

Surrealist World

“Isn't it true, after all, that man is no more than an offshoot of solar matter cast over with a gadfly shadow of free will?”

-Rene Char

Antonin A explodes himself all over the foyer of the Hotel Magritte, making a pretty mess. It is a protest against the recent renovations to the beloved landmark; a witless concatenation of dull, complacent colours and an ersatz rain forest of plastic plants. The blood and offal is photographed for exhibit by one of A's accomplices, using an old style box camera. Sepia carnage.

The group had determined that a grand gesture was required, Monsieur B giving his blessing to the venture with a slight, almost imperceptible dip of his over-large, leonine head. Antonin A volunteered for the assignment, knowing it would guarantee him a spot in the pantheon beside Vache, Desnos, Rimbaud and a select few others.

The rebuff is accompanied by a hand lettered manifesto, found on what remains of A's shattered torso. The hotel management is warned that further reprisals can be expected if any attempt is made to clean up the statement. The tableau of gore is to be left as is, a potent symbol of what is in store for reactionaries and aesthetic miscreants. Word quickly spreads, the scene drawing an influx of gawkers, a clamouring of new guests.

C'est ca.

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Open expressions of affection are strictly discouraged. Ardent lovers find themselves spattered with fish guts. Upon discovery, grass-stained couples are forced to run a gauntlet, screaming as they're lashed with whips and green branches stripped from nearby trees. The group is notorious for prudishness, revolted by sensuality, except in its most extreme forms.

Thus their veneration of prostitutes and porn stars, who are urged to rut in full view of on-lookers, random orgies taking place in front of schools, government buildings, police stations, homes for the aged and infirm.

Other favourite targets for "actions": libraries, churches, synagogues and mosques. A horde of *artistes* descend on such places, driven by righteous furies. Library shelves are emptied of the so-called "classics", which are then burnt to prevent further contagion. Religion is delusionary, proscribed. Walls and windows of temples are defaced with obscene graffiti, sacred texts shredded, priests and practitioners ridiculed, assaulted, their clothes cut from their bodies, driven howling into the streets.

Mr. and Mrs. Something-Something, exchanging bland pleasantries over their second cup of morning coffee.

Without warning, without the slightest inkling, the ceiling peels back, the walls expand higher and higher, stretching up to pierce the overcast. The group has dumped a huge supply of lysergic acid into the reservoir, tripping out half the city. Now see the world as it truly is, layers and camouflaging illusions stripped away, reality in its purest, most sublime state. Two million souls crying out in wonder and anguish, an eight-hour

amusement ride, *sans* safety bars; penetrate the eyeballs, burrow into the soft matter within. Today's psychotic is tomorrow's visionary poet.

Bon voyage, madame et monsieur...

The group convenes at the Café Lautreamont to compare notes and receive a briefing regarding the latest actions. The room sulfurous with cigarette smoke, rife with rumour and innuendo.

And Monsieur B holds court, as always. Excommunication orders are drawn up for those who have strayed from the designated path. Back sliders. Art whores. *Cunts*. The list is handed to B who confirms the roster. Some will readily admit the folly of their ways and apply for reinstatement but they will forever be regarded with suspicion. B barely bothers to pay lip service to consensus. He is the high priest, absolute dictator, his will be done. Cold, analytical, humourless, brilliant.

C_____ reminds them of his upcoming art opening and B fixes him with that hard, grey stare. Lately C_____ has been straying into unapproved styles, nonrepresentation. This will not be tolerated, he is reminded.

B is suspicious of painters, feeling in his heart that the movement is primarily a literary one. Visual artists are unstable, not to be trusted. C_____ withers under that imperious gaze, dissolving like one of those melted clocks by--well, they ridicule him with the name "Avida Dollars" now. C_____ reaffirms his allegiance to the Cause and is relieved when they finally move on to other matters.

He will return to his studio and destroy the new paintings. The ones already turned to the wall. Mustn't take a chance someone will see them, report his heresy.

The recriminations are too terrible to consider.

A visiting foreign dignitary is given the full treatment. They wait until he disembarks from the plane, accepting greetings from the usual round of functionaries. Then someone steps from their midst and with some sort of Gallic cry, empties a bucket of pig bladders over his head. The photographers shout and jostle to get a picture of the gore-drenched diplomat.

His furious security detail grapple with the assailant but they, in turn, are pelted by members of the crowd; they retreat up the red carpet, shielding their charge against the rain of projectiles.

The imperialists depart to the cheers of many present.

That was for Africa and l'Indochine, you bastards!

J'ai peur qu'il ne veuille pas revenir en France de si tot.

Bah! Good riddance! Fascists! Militarists! Capitalist douchebags! Choke on your blood money...

Their kind are not welcome here.

The launch of the new journal *Piss and Bile* is a huge success. Monsieur B's work takes up a good portion of the publication, poems and rants and a long introduction which explains, in great detail, what the magazine is not.

Apparently it is *not* anything. To read anything into it is to completely miss the point. The various pieces, by sycophants and proteges, are worthless; writing for and about and by automatons. No philosophy, no didactic, no merit. "In conclusion," he

writes, “this is an ichor-stained dagger, a sky threatening with clouds, a doorway leading nowhere. Fuck you and your precious belief systems and the banality they entail.”

Everyone congratulates him for his insightful commentary but when he is asked when the next issue is due, B merely shakes his head.

Once again, they just don't *get* it.

C_____ waits impatiently for their arrival. He has purchased, out of his own pocket, the very best wine and liquors. He even manages to scrounge up a couple of bottles of absinthe, which is harder to find than a virgin in Montparnasse. He's excluded anything from the show that could possibly earn Monsieur B's ire. It meant stripping the walls of all but a few pictures and even those he isn't sure of. Once B renders his verdict it is set in stone. People trickle in and out, hardly glancing at the framed wonders he has spent months executing.

It grows late. Finally, he spots Louis A and Philippe S, Monsieur B's main errand boys. They eye the pictures critically and whisper amongst themselves. Sweat beads his forehead, collects in the elastic of his underwear. At last, Louis approaches. Monsieur B, it seems, will not be attending the opening. C_____ ventures to ask his opinion of the show. Louis purses his lips.

“It is difficult to say,” he finally offers blandly. “That piece there, for instance. The tricolor. Is that meant to be a flag? Is it...*political*?” He practically spits the word.

“No, no.” C_____ shakes his head vigorously. “That is not the intention.”

But clearly the painting is suspect. It will have to go.

There are no sales, but that is inconsequential. He is not a *whore*. He illustrates erotic texts to make ends meet, one of the few activities that Monsieur B wholeheartedly endorses. After all, did not the great Apollinaire scribble the most heinous pornography?

Love is deception. Sex is exploitation. Revel in the carnal, the spilling of bodily fluids for sheer pleasure.

The prick is a sword. Use it.

The movement includes few women, no minorities. Pagan and African art are revered but as for admitting a black man or woman to their intimate circle...no. It wouldn't be right. Only one or two musicians make the grade (Monsieur B boasts that he is quite tone deaf).

The Italians have made contributions, the Spanish are tolerated. The English are cunts, the Germans hopeless and the Americans, the poor Americans, are louts of the worst kind. To them, art is a *commodity*. The Japanese are the worst. One collector from Japan is nearly beaten to death with a dead fish for daring to discuss the relative monetary value of modern art in the presence of Monsieur B.

Attention! The poster proclaims. *The old republics, federations, city states, university trained elites, entrenched mediocrities, critics, philologists and politicians of every stripe are to be exterminated. Mob rule is hereby enjoined. No leaders, no followers, a mindless groundswell, primitivism unleashed. Romantic notions and closely guarded paradigms no longer hold sway. The law is nothing. You are free to express yourselves. Forget the alphabet, deny coherence. Rape at will, murder creates celebrity.*

Are you alive? Can your eyes see what has been done to you in the name of stupid conformity? Then pluck them out and be done with it! The eyes are liars, propagandists. Empty the windows of the soul and let the void seep in/out...

And so on and so forth.

One by one they have fallen by the wayside. For crimes against the movement, real and imagined. For daring to question Monsieur B. For refusing to toe the party line. They are officially condemned, pronounced *persona non grata*, their readings and openings either boycotted or, even better, disrupted, their works torn from their hands, trampled underfoot.

“Who will be left?” The *enfant terrible* writes to Monsieur B from his Manhattan penthouse. “You are the unrepentant bulimic, purging yourself of all but your grossest secretions. Everything else is expelled from your faggoty lips, your puckered, cankerous arsehole...”

B reads the letter to the others without comment but the next day an assassin is dispatched to deliver B’s rebuttal. It is rumoured to be the same icepick that felled the mighty Trotsky. The holiest artifact in the arsenal, consecrated for a just and noble cause.

No one knows where Monsieur B found him. Allegedly it was near the amusement arcade by the river, a popular spot for homosexuals cruising for anonymous trysts. What was B doing there? No one dares ask.

The old man is filthy, his body giving off the foul odour of an unembalmed corpse. He converses in inaudible mumbles which, it seems, only Monsieur B can decipher.

“Here is the future of art!” B cries. “Observe.” He instructs the man to draw, on the spot, a rendering of Baudelaire’s “diseased organ”. The man scratches a few lines on a pad and then B snatches it away from him, holding it aloft, brandishing it for all to see.

The others are taken aback but then when they discern the gleam in their leader’s eyes they quickly burst out in a chorus of praise. Monsieur B beams at this newly discovered great master and the others press forward to embrace him, shake his stained hand, filling the air with “Bravo!” and “C’est magnifique!”. Meanwhile, B looks on, his face rapturous, a gloating expression of pride or, possibly, cunning.

It is too much.

C_____ flees the gathering, pushing his way outside, seeking escape, a sanctuary, some place where he can quiet the angry beehive buzzing in his head. Monsieur B has never mentioned his opening, his latest paintings, the leader’s silence speaking volumes.

They will cast me out.

He does not remember how long or far he walks. The city seems foreign to him, bent Tanguy architectures, no recognizable landmarks, a stranger in this place, his wanderings without destination.

He finds himself on a dimly remembered avenue which, he finally realizes, is not far from the Proust Museum, a shrine for the group.

Now he sees him, his nemesis, his *bete noire*. Monsieur B is walking at a fast clip and gesticulating, followed by the usual entourage of hangers-on and adoring lackeys.

Where does the pistol come from? Is it his? C_____ vaguely recollects buying it, or one very much like it.

He places himself in their path, causing them to draw up in an uncertain huddle. He says something, a long complaint, a diatribe against all Monsieur B represents. B's eyes take him in, his lips curling. An unforgivable affront. The letter of condemnation already being composed, a litany of C_____ 's many sins delineated and codified.

The gun barks once, twice. The others retreat, take to their heels, making no attempt to shield their leader. B collapses, an idol whose feet have been cut from beneath him.

Later there will be an argument over his final words. Were they "Shit, I'm killed" or, even more appropriately, "After all, art is spectacle"?

C_____ is now in complete possession of his faculties. The full ramifications of his act are apparent, the body bleeding out before him.

"There is no movement!" He shouts after them. "Death to the demagoguery of the irrational!"

Then he places the barrel of the revolver under his chin and, *tout de suite*, bursts his brain, slipping his earthly shell and entering the all-encompassing realm of the Universal Genius.

Fin

The author acknowledges consulting the following texts in the preparation of this fictional work:

Surrealist Painters and Poets (An Anthology) edited by Mary Ann Caws (MIT Press; 2001)

Surreal Lives by Ruth Brandon (Grove Press; 1999)

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