élitist culture than the one at whose service the surrealists placed their work, or play, would have called genius.

Surrealism was not an artistic movement but a theory of knowledge that developed a political ideology of its own accord. Its art came out of the practice of a number of men and women who formulated and committed themselves to this theory of knowledge, some for a few years, some for their whole lives. They were practitioners and theoreticians at the same time. A poet, André Breton wrote the Surrealist Manifesto; a film-maker and a punk painter, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, made the two most comprehensive surrealist visual statements, *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or*, though Dalí later recanted on the whole thing. Buñuel never recanted, kept turning them out, the greatest poet of the cinema and of love, who used the camera like a machine-gun, the dialectic like a *coup de grâce*.

However, surrealist theory is derived from a synthesis of Freud and Hegel that only those without a specialist knowledge of either psychoanalysis or philosophy might have dared to undertake. Over the surrealists, or, rather, around them lie the long shadows of Plato, amongst whom they moved as if they were made of flesh. The immediate literary avatars are easier to assimilate: Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Alfred Jarry. The surrealists soon incorporated Marx, yet, with digestions like so many boa constrictors, were greedy for occult phenomena and utilised a poetic methodology based on analogy and inspiration, the free play of the unconscious, tangling with the French Communist Party – losing Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard to it. Most of the painters found themselves prize exhibits in the Hitlerian gallery of decadent art. The poetry, especially that of Eluard, with its themes of freedom and love, was used as propaganda in the French Resistance.

Like most philosophical systems put together by artists – like neo-Platonism itself – surrealism was intellectually shaky, but artistically speaking, the shakier the intellectual structure, the better art it produces. (Christianity has produced some perfectly respectable painting, even poetry.) The British could never take its philosophic pretensions seriously; none of the surrealists knew any maths, and besides, they kept dragging sex and politics into everything, including the relations between men and women and the individual and the state, where every good Briton knows sex and politics have no right to be. Nevertheless, surrealist art is, in the deepest sense, philosophical – that is, art created in the terms of certain premisses about reality; and also an art that is itself a series of adventures in, or propositions and expositions of, this surrealist philosophy.

It was also a way of life; of living on the edge of the senses; of perpetual

armies, of the brothels. Such power they ascribed to words and images. A poem is a wound; a poem is a weapon:

It has been said that it is not our right but our duty to start with words and their relations in order to study the world scientifically. It should be added that this duty is that of living itself, not in the fashion of those who bear death within them, and who are already blind walls, or vacuums, but by uniting with the universe, with the universe in movement, in process.

Poetry will become flesh and blood only when it is reciprocal. This reciprocity is entirely a function of the equality of happiness among mankind. And equality of happiness will bear happiness to a height of which we can as yet have only a faint notion.

(Paul Eluard)

Surrealism posits poetry as a possible mode, possibly the primary mode, of being. Surrealism was the latest, perhaps the final, explosion of romantic humanism in Western Europe. It demanded the liberation of the human spirit as both the ends and the means of art.

Surrealism = *permanent revelation*
Surrealism = *permanent revolution*

So it didn't work out. Those surrealists who are not dead are very old and some are very rich, which wasn't on the original agenda. Since poetry has to pay its dues at the custom-house of translation, it rarely travels, and, besides, the nature of outrage is not the same at all places and at all times. The Dadas are more fashionable at the moment, since we live in nihilistic times. Surrealist romanticism is at the opposite pole from classical modernism, but then, the surrealists would never have given Pound or Eliot house room on strictly moral grounds. A Mussolini fan? A high Tory? They'd have moved, noisily but with dignity, to another café. You don't have to collaborate, you know. *La lutte continue*. It continues because it has to. This world is all we have.

It is this world, there is no other but a world transformed by imagination and desire. You could say it is the dream made flesh.

Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* was a key book. When we dream, we are all poets. Everywhere, the surrealists left their visiting cards: 'Parents! Tell your children your dreams.' The Bureau of Surrealist Enquiries was opened at 15 rue de Grenelle, Paris, in October 1924. 'The Bureau of Surrealist Enquiries is engaged in collecting, by every appropriate means,

activity of the mind is likely to take.' The general public were invited to visit the Bureau to confide their rarest dreams, to debate morality, to allow the staff to judge the quality of those striking coincidences that revealed the arbitrary, irrational, magical correspondences of life.

Antonin Artaud fired off letters to the chancellors of the European universities: 'Gentlemen: In the narrow tank which you call "Thought", the rays of the spirit rot like old straw.' To the Pope: 'In the name of Family and Fatherland, you urge the sale of souls, the unrestricted grinding of bodies.' And to the Dalai Lama: 'Teach us, Lama, material levitation of the body and how we can be held no longer by the earth.' Note the touch of oriental mysticism creeping into the last missive. A bit more of that kind of thing and André Breton, the Pope of surrealism, its theoretician, propagandist, and mage, expelled him from the group. Like many libertarians, Breton had, in action, a marked authoritarian streak. Artaud vanished from this world into that of madness.

In 1922 Max Ernst had already painted a group portrait: 'At the Rendezvous of Friends'. The friends were the poets René Crevel, Louis Aragon, Philippe Soupault, Paul Eluard, Robert Desnos, André Breton, and Benjamin Peret; Dostoevsky had also arrived. Jean Arp, like Ernst a former Dada, was a poet as well as a sculptor; Giorgio de Chirico and Ernst himself are primarily painters, even if Ernst is the most literary of all painters and de Chirico wrote an enigmatic novel, *Hebdomeros*, that begins in the middle of one sentence and ends in the middle of another. The surrealist freemasonry encompassed all kinds of art because it saw all kinds of art as manifestations of the same phenomena.

The term 'surrealism' was coined by Guillaume Apollinaire in the preface to his play, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, to describe the human ability to create the unnatural. Man's first surreal act, he opined, was the creation of the wheel. The wheel imitates the physical function of motion but creates a form entirely independent of forms known to exist in nature. It was a product entirely of the imagination.

At the première of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, at the Conservatoire Maubel, on 24 June 1917, the young André Breton observed an acquaintance in the audience; this young man had come to the theatre with a revolver in his hand, and excited by the scandal of the performance, was threatening to fire into the audience. This Jacques Vache, a Baudelairean dandy, exercised a far greater influence over surrealism than his exiguous life would suggest; ten years later, Breton would write in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*: 'the simplest surrealist act consists of going out into the street revolver in hand and firing at random into the crowd as often as possible.' Fifty years later, Buñuel filmed just such a random assassin in *The*

street, free. Girls cluster round him for his autograph.

Put together your own set of connections between these events.

Vache wrote to Breton: 'Art is nonsense.'

In 1917, at the home of the ubiquitous Apollinaire, poet, art critic, modernist, Breton found issues of a magazine from Zurich, *Dada*. Which confirmed his intuition that, if art was nonsense – then nonsense might be art.

When Tzara arrived in Paris two years later, he, Breton, and friends organised a series of provocation-performances similar to those he had staged in Zurich; announcing a poem, Tzara would read from a newspaper, accompanied by bells and rattles. Breton would chew matches. Others screamed, caterwauled, or counted the number of pearls in the necklaces of ladies in the audience. But Breton could not keep up the pace for long. Nihilism can never be an end in itself.

Surrealism was born out of the row between André Breton and Tristan Tzara. It was the creative negation of destruction.

The young poets, the friends, who assembled around Breton concerned themselves with a direct relation to the unconscious: then ensued the period of automatic writing, of trance, of the recitals of dreams. Robert Desnos was so good at tranced pronouncements they thought he was faking it. A photograph of him, tranced, published in Breton's novel, *Najda*, in 1928, oddly prefigures the face of a man near death. It was by this photograph that a Czech student, working in the German concentration camp where Desnos lay dying of typhus, recognised him at the end of the Second World War.

What did these young people do with themselves when they were not engaged in the revolutionary act of sleep? For a start, they played games.

They played: the question game, in which you make a reply without knowing the question.

For example: Raymond Queneau: 'Who is Benjamin Peret?'

Marcel Noll: 'A zoo in revolt, a jungle, a liberty.'

They played: *l'un dans l'autre*, a thing described in terms of an analogy.

For example: George Goldfayn describes an armchair as if it were a hedgehog. 'I am a very small garden armchair whose springs pierce the leather cover under which I draw back my feet whenever someone comes near.

(This kind of exquisite whimsy is the only thing the British have ever found tolerable about the whole damn crew.)

They drew analogical portraits; they collaborated on portraits; they invented animals, the flora and fauna of dream; they compiled manifestos, put together magazines, quarrelled, demonstrated, shocked the bour-

snapped in the act of insulting a priest.

The surrealists also fell in love. Love, passionate, heterosexual love, together with freedom, from which it is inextricable, was their greatest source of inspiration; their women live vividly on the page at second hand. Gala, who left Eluard for Dali. Elsa Triolet (for whom, and Communism, Aragon left surrealism). Youki Desnos. The three wives of Breton – he transferred his passion *en bloc* to each in turn. The surrealists were not good with women. That is why, although I thought they were wonderful, I had to give them up in the end. They were, with a few patronised exceptions, all men and they told me that I was the source of all mystery, beauty, and otherness, because I was a woman – and I knew that was not true. I knew I wanted my fair share of the imagination, too. Not an excessive amount, mind; I wasn't greedy. Just an equal share in the right to vision.

When I realised that surrealist art did not recognise I had my own rights to liberty and love and vision as an autonomous being, not as a projected image, I got bored with it and wandered away.

But the old juices can still run, as in the mouths of Pavlov's dogs, when I hear the old, incendiary slogans, when I hear that most important of all surrealist principles: 'The marvellous alone is beautiful' (*First Manifesto of Surrealism*, 1924).

Surrealist beauty is convulsive. That is, you *feel* it, you don't see it – it exists as an excitation of the nerves. The experience of the beautiful is, like the experience of desire, an abandonment to vertigo, yet the beautiful does not exist *as such*. What do exist are images or objects that are enigmatic, marvellous, erotic – or juxtapositions of objects, or people, or ideas, that arbitrarily extend our notion of the connections it is possible to make. In this way, the beautiful is put at the service of liberty.

An aesthetic of the eye at the tips of the fingers; of the preternaturally heightened senses of the dreamer. They liked William Blake; and they liked Lewis Carroll; and they liked Bishop Berkeley. Leonora Carrington was British and wrote, still writes, prim, strange, surrealist fictions but the movement never travelled across the Channel, not even in the 1930s, just as women never took it over. Breton died in 1966, securely ensconced as one of France's greatest modern writers.

So does the struggle continue?

Why not. Give me one good reason. Even if the struggle has changed its terms.

Harper's Queen, 1978

The Great Gatsby is a romance, perhaps the most perfect romance, of high capitalism, which may be one of the reasons why the novel has proved so easy to merchandise. Because Fitzgerald is so upfront and unembarrassed – 'Her voice is full of money' – about this love story which is poignant solely because each word, each gesture, each caress of the two principals is determined by economic factors, it is easy to forget that he is but rehearsing a universal truth and doing so with a peculiar and remorseless lucidity.

And it is one of the great middlebrow classics – a soft-edge production, in no way intellectually demanding: you lie back and have it done to you. It is a ravishing novel: but it does not ravish you to no purpose.

Indeed, in spite of its small scale, though it is the smallness of scale that helps give *Gatsby* its odd illusion of perfection, it is the most Balzacian of all American novels and certainly the only authentic American account of a sentimental education that I know of. Not that it is Gatsby who is thus educated: it is the narrator, Nick Carraway, who is the hero of the novel, and who acquires almost too much weary knowledge of the heart at Gatsby's expense. Gatsby himself is no hero. He is the dupe of the dream. Reality would spoil things. He believes it is possible to recreate the past.

So *Gatsby* is about *not* making it, about the intractability of social class, about the yawning gulf between wealth and money and that between love and marriage. It is also, very much so, about adultery, unusual for a Great American novel; but, then, Fitzgerald was raised a Roman Catholic. This is adultery in the grand manner: when Gatsby startles the staid midwesterner, Nick, by dismissing the relations between the woman whom he believes to be in love with him and her husband as 'just personal', Gatsby is, from the depths of his passionate naïvety, singing the very song Tristan sang before King Mark and the Queen of Cornwall.

This grand, rhetorical adultery is counterpointed by the sordid, realistic adultery between Daisy's husband and the wife of the man who looks after his car. The final twist of the plot restores marital propriety.

Daisy/Isolde triumphantly repossesses her deplorable but necessary husband after disposing of this mistress. Indeed, with one hit and run accident for which she evades the blame, Daisy contrives not only to rid herself of Tom Buchanan's woman but also unconsciously to set in motion the events that also rid her of Gatsby, the old lover turned up like the refrain of an old song – a lover with whom she rapidly becomes disillusioned. For, if Daisy has represented the Love of a Good Woman for Gatsby for all those years, then she, too must have polished the shining armour of his