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"I don't know why, in fact, it is there that my steps take me, there that I almost always arrive when I walk with no destination in mind, nothing decisive, except for the obscure given: that it is there that the event must occur..."¹

André Breton

"Take out my heart, you will find Paris there."²

Louis Aragon

SURREALIST PARIS

From its very inception, the Surrealist movement created by André Breton, Louis Aragon and their colleagues in Paris of the early 1920s was marked by the young poets' passionate devotion to the city in which they lived and wrote. Paris was the "real hero" of many of the Surrealists' most significant works.³ For Breton and Aragon, Paris was muse, spiritual initiator, seductress, confidante. The city was a "capital of desire" whose forms and rhythms, "deciphered like cryptograms," unveiled to the members of the Surrealist circle their own secret needs and unavowed wishes.⁴ Few movements in Western art and literature have been shaped as decisively by their relationship to a specific urban locus as was Surrealism, and no literary movement in recent times has contributed as many fresh insights to the understanding of the complex, multi-layered nature of urban space.



Shop windows, which often display mysteriously disposed objects, offered rich terrain for aesthetic prospecting.

The city that served as a matrix for the literary, artistic, political and psychological experimentation associated with Surrealism is chronologically removed from us by more than half a century. (Breton, the movement's acknowledged leader and spokesperson, published his *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924; Louis Aragon's *The Peasant of Paris*, a detailed exploration of what its author called the "metaphysics of [Parisian] places," appeared in 1926.) Urbanistically and spiritually, however, the capitol through which the poets wandered is still astonishingly present in the heart of the sprawling metropolis that is the Paris of today.

Certainly, names have been altered and significant changes have occurred in many of the sites discussed in *Nadja*, Breton's 1928 chronicle of love and esoteric mystery, as well as in the places woven into *The Peasant of Paris*' kaleidoscopic mixture of meticulous observation and lively poetic fantasy; these changes had already begun to unfold, as Breton himself pointed out, while the books were still being written. Yet visitors to the Porte Saint-Denis area or the flea market at Saint-Ouen can still sense the magic and ambiguity that fascinated the Surrealist writers and artists who haunted these places.

Three aspects of the Surrealists' approach to the city will occupy our attention here: the continuity between urban space and the space of the poets' dreams and fantasies, that is, the refusal to posit a rupture between the real and the fantastic in the urban realm; the concept of the streetscape as an oracular text to be deciphered; and the notion of the city as the setting of a mystical/erotic quest.

The City of Dreams

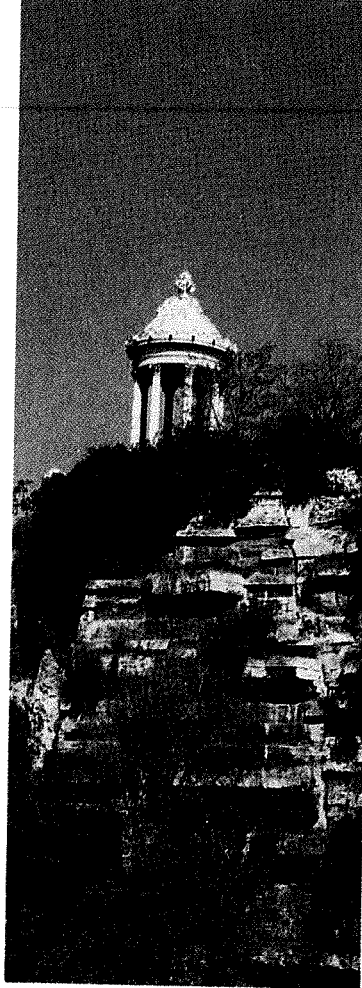
The principal goal of Surrealist activity, according to André Breton, was to find the "supreme point" at which the dream world and the waking realm, poetic imagination and the prose of everyday life would cease to be perceived as antithetical. Paris' urban matrix offered a complex series of spaces and images especially propitious to the abolition of these "false antinomies," to the fusion of fantasy and the real. The streetscape of the capital presented an endless parade of divisions—in the form of advertising posters, unexpected juxtapositions of objects, the faces and attitudes of passers-by, surprising architectural details and shop window displays—that opened passages from ordinary reality into the world of the dream.

The oneiric quality that Surrealist poets had admired in the painting of DeChirico revealed itself with equal force in the spaces of the real city in which they lived. Breton and Aragon savored the hallucinatory incongruities of shop displays along less chic segments of the *grands boulevards* (Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, Boulevard de Sébastopol and Boulevard Magenta, among others), where glaring signs, exotic and perplexing objects and throngs of people hungry for excitement mingled in an atmosphere of celebration, fermenting desire, or somnambulistic enchantment.

The poets prospected the streets of Paris in search of places where the veil separating ordinary reality from the dream realm had been worn especially thin. Their most electrifying finds rarely coincided with those monuments or parts of the city that would have been considered beautiful by ordinary aesthetic standards.

In fact, the Surrealists showed a marked predilection for extreme forms of kitsch, decaying buildings and quarters neglected by those of sophisticated tastes: the sordid haunts of prostitutes, drug dealers and other outcasts in Montmartre, the dubious commercial area around the Porte Saint-Denis and the Porte Saint-Martin;

The "Temple of Love" in the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont remains one of the principal strategic points of the "capital of desire."



and the rundown working-class and immigrant district of Belleville in the city's northeastern section. Such shadowy and ill-famed places were for the poets the authentic habitat of modern myth and liberation fantasy. "All the fauna of our imaginations and their marine vegetation," wrote Aragon, "lose and perpetuate themselves in the badly lit cones of human activity."⁵

For Aragon, the region of the capital that was most porous to the osmotic filtering of fantastic elements into the real was that of the glass-roofed *passages*, the shopping galleries constructed in the neighborhood of the *grands boulevards* in the nineteenth century. In the ambiguously lit *passages*, Aragon sensed the presence of

"locks badly closed on the infinite. There where the most equivocal activity of the living goes on, the inanimate sometimes gives a reflection of people's most secret motives. Thus, our cities are populated by sphinxes which are seldom recognized."⁶

The window display in a cane shop in the Passage de l'Opéra conjured up for Aragon visions of a sweet-voiced siren from his past, whom he "saw" one evening swimming base-chested in an aquatic medium that had somehow filtered in among the canes, pipes and umbrellas.

The *passages*, those "human aquaria" given over to more or less sordid forms of commerce, offered a high concentration of such sphinx-like visions, which, like images in a dream, provided the onlooker with information about the depths of his own unconscious: "It is his own abysses which, thanks to these faceless monsters, the explorer of the Surrealist city will be able to plumb," Aragon wrote. "The modern light of the unexpected, that is what from now on will hold his attention."⁷

The Surrealists' urban aesthetic was founded on the notion of the *insolite*, the unexpected, the astonishing, the marvelous images and occurrences that surged forth in the teeming, restless matrix of



Ecce homo. A bewildered mannequin contemplates the restless crowds in the Boulevard Rochechouart.

Mechanical voyante near the Place Pigalle: kitsch as a catalyst of mystery.



the city. Just as in painting and poetry, they valued above all else the “spark” produced through the juxtaposition of superficially unrelated objects or images.

Therefore, in the urban landscape, the members of the group searched out spaces and juxtapositions that corresponded to Le Comte de Lautréamont’s aesthetic canon: “As beautiful as the encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table.” Certain areas of the city offered particularly rich terrain for such aesthetic prospecting: the crowded sidewalks of the *grands boulevards* with their flashing electric signs and their endless streams of faces; the *passages*, with their cast of shady characters and the mysteriously disposed objects in their shop windows; the area of the Porte Saint-Denis and the park of the Buttes-Chaumont.

For Breton, one of the most significant points of interpenetration between concrete urban space and the world of dreams and the unconscious was the flea market at Saint-Quen in the capital’s northern suburbs. In *Nadja* and *L’amour fou* (1937), he described at length visits to the flea market and discoveries that he and his Surrealist colleagues made there. In the poet’s words, unwanted or misunder-

stood objects “went to dream” at this gigantic bric-a-brac sale, their “dreaming” could sometimes give—suddenly and with an irresistible authority—tangible form to the unconscious desires of the passer-by.

A mask found at the flea market enabled Alberto Giacometti to complete a sculpture whose final form had been eluding him, and a strangely carved wooden spoon discovered by Breton on the same occasion revealed itself to be the fulfillment of a poetic-erotic fantasy that had been haunting the poet for several months.⁸

Breton felt perfectly justified in analyzing objects discovered at the *marché aux puces* or encounters experienced in the course of a walk through the streets of Paris precisely as if they had been images from a dream, fabricated by his own unconscious. In the Surrealists’ vision of the city, in effect, the barrier between “inner” and “outer,” between objective reality and the subjective play of fantasy and desire, had ceased to function with any sort of rigor: “Paris inscribes in its stones the irrationality of the dream, of which it represents the projection made easy, tangible. So easy, in fact, that one can no longer distinguish



Cane shop, Passage des Panoramas. “The canes swayed softly like seaweed. I had not yet gotten over this enchantment when I noticed that a swimming form was sliding between the different levels of the display.” (Aragon)

The flea market at Saint Ouen.
A mask found at a flea market
enabled sculptor Alberto
Giacometti to complete a pro-
ject whose final form had
been eluding him.



between the dream and the adventure that one has actually lived...Itineraries exist in Paris which trace among and with the objects of daily life (posters, electric signs, decorative elements and construction projects) the paths of the imagination.”⁹

The City as Oracular Text

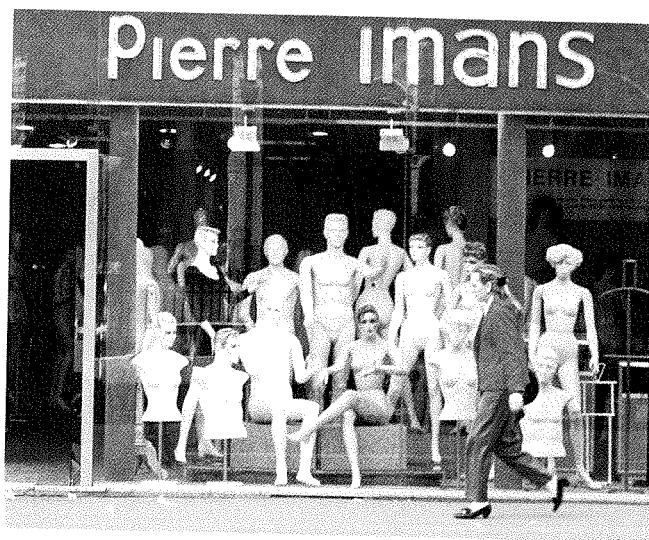
“Interpreting” objects found at the flea market, chance encounters in the street, or advertising symbols noticed for the first time under peculiar circumstances meant deciphering the sense of these objects, events and images in a specific personal/psychological context. The meanings uncovered would inevitably, the Surrealists believed, emerge as linked to a “difficulty [the viewer/interpreter] is in with himself,”¹⁰ usually relating to love, sexuality, the fate of a relationship. Objects and occurrences encountered “by chance” took on the aspect of personal messages addressed to the viewer by his own unconscious through the medium of the urban landscape.

The city became a medium for communicating not only by conventional means, but also in the occult sense. Paris was on oracle, a “*voyante*” who, through gestures, images, words and seemingly fortuitous encounters, announced to the poets

information concerning their own destinies. Philippe Soupault, a member of the Surrealist circle who collaborated in Breton’s early experiments in the techniques of automatic writing, explored this occult side of the city in his novel *The Last Nights of Paris* (1928).

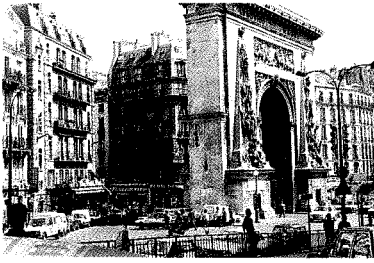
Soupault explained how at crucial moments Paris “called” to him, “demanded his attention.” He described his rapture when he realized that, luring him into one of her hidden corners, the city had decided to “trust him with a new secret.”¹¹ As the title of this book suggests, Soupault’s Paris was a nocturnal entity, coming to life only under cover of darkness. The secret spaces whose perplexing and disconcerting powers awakened him in the darkness included the area of the Champs-Élysées near the Petit Palais, where specialized prostitutes plied their trade, and the *quais* and bridges along the Seine: places of loneliness, passion and furtive movement to which the river communicated something of its own liquid mystery.

Even such an eminently “respectable” and rational space as the courtyard of the Institut de France on the Quai de Conti could become the theater of nocturnal rituals that took on a strongly occult character and in which Paris herself



The “mystery and melancholy” (sometimes ludicrous and sometimes menacing) that haunted the canvases of De Chirico and Max Ernst can still be encountered in the streets of Paris.

The area of the Porte Saint-Denis was Andre Breton's favorite Parisian quarter. He described the gate itself as "very beautiful and very useless."



Passage du Prado. One of Louis Aragon's "human aquaria."



seemed to emerge as playing the principal role: "The Paris that I had thought I knew, but whose sexuality and mystery I had not understood, Paris misunderstood but then found again, Paris with her breath and her gestures, Paris with her supple, silent night."¹²

Breton, who was an adept of the tarot and frequently consulted mediums and *voyantes*, experienced the city itself as a complex network of occult symbols carrying a multiplicity of messages. Human mediums and oracles had their places within a larger oracular text, which was the substance of the city. Thus in *Nadja*, the prison of the Conciergerie inspired Breton's heroine with visions of a previous incarnation, and the poet reported that Nadja regularly consulted certain Parisian statues, such as the bust of Henri Bècque in the Place Villiers, to obtain their opinions on how best to resolve her personal dilemmas.

For Breton and his companions, the proper functioning of the esoteric code was less dependent on the "authenticity" of the places, objects and personages involved than on the psychological "availability" and openness of the person interpreting the signs. According to Surrealist principles, not only were kitsch and incongruity not

barriers to contact with the mysterious dimensions of existence, but by bending the structures of ordinary aesthetic perception, they actually facilitated such magical contacts.

Some of the Parisian places in which the poets experienced most readily the presence of the mystifyingly and enchantingly *other* (for example Aragon's beloved Passage de l'Opera or the Théâtre des Deux Masques, which Breton frequented in Montmartre) have long since become casualties of urban progress. However, a casual stroll up the Boulevard de Clichy from the Place Clichy to Pigalle, or along the Boulevard de Magenta between the Place de la République and the Gare de l'Est, would reveal that Paris retains its ability to deploy kitsch and eclectic oddity as an invitation into the realm of mystery, paradox and wonder.

The Mystical Quest

Disponibilité, total physical, intellectual and emotional receptivity, was the essential characteristic of the Surrealists' approach to the urban environment. The poets opened themselves consciously to all of the city, to its incongruities and contradictions, to its undeniable ugliness as well as to its picturesque and pleasant aspects, asking only that it continue to

astonish them. And in this, Paris never failed.

The Paris of Breton and Aragon was a city that unfolded itself at a walking pace, at the rhythm of the poetic *flâneur* patient enough to search out and savor its intimate details. Every walk along the boulevards or through the winding streets of Montmartre, in the neighborhood around Breton's home in the Rue Fontaine, became a voyage of discovery, an opportunity to gain fresh insights into that "metaphysics of places," which, in Aragon's words, nourished the dreams of children and poets.¹³

Under these conditions, the Surrealists' famous "*promenades*" took on the character of pilgrimages among the unforeseen and ephemeral shrines of the marvelous, of a quest, constantly renewed and different each time, for those objects, persons and places that could catalyze a penetration into the dimension of myth and mystery. But the mystery that was the object of the poets' quest remained anchored in the weave of the tangible urban fabric. "The quest in the setting of city appears clearly religious in character;...[however, in the Surrealists' view] one does not decipher the universe by turning away from appearances, but rather by scrutinizing them intensively. Read right to the end, they



Hanging bridge in the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, the entirely artificial bucolic enclave created by the Baron Haussmann in northeastern Paris. "The bridge is suspended. Suspended from your lips, Ladies. One cannot be more gallant. One cannot be more gallant than a suspended bridge." (Aragon)

would yield the key to reality.”¹⁴ Aragon insisted: “There is no knowledge except of the particular. There is no poetry except of the concrete.”¹⁵

The poets’ urban mysticism retained a strongly erotic element. It was the search for and the promise of love that, more than any other factor, oriented Breton and Aragon’s wanderings through the streets of Paris. It hardly seems surprising, then, that one of the richest territories for their explorations should have been the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont in the capital’s nineteenth *arrondissement*, crowned with its neo-classical “temple of love,” and, at night, filled to overflowing with couples in various stages of amorous abandon.

“Let us walk through this decor of desires,” Aragon wrote in *The Peasant of Paris*; “In this setting full of criminal thoughts and imaginary spasms. Perhaps by the betrayal of a gesture or a sigh, we will be able to understand what links these sensitive phantoms to the touching life of the trembling bushes, to the blue gravel which crunches beneath our feet.”¹⁶

Erotic energies were, for the poets, tied directly to the tangible phenomena of the urban setting: the shrubs and gravel and eccentric architecture of the Parc des Buttes-

Chaumont, the cafés of Montmartre, the solitary elegance and mystery of the Tour Saint-Jacques, in which André Breton sensed a benevolent guiding presence during a late-night walk with a newfound love.¹⁷ For Surrealists, Paris itself became an erotic object, shot through with currents of desire: “The bizarre, the strange, the divine encounter, hope, mad hope...all these ideas announce that the city is to be explored, caressed, penetrated” like a lover’s body, “and that, like such a body, the city possesses its hollows and its hot points.”¹⁸

Conclusion

The Paris of the Surrealists was a realm in which dream and concrete reality ceased to oppose one another and instead fused into a unity in which the most astonishing visions, events and encounters became not only conceivable, but necessary and inevitable. In oneiric spaces such as the glass-roofed *passages* and the flea market at Saint-Ouen, the city offered signs and messages that the poets believed they could interpret just as they did the dream-symbols of their own unconscious. They looked at the tangible fabric of the urban environment as an oracular text in which occult meanings were to be sought out and deciphered. Ultimately, for Breton and Aragon, Paris was the setting of a mystical quest tirelessly pursued though the streets, squares, *quais*, parks and mysterious trysting-places and guided by an attitude of physical and mental *disponibilité*. Love in its most exalted forms was the ultimate aim of the poets’ quest, and the force of their desire turned the city itself into an object of erotic passion.

The Surrealists were resolutely faithful to the principle of taking a passionate rather than a rational and distanced approach to the urban world. For them, the one thing that the city could never be was an object of disinterested,

clinical examination. Breton, Aragon and Soupault felt themselves to be personally concerned, directly solicited by the events and images which proliferated in the urban landscape around them, even those events and images which to other eyes might have appeared ugly or trivial.

Whatever the ultimate value and sincerity of the Surrealists’ esoteric research, the fact remains that half a century before modern investigations into architectural semiotics, they explicitly approached the urban environment as a tissue of signs to be interpreted on diverse levels: social, political, affective and occult. Perhaps still more important they viewed the city as an organic, living text whose multiple and constantly changing meanings could never be exhausted, reduced to a simple formula, or definitively analyzed and catalogued. The “text” of Surrealist Paris remained open at all moments to fresh and unexpected images, new surges of poetic/esoteric inspiration.

In this sense, far from constituting a set of ideas limited in their applicability to a single historical urban context, the vision of the city developed by the Surrealists in the Paris of the ’20s and ’30s would seem to suggest insights

for an approach to other urban situations, as well.

The poets' attitude towards the city was above all one of careful and respected attention to nuance and detail, especially where such detail became puzzling and enigmatic, seeming to resist tidy classification. Their particular form of attention was at the same time both a joyful participation in the complex and exhilarating life of the city they loved and a delight in, rather than a refusal of, complexity, mystery, paradox and passion as fundamental categories of urban experience.

Notes

1. André Breton, *Nadja* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 38.
2. Louis Aragon, "Le paysan de Paris chante," in *L'oeuvre poétique, tome X: 1943-1945* (Paris: Livre Club Diderot, 1979), p. 87.
3. Marie-Claire Bancquart, *Paris des surréalistes* (Paris: Seghers, 1973), p. 104.
4. Marie-Claire Bancquart, "Paris, capitale du désir," *Magazine littéraire no. 254* (1988), p. 38.
5. Louis Aragon, *Le paysan de Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), p. 20.
6. Aragon, *Le paysan*, p. 20.
7. *Ibid*, p. 20.
8. André Breton, *L'amour fou* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp. 41 ff.
9. Bancquart, *Paris des surréalistes*, p. 72.
10. Breton, *L'amour fou*, p. 16.
11. Philippe Soupault, *Les dernières nuits de Paris* (Paris: J'ai lu, 1982), pp. 44, 38.
12. Soupault, p. 112.
13. Aragon, *Le paysan*, pp. 19-20.
14. Bancquart, *Paris des surréalistes*, p. 74.
15. Aragon, *Le paysan*, p. 245.
16. Aragon, *Le paysan*, p. 178.
17. Breton, *L'amour fou*, p. 50 ff.
18. Pierre Sansot, *Poétique de la ville* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1984), p. 57.