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ANDRÉ BRETON AND THE MAGIC CAPITAL:
AN AGONY IN SIX FITS

1

After decades in which the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group all but vanished from the art-historical record on both sides of the erstwhile Iron Curtain, interwar Prague's standing as the "second city of surrealism" is in serious danger of becoming a truth universally acknowledged.¹ Vítězslav Nezval denied that "Zvěrokruh" (Zodiac), which appeared at the end of 1930, was a surrealist magazine, but its contents, which included his translation of André Breton's "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" (1929), suggested otherwise.² Two years later the painters Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen (Marie Čermínová), the sculptor Vincenc Makovský, and several other Czech artists showed their work alongside Hans/Jean Arp, Salvador Dalí, Giorgio De Chirico, Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Wolfgang Paalen, and Yves Tanguy (not to mention a selection of anonymous "Negro sculptures") in the "Poesie 1932" exhibition at the Mánes Gallery.³ Three times the size of "Newer Super-Realism" at the Wadsworth Atheneum the previous November – the first surrealist exhibition on Ameri-

¹ Not one Czech artist was included, for example, in MoMA's blockbuster 1968 exhibition "Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage" or discussed in William S. Rubin's accompanying monograph "Dada and Surrealist Art" (New York 1968). – Recent western works that seek to correct this picture include *Tippner*, Anja: Die permanente Avantgarde? Surrealismus in Prag. Köln 2009; *Spieler*, Reinhard/Auer, Barbara (eds.): Gegen jede Vernunft: Surrealismus Paris-Prague. Ludwigshafen 2010; *Anaut*, Alberto (ed.): Praha, Paris, Barcelona: modernidad fotográfica de 1918 a 1948/Photographic Modernity from 1918 to 1948. Barcelona, Madrid 2010; and *Srp*, Karel/Bydžovská, Lenka (eds.): New Formations: Czech Avant-Garde Art and Modern Glass from the Roy and Mary Cullen Collection. Houston/New Haven 2011. For background, see *Anděl*, Jaroslav (ed.): Czech Modernism 1900-1945. Houston 1989; and *Anděl*, Jaroslav (ed.): The Art of the Avant-Garde in Czechoslovakia 1918-1938/El Arte de la Vanguardia en Checoslovaquia 1918-1938. Valencia 1993.

² There were two issues of "Zvěrokruh", in November and December 1930. As well as Czech contributions they contained translations of prose and poetry by Breton, Éluard, Soupault, Tzara, Cocteau, Mallarmé, and Baudelaire, among others. A small extract from Breton's "Nadja" was carried in Zvěrokruh 1, 4-6, and the "Second Manifesto" in Zvěrokruh 2, 60-74. Both issues have been reprinted, together with other key texts of 1930s Czech surrealism, as: Zvěrokruh 1, Zvěrokruh 2, Surrealismus v ČSR, Mezinárodní bulletin surrealismu, Surrealismus [Zodiac 1, Zodiac 2, Surrealism in the ČSR, International Bulletin of Surrealism, Surrealism]. Praha 2004. – In the untitled editorial to "Zvěrokruh" 1, 1 Nezval denies that "Zvěrokruh" is a surrealist journal.

³ Výstava Poesie 1932 [Poetry 1932 Exhibition]. Praha 1932. – The other Czech artists represented were the painters Josef Šíma, František Muzika, Alois Wachsmann, Adolf Hoffmeister, Emil Filla, and František Janoušek, and the sculptors Hana Wichterlová and Bedřich Štefan.

can soil⁴ – “Poesie 1932” was probably the largest display of surrealist art yet seen anywhere in the world. Nezval and the theater director Jindřich Honzl visited Paris in May 1933, where they met with André Breton, Paul Éluard, and other surrealists.⁵ In a letter to Breton published in the next issue of “Surréalisme au service de la Révolution”, Nezval pledged “closer cooperation” between the Devětsil group that had dominated Prague’s avant-garde scene throughout the 1920s and “the first of the world’s avant-gardes to discover [...] the idea of surreality.”⁶

The formation of the Group of Surrealists in Czechoslovakia (Skupina Surrealistů v Československu), to give the Prague surrealists their official title, was announced on 21 March 1934 in the manifesto “Surrealism in the Czechoslovak Republic” (Surrealismus v ČSR). It was the first such surrealist group to be established outside France. The core members were Nezval, Honzl, Štyrský, Toyen, Makovský, the poet Konstantin Biebl, the Liberated Theater composer Jaroslav Ježek, and the psycho-analytic theorist Bohuslav Brouk.⁷ Karel Teige – Devětsil’s leading spokesman and the most influential figure of the interwar Czech avant-garde – joined them a few weeks later, having in the meantime mended fences with Jindřich Štyrský, with whom he had fallen out in 1930.⁸ The poet František Halas, the theater director E. F. Burian, the founders of the Prague Linguistic Circle Roman Jakobson and Jan Mukařovský, and the communist journalist Závěš Kalandra were among those the group counted as its “collaborators.”⁹ Unsurprisingly, given the standing of many of the Prague surrealists in Czech cultural life, “Surrealismus v ČSR” caused considerable stir in left-wing artistic and political circles. A discussion evening hosted by the Left

⁴ The show was reprised at Julien Levy’s gallery in New York on 9–29 January, 1932. See *Schaffner, Ingrid/Jacobs, Julien L.: Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery*. Cambridge 1998.

⁵ *Nezval, Vítězslav: Neviditelná Moskva [Invisible Moscow]*. Praha 1935. Quoted in *Bydžovská, Lenka/Srp, Karel: Český surrealismus 1929–1953: Skupina surrealistů v ČSR. Události, vztahy, inspirace [Czech Surrealism 1929–1953: The Group of Surrealists in the ČSR: Events, Links, Inspiration]*. Praha 1996, 21.

⁶ Nezval to Breton on behalf of Devětsil, 10 May 1933, reproduced in: *Surrealismus v ČSR*, 21 March 1934. In: *Zvěrokruh* 115 (cf. fn. 2). – The word Devětsil is the name of a flower (the butterbur) in Czech, but it also puns on “devět síl” (nine powers or forces), a possible reference to the nine muses of antiquity.

⁷ The other signatories of *Surrealismus v ČSR* were Imre Forbath, Katy King, and Josef Kunstadt, all friends of Nezval’s who dropped out of the group soon afterwards. Makovský was later expelled.

⁸ Teige later gave his own explanation for his delay in joining the group. “Old quarrels,” he says, “were very smoothly liquidated”; his concern was that the group would be based on solid dialectical materialist foundations. *Teige, Karel et al.: Surrealismus proti proudu [Surrealism against the Current]*. Praha 1938 (*Surrealistická skupina v Praze*). Reprinted in *Brabec, Jiří/Effenberger, Vratislav/Chvatík, Květoslav/Kalivoda, Robert* (eds.): *Karel Teige: Výbor z díla 2. Zápasy o smysl moderní tvorby: studie z třicátých let [Selected Works 2. Struggles over the Meaning of Modern Creativity: Studies from the 1930s]*. Praha 1969, 523–524. These three volumes of selected works were published in 1966, 1969 (Praha: Československý spisovatel), and 1994 (Praha: Český spisovatel) respectively, though most copies of vol. 2 were pulped before reaching the bookstores.

⁹ *Schůze surrealistické skupiny v Praze 14.3.1938 [Meeting of the Surrealist Group in Prague 13.3.1938]*. In: *Teige: Výbor z díla 2*, 662 (cf. fn. 8).

Front (Levá fronta) at which Nezval, Teige, and Honzl debated against advocates of socialist realism at the City Library on 28 May 1934 drew over a thousand spectators. The proceedings were published under the title “Surrealism in Discussion” later that year.¹⁰

The group’s first public exhibition opened on 15 January 1935, once again at the Mánes Gallery. It consisted entirely of works by Štyrský, Toyen, and Makovský. The event was perhaps most remarkable for Štyrský’s photographs from his series “Frog Man” and “Man with Blinkers”; Lenka Bydžovská claims that this was the most extensive exposure yet given to avant-garde photography in any Czech art exhibition.¹¹ Štyrský’s subjects – coffins, prostheses, busts, palmists’ charts, fat ladies, fallen angels, reflections in shop windows – are instantly recognizable today as stock surrealist fare, but at the time he was a pioneer of the genre. The politics of the exhibition were difficult to discern, but Teige did his best to explain what was far from obvious from the works on display themselves. “Above the entrance to the exhibition hall,” his catalogue essay began, “should be placed a sign reminding us that:

SURREALISM IS NOT AN ARTISTIC SCHOOL.”

“To surrealists,” he goes on,

[...] art, painting, poetry, and theatrical creation and performance are not the aim, but a tool and a means, one of the paths that can lead to the liberation of the human spirit and human life itself, on condition that it identifies itself with the direction of the revolutionary movement of history [...] and if surrealists pronounce the word REVOLUTION, they understand by it exactly the same thing as the followers of that social movement which is founded upon the dialectical materialist worldview.¹²

Wisely perhaps, Nezval kept his essay on the firmer ground of “The Systematic Exploration of Reality through Reconstruction of the Object, Hallucination, and Illusion.”¹³

2

André Breton arrived in Prague a few weeks later with his second wife Jacqueline Lamba and his fellow poet Paul Éluard. He had intended his trip to coincide with the Czechoslovak surrealists’ exhibition, but the plans went awry. The surrealist leader had married the twenty-five-year-old Jacqueline the previous August. Lamba

¹⁰ Teige, Karel/Štoll, Ladislav et al.: *Surrealismus v diskusi*. Sborník. [Surrealism in Discussion. An Anthology.]. Praha 1934 (Knihovna Levé fronty 8).

¹¹ Bydžovská/Srp: *Český surrealismus* 81 (cf. Fn. 5). – For Štyrský’s photographs see *Srp*, Karel: Jindřich Štyrský. Praha 2001.

¹² Teige, Karel: “Surrealismus není uměleckou školou” [Surrealism is Not a School of Art]. In: *První výstava skupiny surrealistů v ČSR: Makovský, Štyrský, Toyen* [First Exhibition of the Group of Surrealists in the Czechoslovak Republic: Makovský, Štyrský, Toyen]. Praha 1935, 3-4. – The full text is now available in English as “Surrealism is Not a School of Art”. In: *Srp/Bydžovská: New Formations: Czech Avant-Garde Art 180-183* (cf. fn. 1). (Emphasis in the original).

¹³ This is now available in English as Nezval, Vítězslav: “Systematic Investigation of Reality through the Reconstruction of the Object, Hallucination, and Illusion”. In: *Srp/Bydžovská: New Formations: Czech Avant-Garde Art 183-187* (cf. fn. 1).

is the heroine of the incandescent “L’Amour fou” (Mad Love), which was serialized in “Minotaure” from 1934 and published in book form in 1937. The bride stripped bare for her guests and Man Ray’s camera at the wedding picnic in a recreation of Manet’s “Déjeuner sur l’herbe”.¹⁴ Éluard married his own fiancée Nusch a week later, bringing to a close the long-drawn-out saga of his break-up with his teenage sweetheart Gala, who left him for Salvador Dalí in 1929. Whether or not André’s and Jacqueline’s daughter Aube was conceived in Prague, as Angelo Maria Ripellino asserts,¹⁵ “l’amour fou” seems to have cast a pervasive spell over both the trip and how it was remembered.

Despite plans to return for a longer stay,¹⁶ this would be Breton’s only visit to the city. The surrealists stayed in Czechoslovakia for two weeks, in the course of which they also visited the Moravian capital Brno and the spa resorts of Karlovy Vary and Mariánské Lázně. Despite a packed schedule in Prague they did plenty of exploring, mostly on foot. Among the locations they visited were Úvoz, Hradčany (Prague Castle) – where Breton fell in love with the miniature houses of the so-called Street of the Alchemists, Zlatá ulička (Golden Lane) – Kampa Island, Charles Bridge (Karlův most), the Jewish quarter, and the Old Town Square (Staroměstské náměstí). They were entranced by the city’s house signs, stone or plaster bas-reliefs that identified buildings in the days before 1770 when they were ordered to be numbered – “surrealist objects,” Vítězslav Nezval thought, “with latent sexual significance.”¹⁷ Éluard also found hidden meaning in puppets (a centuries-old Czech pastime) and painted eggs (Easter was coming up on April 21). Had he known what he was looking at, he might have pondered the sexual significance of the gaily ribboned “pomlázky,” plaited willow switches that would have been for sale on the market stalls in the weeks leading up to Easter. Czech boys traditionally use them to warm up Czech girls’ bottoms on Easter Monday, and the girls give them the eggs in return.

Always adept at turning places into topoi (consider what he does with Tenerife in “Mad Love” or the Gaspé Peninsula in “Arcane 17”),¹⁸ Breton detected an uncanny affinity between Prague and surrealism almost as soon as he laid eyes on the Bohemian capital. “I am very happy to be speaking today,” he began his 29 March lecture on “The Surrealist Situation of the Object” at the Mánes Gallery, “in a city outside of France which yesterday was still unknown to me, but which of all the cities I had

¹⁴ *Anglioviel de la Beaumelle*, Agnès/Monod-Fontaine, Isabelle/Schweigsuth, Claude (eds.): André Breton: La beauté convulsive. Catalogue to accompany exhibition held at the Musée national d’art moderne, 25 April-26 August 1991. Paris 1991, 214.

¹⁵ *Ripellino*, Angelo Maria: Magic Prague. Ed. by Michael Henry Heim, trans. David Newton Marinelli. Berkeley 1994, 57.

¹⁶ Breton spoke of his plans to spend “several years in Prague (or Mexico)” in a letter to Nezval of 25 August 1936. *Krubličová, Marie/Vinařová, Milena/Tomek, Lubomír* (eds.): Korespondence Vítězslava Nezvala: depeše z konce tisíciletí [Letters of Vítězslav Nezval: Dispatches from the End of the Millennium]. Praha 1981, 95.

¹⁷ Nezval, diary entry, 2 April 1935. In: *Bydžovská/Srp: Český surrealismus 82* (cf. fn. 1). Other details in this paragraph are derived from the same source.

¹⁸ *Breton*, André: Mad Love. Trans. Mary Ann Caws. Lincoln 1987. – *Breton*, André: Arcanum 17. Trans. Zack Rogow. Los Angeles 1994.

not visited, was by far the least foreign to me.” In a passage that is as opaque as it is illuminating, he went on to explain that

Prague with its legendary charms is, in fact, one of those cities that electively pin down poetic thought, which is always more or less adrift in space. Completely apart from the geographical, historical, and economic considerations that this city and its inhabitants may lend themselves to, when viewed from a distance, with her towers that bristle like no others, it seems to me to be the magic capital of old Europe. By the very fact that it carefully incubates all the delights of the past for the imagination, it seems to me that it would be less difficult for me to make myself understood in this corner of the world than any other.¹⁹

Certainly the city gave the visitors an extraordinarily warm reception. Hundreds of people turned out to hear their lectures.²⁰ They broadcast on the radio,²¹ gave interviews to the press,²² and signed Czech translations of their books. Even the popular magazine “Světobor” (World Outlook) ran a cover feature to coincide with their presence in town, illustrated with collages by Marie Stachová, entitled “The Victory of the Surrealist Revolution” – though it is probably fair to add that the spread fitted into a long Czech tradition of April Fools’ Day spoofs.²³ Such appeared to be the intellectual and political consonances between the French and the Czech surrealists that Breton may well have felt that their meeting was preordained by “objective chance” (*hasard objectif*). He left Prague, he wrote Nezval on his return to Paris, with

[...] this very rare certainty that I would take away from this city and from you all one of the most beautiful memories of my life. You know, don’t you, that I am completely behind you, that I would do *everything* for you, that you are my best friends. You are men. When I think of intelligence, of beauty, of nobility, of the future, your faces will be the first that appear before me.²⁴

One immediate outcome of this love fest was the bilingual “Bulletin international du surréalisme” (Mezinárodní bulletin surrealismu), a project Nezval says originated over dinner at the Mánes Gallery on April 5 and Éluard reckoned “very important.”²⁵ The “Bulletin” marked the beginning of the official internationalization of the surrealist movement. The first issue was published in a dual-column French and

¹⁹ Breton, André: “Surrealist Situation of the Object: Situation of the Surrealist Object”. In: *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor 1972, 255.

²⁰ See the report in *Rudé Právo*, 3 April 1935. In: *Zvěrokruh* 127 (cf. fn. 2). – Éluard’s letter to Gala, 7–8 April 1935. In: *Éluard*, Paul: *Lettres à Gala 1924–1948*. Paris 1984, 253.

²¹ Breton’s talk on Radiojournal Brno, recorded on 5 April 1945, is included in: *Zvěrokruh* 203 (cf. fn. 2). It is notable, among other things, for his insistence that “surreality is contained in reality itself.”

²² “Interview with Haló-noviny.” In: *Breton, André: What Is Surrealism? Selected Writings*. Book 2. Ed. by Franklin Rosemont. New York 1978, 141–143.

²³ *Světobor* 35 (1935) 13, 28 March 1935. – Stachová’s cover is reproduced in *Toman*, Jindřich: *Foto/montáž tiskem [Photo/Montage in Print]*. Praha 2009, 69.

²⁴ Breton to Nezval, 14 April 1935. In: *Anglioviel de la Beaumelle/Monod-Fontaine/Schweigsuth* (eds.): *André Breton 225* (cf. fn. 14). (Emphasis in the original). – The full text (in Czech translation) can be found in: *Korespondence Vítězslava Nezvala* 81–83 (cf. fn. 16).

²⁵ Nezval, diary entry, 5 April 1935. In: *Bydžovská/Srp: Český surrealismus* 83 (cf. fn. 5). – Éluard to Gala, 7–8 April 1935. In: *Éluard: Lettres à Gala 1924–1948*, 253 (cf. fn. 20).



Fig. 1: Marie Stachová: “Po vítězné revoluci surrealismu” [“After the Victorious Surrealist Revolution”]. Photomontage cover for Světozor, 1 April 1935. Archive of Jindřich Toman.

Czech bilingual edition in Prague on April 20.²⁶ The second number (in French and Spanish) followed in Tenerife in May, the third in Brussels in August. The fourth (in French and English) was published in London in May 1936, a month before an International Surrealist Exhibition opened at the New Burlington Galleries. Breton hailed the London show as “the highest point in the graph of the *influence* of our movement, a graph which has risen with ever increasing rapidity during recent years.”²⁷ He would probably have been as gratified to learn of the world premiere a year

²⁶ The Bulletin was officially dated April 9. Bulletin internationale du surréalisme/Mezinárodní bulletin surrealismu, 9 April 1935. In: Zvěrokruh 121-132 (cf. fn. 2).

²⁷ Breton, André: “Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism.” In Read, Herbert (ed.): Surrealism. New York 1937, 93-116, 95. (Emphasis in the original).

earlier of his play “Le Trésor des Jesuites” (The Jesuits’ Treasure, with Louis Aragon, 1928) at the Nové divadlo (New Theater) on Wenceslas Square. Jindřich Honzl directed the production, Jindřich Štyrský designed the stage-sets, and Jaroslav Ježek composed the music. “The whole surrealist atmosphere of the evening was excellent,” Nezval wrote Éluard afterwards. He made a point of adding: “We were well received in the communist press.”²⁸

It was not only the “delights of the past” that made the French surrealists’ visit to Prague so memorable. What most astounded Breton and Éluard was the cordial relations the Czech surrealists appeared to enjoy with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana Československa, KSČ), which contrasted sharply with their own dismal relations with the French Communist Party (PCF). Alongside Nezval’s letter to Breton promising cooperation between Devětsil and the French surrealists, “Surrealism in the Czechoslovak Republic” was prefaced with a letter to the agitprop section of the KSČ announcing the group’s readiness to put themselves at the service of the proletarian struggle “in writing, speech, drawing, painting, the plastic arts, theater, and life itself”, a commitment it reckoned to be “the first success of surrealism in Czechoslovakia.”²⁹ Unlike in Paris (where, Breton sniffed, “L’Humanité” made a specialty out of translating Mayakovsky’s poems into doggerel”),³⁰ in Prague the gesture seemed to be appreciated. Reviewing Honzl’s and Nezval’s Czech translation of Breton’s “Communicating Vessels” (“Les Vases communicants”, 1933) in “Doba” (Time), the KSČ journalist Závěš Kalandra argued that

The Marxist critics who condemn surrealism [would] be right if in his study André Breton had separated the human individual in his “eternal” subjectivity from the historically and class conditioned individual in his process of ceaseless social change. But Breton never made these mistakes [...] in this marvelous poetic book of surrealism there is a *scientific* act.³¹

“This trip is a revelation,” Éluard wrote Gala:

Their situation in the Communist Party is exceptional. Teige edits the only communist periodical in Czechoslovakia. In every issue there are one or more articles about surrealism. [...] Our photos in the magazines, the laudatory articles in the communist newspapers, the interviews, I believe that for us Prague is the gate to Moscow [...].³²

3

Let me at this point interject a dissonant note into this rose-tinted narrative. Breton’s boast in his Mánes lecture that, “constantly interpreted by Teige in the most lively way, made to undergo an all-powerful lyric thrust by Nezval, Surrealism can flatter

²⁸ Nezval to Éluard, 19 May 1935. In: Korespondence Vítězslava Nezvala 136 (cf. fn. 16). – The premiere took place as part of a “Surrealist Evening” on 17 May 1935.

²⁹ Letter to Ústřední agitprop KSČ [KSČ Agitprop Center], 19 March 1934. In: Zvěrokruh 115 (cf. fn. 2). – The author of the letter (and the manifesto) was Nezval.

³⁰ Breton, André: “The Political Position of Today’s Art.” In: Manifestoes of Surrealism 214 (cf. fn. 19).

³¹ Závěš Kalandra, as quoted in Bulletin internationale du surréalisme/Mezinárodní bulletin surrealismu 1 (1935) 4-5. In: Zvěrokruh 124-125 (cf. fn. 2). (Emphasis in the original).

³² Éluard to Gala, 7-8 April 1935. In: *Éluard: Lettres à Gala* 1924-1948, 252-253 (cf. fn. 20). – The magazine to which Éluard refers is “Tvorba”.

itself that it has blossomed in Prague as it has in Paris,” was undoubtedly justified. His assurance that, “For many long years I have enjoyed perfect intellectual fellowship with men such as Vítězslav Nezval and Karel Teige,”³³ on the other hand, was a good deal more dubious. Despite their usual reverence for the “center of science and art, focus of contemporary culture, cradle of modern architecture” (to quote a 1929 advertisement in Devětsil’s magazine “ReD” for Štyrský and Toyen’s “Guide to Paris and its Environs”),³⁴ surrealism was one Parisian trend to which the Prague avant-garde initially proved highly resistant. Ivan Goll’s Apollinairean version of “sur-réalité” long held greater sway in the Bohemian capital than André Breton’s.³⁵

When they were living in Paris in 1926-1929, Štyrský and Toyen adopted the label “Artificialist” in order to distance themselves from surrealism, which they accused of “formally historicizing painting.”³⁶ Reviewing their latest work for “ReD” in 1928, Teige sneered that surrealism “is too indebted to Böcklin and expressionism, and, unable to utilize the unlimited possibilities that are the legacy of cubism, degenerated into literary and formal historicism.” Štyrský and Toyen called their canvases Artificialist, he explains, in order to highlight their “complete independence toward the natural world as well as their complete lack of subordination to the forces of the subconscious.”³⁷ Breton, of course, had identified “pure psychic automatism” in the first “Manifesto of Surrealism” as *the* hallmark of surrealist activity.³⁸ There were obvious affinities between Czech poetism and French surrealism – affinities that came to look all too obvious, perhaps, when viewed through the dreams and desires of both parties in the spring of 1935. But such proto-surrealist elements as we might retrospectively detect in, say, Devětsil’s picture-poems or the unfettered wordplay of Nezval’s “Pantomima” (Pantomime, 1924) masked a profound difference of sensibility.

Artificialist paintings, Teige stresses, are “realized in the full radiance of consciousness”:

³³ Breton, André: “Surrealist Situation of the Object.” In: *Manifestoes of Surrealism* 256 (cf. fn. 19).

³⁴ Štyrský, Jindřich/Toyen/Nečas, Vincenc: *Průvodce Paříží a okolím* [Guide to Paris and Vicinity]. Praha 1927; advertisement in: *ReD* 2 (1929) 9, 292.

³⁵ For fuller discussion of Goll’s influence on Devětsil, see Witkovsky, Matthew S.: *Surrealism in the Plural: Guillaume Apollinaire, Ivan Goll and Devětsil in the 1920s*. In: *Papers of Surrealism* (2004) No. 2, available at <http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal2/index.htm> (last retrieved on 08.05.2012).

³⁶ Štyrský, Jindřich/Toyen: “Artificielismus” [Artificialism]. In: *ReD* 1 (1927) 1, 28-30. Translated in: Benson, Timothy O./Forgacs, Eva (eds.): *Between Worlds: a Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes 1910-1930*. Los Angeles 2002, 589-590.

³⁷ Teige, Karel: *Ultrafialové obrazy, čili artificielismus* (poznámka k obrazům Štyrského & Toyen) [Ultraviolet Images, or Artificialism (Comment on the Pictures of Štyrský and Toyen)]. In: *ReD* 1 (1927-1928) 9, 315-317. Translated in: Benson/Forgacs (eds.): *Between Worlds*, 601-603 (cf. fn. 36).

³⁸ “SURREALISM, *n.* psychic 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 functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.” Breton: *Manifesto of Surrealism* 26 (cf. fn. 19).

Fig. 2: Dust jacket for Štyrský, Jindřich / Toyen / Nečas, Vincenc: *Průvodce Paříží a okolím* [Guide to Paris and Vicinity]. Prague: Odeon 1927.

Anonymous author. Archive of Jindřich Toman.



[...] the poetry of a new reality, new flowers, new lights, they direct a film of excitement and emotion, they create an *ultraviolet, superconscious world*; they are magical and enchanting works, unforgettable jewels, the colored mist of a new dawn of poetry breaking before us. Toyen's and Štyrský's artificialism, deeply linked to Nezval's poetism, lives in the certainty that *the most artificial existence fosters the least illusion and the greatest happiness*. The poetry of colorful games, transfigured, made up, abstract, and of future memories; this is not a passive recording of the subconscious, nor is it astrology or the interpretation of dreams. It is creation, it is invention, it is a poem: a work, a fact, a fruit of poetic super consciousness.³⁹

He dismissed the first edition of Breton's "Surrealism and Painting" that same year as "a deviation from the trail blazed by cubism [...] which today, as the night of surrealism draws to its end, we can consider closed."⁴⁰ A modernist to his fingertips, the Devětsil leader had no time for Prague's "legendary charms." He was, after all, a

³⁹ Teige: *Ultrafialové obrazy* 601-602 (cf. fn. 37). (Emphasis in the original).

⁴⁰ Teige, Karel: *Surréalistické malířství* [Surrealist Painting]. In: *ReD* 2 (1928) 1, 26-27.

founder of the Club for New Prague (Klub za novou Prahu), whose very name satirizes the Club for Old Prague (Klub za starou Prahu) established in 1900 to protect the city's historic heritage against planners and developers. It says much about where Teige was coming from that on his first visit to Paris in 1922 he sought out the editors not of the proto-surrealist "Littérature" but the super-rationalist "L'Ésprit nouveau", Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant, whom he persuaded to contribute to Devětsil's groundbreaking anthology "Život" (Life).⁴¹

It is ironic that it should have been the "Second Manifesto", published in December 1929, that opened the door to rapprochement between Devětsil and the French surrealists, for among those targeted in Breton's acerbic text were some of Devětsil's closest Parisian contacts. Philippe Soupault, whom Breton forced out of the Paris surrealist group at the end of 1926,⁴² met Karel Teige during a visit to Prague with the young writer Roger Vailland in April 1927. Vailland mistook Teige for "the head of the Czech surrealists," which would hardly have pleased the Devětsil leader at the time.⁴³ Along with Roger Gilbert-Lecomte and René Daumal, Vailland was a founder of the dissident surrealist group Le Grand Jeu. The expatriate Czech painter Josef Šíma (who was largely responsible for the Parisian representation in the "Poesie 1932" exhibition) was involved with the same group. Šíma translated Nezval's "Acrobat" for Le Grand Jeu's eponymously titled magazine in 1929, for which he also designed the cover.⁴⁴ "ReD" repaid the favor the following year by devoting a special issue to Le Grand Jeu.⁴⁵ Teige and Soupault went on to collaborate on a Czech translation of the Comte de Lautréamont's "Chants de Maldoror", which was published in 1929 with illustrations by Štyrský. The censors promptly confiscated the book, which was held to be repugnant to public morality. Soupault and Le Grand Jeu angrily denounced the ban, but Breton remained silent. His reticence became clearer when later that year he repudiated these and other former associates of surrealism in the "Second Manifesto". René Daumal angrily responded with an "Open Letter to André Breton,"⁴⁶ which was pointedly followed with a reprint of the

⁴¹ Krejcar, Jaromír (ed.): *Život II. Sborník nové krásy* [Life II. A Collection of New Beauty]. Praha 1922. – Corbusier and Ozenfant's "Architecture and Purism," the magazine boasted, "was written especially for *La Vie*." This article was carried in French alone. Corbusier and Ozenfant's second contribution, entitled "Le Purisme," was also previously unpublished. The latter was carried in the original French and in Czech translation by Karel Teige as the opening item of the volume.

⁴² See Polizzotti, Mark: *Revolution of the Mind: the Life of André Breton*. New York 1997, 273-274.

⁴³ Roger Vailland's undated letter to Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, quoted in Huebner, Karla T.: *Eroticism, Identity, and Cultural Context: Toyen and the Prague Avant-Garde*. PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh 2008, 115-116.

⁴⁴ *Le Grand Jeu* 2 (1929). Collection complète, facsimile reprint. Paris 1977 (Editions Jean-Marcel Place), 33-36. – Šíma also translated Seifert's "Le tableau frais" in *Le Grand Jeu* 1 (1928) 30-32. – For background, see Pagé, Suzanne et al: *Sima/Le Grand Jeu*. Paris 1992. – *Feuerhahn*, Nelly et al: *Grand Jeu et surréalisme*. Reims, Paris, Prague. Reims 2003.

⁴⁵ *ReD* 3 (1930) 8, 225-226. The issue includes a translation of the French group's manifesto.

⁴⁶ *Daumal*, René: *Lettre ouverte à André Breton*. In: *Le Grand Jeu* 3 (1930) 76-83. Ironically, one of Breton's criticisms of Le Grand Jeu was their insufficient attention to Lautréamont.

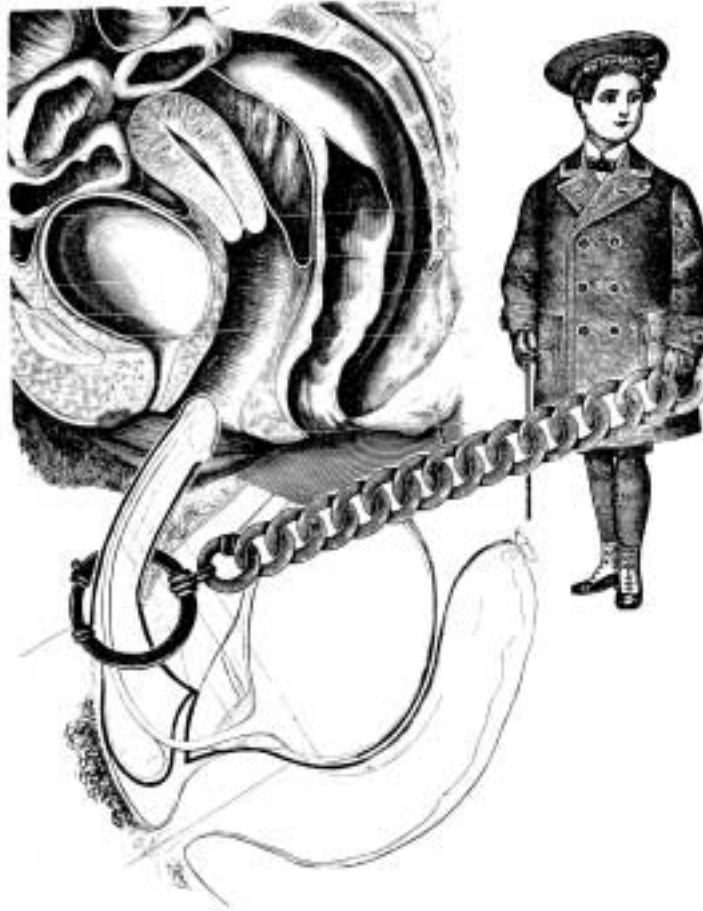


Fig. 3: Jindřich Štyrský, illustration for Vítězslav Nezval: *Sexuální nokturno* [Sexual Nocturne]. Praha 1931 (Edice 69).

group's protest in "ReD" against "the Czech Anastasia who excommunicates Mal-doror for absence of pants when he has wings."⁴⁷

But with the onset of the 1930s, Devětsil's "easy-going, mischievous, fantastic, playful, non-heroic, and erotic" art (as Teige described it in his first "Poetist Manifesto" of 1924)⁴⁸ began to look more and more out of tune with the times. "When

⁴⁷ Le Grand Jeu 3 (1930) 87.

⁴⁸ Teige, Karel: Poetismus [Poetism]. In: Host 3 (1924) 9-10, 197-204. In: Teige, Karel: Výbor z díla 1. Svět stavby a básně: studie z 20. let [Selected Works 1. The World of Building and Poetry. Studies from the 1920s]. Praha 1966, 123. This manifesto is translated in Benson/ Forgacs: *Between Worlds* 579-582 (cf. fn. 36).

the city clocks chime the approaching midnight of the old order,” he later explained, “poetry cannot be the song of a bird, the intoxication of the summer sun; it is a mouth spewing out blood, a crater overflowing with lava in which the Pompeii of luxury and piracy will perish, a geyser of forces against which the censor of social morality will be powerless.”⁴⁹ The KSČ, which was engaged in a vigorous campaign of “Bolshevization” under its new leader Klement Gottwald, showed which way the wind was blowing when it expelled the writers Josef Hora, Marie Majerová, Helena Malířová, the veteran communist poet S. K. Neumann, Ivan Olbracht, Jaroslav Seifert, and Vladislav Vančura from its ranks in 1929 for their “radically petty-bourgeois views.” Teige, Nezval, Konstantín Biebl, and František Halas were among those who publicly denounced the “grave error” of the Seven, as they became known, “not in order to correct their mistake – but to emphasize that here our ways part.”⁵⁰

When Devětsil finally collapsed in 1931 the Left Front – a broadly-based coalition of artists and intellectuals formed in 1929 to defend “modern views and interests against conservatism and reaction”⁵¹ – took its place in Prague’s cultural life. Teige was the Front’s first president, though S. K. Neumann (who had by then dutifully returned to the Bolshevik fold) would soon replace him. In Paris, meantime, Breton, Aragon, and Éluard joined the PCF⁵² and “La Révolution surréaliste” was succeeded by “Surréalisme au service de la Révolution”. Teige soon hailed the “new stage of surrealism” inaugurated by the “Second Manifesto” – the same text that Nezval chose to translate in “Zvěrokruh”. “The surrealist movement, and especially the group led by André Breton,” he argued in 1931, “is not only the most radical avant garde in today’s confused so-called artistic and cultural world, but it is almost the only intellectual current in contemporary French literature which has weight, which has historical significance.” What had made him change his mind, he made clear, was not any artistic considerations but Breton’s acceptance of “dialectical materialism as a world view.”⁵³

4

Politely requested by the Mánes Artists’ Society committee to give an “apolitical” talk that focused on “the artistic and poetic side of surrealism,”⁵⁴ Breton confined

⁴⁹ Teige, Karel: *Od artificialismu k surrealismu* [From Artificialism to Surrealism]. Introduction to his monograph “Štyrský a Toyen” [Štyrský and Toyen] (Prague 1938). In: *Teige: Výbor z díla* 2, 442–468, 465 (cf. fn. 8).

⁵⁰ Zásadní stanovisko k projevu “Sedmi” [Fundamental Standpoint toward the Proclamation of the “Seven”]. In: *Tvorba* 4 (1929), reprinted in: *Vlašín, Štěpán et al. (eds.): Avantgarda známá a neznámá 3. Generační diskuse 1929–1931*. [The Known and Unknown Avantgarde 3. The Generational Discussion 1929–1931]. Praha 1972, 54–55.

⁵¹ Levá fronta [Left Front]. In: *Vlašín: Avantgarda známá a neznámá 3*, 121. Originally published in: *ReD* 3 (1929) 2, 48. The text is translated in *Benson/Foragcs: Between Worlds* 678–679 (cf. fn. 36).

⁵² Breton and Éluard were expelled from the PCF in 1933.

⁵³ Teige, Karel: *Nová etapa surrealismu* [A New Stage of Surrealism]. In: *Rozpravy Aventina* 6 (1931) 39–40, excerpts in: *Teige: Výbor z díla* 2, 593–594 (cf. fn. 8).

⁵⁴ SVU (Spolek výtvarných umělců [Society of Creative Artists]) Mánes, committee meeting minutes of December 6, 1934, quoted in *Bydžovská/Srp: Český surrealismus* 80 (cf. fn. 5).

his Mánes Gallery lecture to surrealist aesthetics – if that is quite the right word. His lecture two days later at the City Library, by contrast, addressed “The Political Position of Today’s Art” head on. Given the recent cultural policies of the Soviet Union, he argued, avant-garde artists who wished to serve the proletarian cause faced a

[...] choice between two abdications: either they must give up interpreting and expressing the world in the ways that each of them finds the secret of within himself and himself alone – it is his very chance of enduring that is at stake – or they must give up collaborating on the practical plan of action for changing this world.⁵⁵

It was not a message his Left Front audience would have greatly wanted to hear, but it proved to be uncannily prophetic.

When Nezval, Štyrský, and Toyen visited Paris later that summer Breton and Éluard amply repaid the hospitality they had been shown in Prague. Nezval met Benjamin Péret, Oscar Dominguez, Dora Maar, Claude Cahun and her stepsister and lover Suzanne Malherbe, Joan Miró, Gisèle Prassinos, and Yves Tanguy, who gave him a treasured watercolor. He visited the studios of Man Ray (who took his and Toyen’s pictures), Salvador Dalí, and Max Ernst, where to his delight he was introduced to Marcel Duchamp. He was amazed to discover that Duchamp, “the legendary precursor of modern painting and surrealism,” had visited Prague for a chess tournament “unknown and unrecognized by anybody.” The thought gave yet another layer of meaning to a familiar landscape that the inventor of the term “surréalisme,” Guillaume Apollinaire, had already made him see through new eyes.⁵⁶ “That’s how poetic beauty works,” he marveled. “It transforms for us the cities, the pubs, the whole world.”⁵⁷

The aim of Nezval’s visit, as he makes clear in his memoir “Ulice Gît-le-Coeur” (Gît-le-Coeur Street, 1936), was to spend more time with Breton and Éluard and renew “the magic that had never deserted us throughout all the days of their stay in Prague.” But the occasion for his journey was the communist-sponsored First International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, to which he had been invited as the sole Czechoslovak delegate. It was a gathering Nezval anticipated “with reluctance;” only the presence of René Crevel in the organizing committee gave him any hope that the surrealist viewpoint would be adequately represented.⁵⁸ Tensions between surrealists and communists – some of whom, like Louis Aragon and Tristan Tzara, were themselves former surrealists – were then running high. On the night of their arrival the Czechs witnessed Breton’s assault on the Boulevard

⁵⁵ Breton, André: The Political Position of Today’s Art. In: Manifestoes of Surrealism 214 (cf. fn. 19).

⁵⁶ “I cannot overemphasize the fact that it was he [Apollinaire] and only he, his chimerically veiled eyes, who taught me to look differently at everything that until then had been merely the subject of Old Prague tales.” Nezval, Vítězslav: Pražský chodec [Prague Pedestrian]. Praha 1938, 190. – Earlier in the book Nezval credits Apollinaire with arousing in him “a new sensibility” (“nový cit”) toward the city. *Ibid.* 19.

⁵⁷ Nezval, Vítězslav: Ulice Gît-le-Cœur [Gît-le-Coeur Street]. Praha 1936, 48. Other details in this paragraph are drawn from this same source.

⁵⁸ Nezval: Ulice Gît-le-Cœur 10 (cf. fn. 57).

Montparnasse on the Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg, who had publicly accused the surrealists of being “too busy studying pederasty and dreams” to do an honest day’s work.⁵⁹ The punch-up led to Breton being banned from speaking at the Congress. After trying unsuccessfully to negotiate a compromise, Crevel closed his windows on the night of 18 June and turned on his gas oven.⁶⁰

Nezval believed that he might have been able to prevent Crevel’s suicide had he only listened to Paul Éluard’s urgings the evening before and phoned the troubled French poet. Instead, he put off the call until “tomorrow, the next day, whenever,”⁶¹ and headed out toward the Porte St. Denis in search of “the obscure rue Blondel, No. 32, where there is one of those houses that bears the name Aux belles Poules.” He is probably right that Breton would never have dreamed of setting foot in such dives, “where you are greeted by ten or more naked women, who draw your attention to their droopy charms, cackling like a gaggle of geese.”⁶² “I saw the perspectives that could have arisen from my meeting with Crevel,” Nezval goes on, “I saw [...] what great consolation and support I could have been able to give with a few words.”⁶³ In Prague, he could have told René, surrealists and communists got along: indeed Crevel’s “Les pieds dans le plat” (Putting My Foot in It, 1933) was the object of serious debate in the KSČ press.⁶⁴ In deference to Crevel’s memory, the organizing committee permitted Breton’s address to be delivered so long as it was read by somebody else.⁶⁵ Paul Éluard rose among catcalls and whistles to a half-empty hall well after midnight, expecting the lights to be turned off at any moment.⁶⁶ Reporting on these events in “Surrealismus” a few months later, Nezval presciently observed: “the defense of culture is first and foremost the defense of freedom of speech.”⁶⁷ He, too, had been prevented from delivering his prepared address to the Congress.⁶⁸

These events proved to be the last straw that led Breton to break definitively with the PCF. His tract “The Time When the Surrealists Were Right”, which was adopted by the Paris surrealist group on 2 June, ended with a denunciation of “the present

⁵⁹ *Ehrenburg*, Ilya: *Vus par un écrivain d’ U.R.S.S.* (1934), quoted in *Polizzotti*: *Revolution of the Mind* 418 (cf. fn. 42). – The altercation on the Boulevard Montparnasse is described in *Nezval*: *Ulice Gît-le-Coeur* 14.

⁶⁰ *Polizzotti*: *Revolution of the Mind* 419 (cf. fn. 42).

⁶¹ *Nezval*: *Ulice Gît-le-Coeur* 36–37 (cf. fn. 57).

⁶² *Nezval*: *Ulice Gît-le-Coeur* 34 (cf. fn. 57).

⁶³ *Nezval*: *Ulice Gît-le-Coeur* 38 (cf. fn. 57).

⁶⁴ See Karel Teige’s discussion in “Socialistický realismus a surrealismus” [Socialist Realism and Surrealism]. In: *Socialistický realismus* [Socialist Realism]. Praha 1935 (Knihovna Levý fronty 9). Reprinted in: *Teige*: *Výbor z díla* 2, 241–243 (cf. fn. 8).

⁶⁵ *Breton*, André: *Speech to the Congress of Writers* (1935). In: *Manifestoes of Surrealism* 234–241 (cf. fn. 19).

⁶⁶ See *Nezval*: *Ulice Gît-le-Coeur* 82–84 (cf. fn. 57).

⁶⁷ *Nezval*, Vítězslav: *Předpoklady Mezinárodního kongresu na obranu kultury* [Assumptions of the International Congress for the Defense of Culture]. In: *Surrealismus* 1 (1936) 25. In: *Zvěrokruh* 160 (cf. fn. 2).

⁶⁸ The speech he had planned to deliver (which Benjamin Péret had helped him translate) is reproduced in full in: *Nezval*: *Ulice Gît-le-Coeur* 59–67 (cf. fn. 57); pp. 61–64 consist largely of quotations from Kalandra’s review.

regime of Soviet Russia and the all-powerful head under whom this regime is turning into the very negation of what it should be and what it has been.”⁶⁹ Besides Breton and Éluard, the twenty-six signatories included Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Dora Maar, René Magritte, Benjamin Péret, Meret Oppenheim, Man Ray, and Yves Tanguy. The Paris surrealists were among the first left-wing intellectuals in Europe to reject Stalinism; this was before the full-frontal Soviet assault on “bourgeois formalism” and the Moscow trials, which respectively began in January and August of the following year. When “The Time When the Surrealists Were Right” was reprinted that November in “The Political Position of Surrealism”, it was accompanied by Breton’s two Prague lectures and an interview with the KSČ paper “Haló-noviny” (Hello-News).⁷⁰ Clearly he regarded them as important statements of his position.

Nezval was present at the meeting on 2 June. Three days later he said his goodbyes to André and Jacqueline, Paul and Nusch, Yves Tanguy, and “dear Benjamin Péret” at the Gare de l’Est. He went home full of forebodings. He was, after all, a longtime KSČ member. “Nothing is sadder than to part with mortals,” he reflected,

[...] if a person is himself predestined for death. Some slight thing may result in our never meeting again. Some trifling mistake may put between us, standing here, embraced in friendship, a wall as thick as eternity. Some trifling mistake, some insignificant circumstance, may bring it about that we never again form a magical constellation with our embracing eyes.⁷¹

Back in Prague, the Czech surrealists declined to endorse the Parisians’ declaration.⁷² Although, Nezval explained to Breton, he personally would have been prepared to sign “your admirable manifesto,” to do so would jeopardize “relations between the group and the Communist Party, which grants the group freedom of opinion.”⁷³ “After the surrealists’ manifesto came out,” he later admitted, “I regretted that the Czech surrealist group had not gone along with it in exactly the same way.”⁷⁴ But ironically it would be Nezval, not the rest of the group, who in the end would choose the KSČ over surrealism.

The next three years witnessed a high tide of surrealism both internationally and in Prague, but Breton’s choice of abdications could not be staved off forever. Štyrský and Toyen participated in the London (1936) and Paris (1938) surrealist exhibitions, huge spectacles that catapulted the movement – for good or ill – onto a global public stage. Nezval wrote prolifically, publishing several collections of poetry as well as

⁶⁹ Breton, André (and 21 others): On the Time When the Surrealists Were Right. In: Manifestoes of Surrealism 253 (cf. fn. 19).

⁷⁰ Breton, André: Position politique du Surréalisme. Paris 1935.

⁷¹ Nezval: Ulice Gît-le-Coeur 120-121 (cf. fn. 57).

⁷² Nezval, Štyrský, Toyen, and Brouk were in favor, Teige and Biebl against. Several members of the group could not be consulted. At Toyen’s suggestion, it was agreed that the group would sign the manifesto neither collectively nor as individuals, since “the Paris group was particular about obtaining the unanimous agreement of the *whole* Czechoslovak Surrealist Group and in no way the individual signatures of several of its members.” Teige et al.: Surrealismus proti proudu. In: Teige: Výbor z díla 2, 529 (cf. fn. 8).

⁷³ Nezval to Breton, sometime after 7 September 1935. In: Korespondence Vítězslava Nezvala 85 (cf. fn. 16).

⁷⁴ Nezval: Ulice Gît-le-Coeur 111-112 (cf. fn. 57).

“Ulice Gît-Le-Coeur” and its sequel “Prague Pedestrian” (Pražský chodec, 1938). Together with his verse collection “Prague in Fingers of Rain” (Praha s prsty deště, 1936),⁷⁵ “Pražský chodec” is the only serious attempt by any member of the original Czechoslovak Surrealist Group to follow Breton in mapping out a “surrealist Prague,” which perhaps says something about the credibility of the notion. The book’s title derives from Apollinaire’s short story “Le Passant de Prague,” a work inspired by the French poet’s own visit to the city in 1902.⁷⁶ It completed the “surrealist trilogy” of Nezval’s autobiographical works, clearly inspired by Breton’s “Nadja,” which began with “Invisible Moscow” (Neviditelná Moskva) in 1935.

Nezval also edited “Neither the Swan Nor the Moon” (Ani labut’ ani Lúna, 1936), an anthology containing contributions from members and collaborators of the group which attacked the hypocrisy of the same bourgeois regime organizing lavish celebrations of the centennial of the death of Karl Hynek Mácha as had previously censored the great romantic poet’s sexually explicit diaries and banned Lautréamont’s “Maldoror”.⁷⁷ Among the contributors to “Ani labut’” was Závěš Kalandra, who was expelled from the KSČ the same year because of his opposition to the Moscow Trials. Teige was equally appalled at the Moscow verdicts,⁷⁸ and increasingly dismayed at Soviet and KSČ cultural policy. The following January he publicly defended André Gide’s “Return from the Soviet Union”, which had angered the left in Prague as elsewhere in Europe, as “a book of *unblinkered* love and *critical* friendship,” “inspired by a deep and sincere sympathy for the world’s first workers’ state and for the struggle and aims of the Soviet and western proletariat.” “An atmosphere of free criticism,” he insisted, “safeguards against bureaucratization, corruption, superficiality, and officialization (zoficiálnění), just as silencing of criticism and encouragement for uncritical eulogies leads to passivity and comas [...]”.⁷⁹

Introducing another Štyrský and Toyen exhibition at Topič’s Salon in January 1938, Teige attacked “the wave of terror aimed at those works which are called ‘degenerate art’ in Germany and ‘monstrous formalism’ in the Soviet Union.” He no longer saw any meaningful distinction between

⁷⁵ Nezval, Vítězslav: Praha s prsty deště [Prague with Fingers of Rain]. Praha 1936. – This is available in English as: Prague with Fingers of Rain. Trans. Ewald Osers. Tarsat 2009.

⁷⁶ Apollinaire, Guillaume: The Wandering Jew. In: The Wandering Jew and Other Stories. Trans. Rémy Inglis Hall. London 1967, 3-16. – A better translation of the French title would be “The Prague Pedestrian” or “The Prague Walker.”

⁷⁷ Doslov [Foreword]. In: Nezval, Vítězslav (ed.): Ani labut’ ani Lúna. Sborník k stému výročí smrti K. H. Máchy [Neither the Swan Nor the Moon. Anthology for the Hundredth Anniversary of the Death of K. H. Mácha]. Praha 1995 (reprint of 1st ed. of 1936), 82-3. – The signatories are Biebl, Brouk, E. F. Burian, Adolf Hoffmeister, Honzl, Ježek, Kalandra, Makovský, Nezval, Laco Novomeský, Štyrský, Teige, and Toyen.

⁷⁸ Teige, Karel: Moskevský proces [The Moscow Trial]. In: Praha - Moskva 1 (1936), reprint-ed in: Teige: Výbor z díla 2, 335-349 (cf. fn. 8).

⁷⁹ Teige, Karel: Projev Karla Teigeho na diskusním večeru Klubu Přítomnost v Praze 13. ledna 1937 [Karel Teige’s Speech at the Discussion Evening of the Přítomnost Club in Prague]. Partly reproduced (from ms. in Památník národního písemnictví) in: Teige: Výbor z díla 2, 626-631 (cf. fn. 8). (Emphasis in the original). – Other participants in the debate included Ladislav Štoll, Závěš Kalandra, and Vladimír Clementis.

[...] the crusade which was simultaneously proclaimed against independent art and the international avant-garde in Berlin and Moscow, in which the “Degenerate Art” exhibition was staged in Munich with howling rhetorical ballyhoo and a success that flustered the organizers, while left front artists in Russian art were comprehensively purged from the Tretjakov Gallery in Moscow and the most significant forum for scenic poetry, Vsevolod Meyerhold’s theater, was sacrificed to the thoughtlessness of the cultural reaction.⁸⁰

Whatever private doubts he might have harbored regarding Soviet cultural policy, Nezval found such a public equation of totalitarianisms unthinkable. “If Karel Teige was able [...] to toss Berlin and Moscow into one basket,” he explained to an audience of communist students, “this testifies not only to a moral, but also – and above all – to an intellectual mistake.”⁸¹ On 9 March 1938 he telephoned “Haló-Noviny” to report that the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group had been “dissolved.” The remaining members met on March 14 and agreed to carry on their activities without him.⁸² Nezval tried to solicit support from the Paris surrealists, but Breton sided with the majority.⁸³

The Paris group would split over the same issues later in the year, with Paul Éluard, in this case, lining up with the Soviet Union. When Breton demanded that the surrealists “commit themselves to sabotaging Éluard’s poetry by any means at their disposal,”⁸⁴ Max Ernst and Man Ray followed the poet out of the group. Forming “a magical constellation with our embracing eyes” no more proved a match for Breton’s choice of abdications in “la ville-lumière” than it had, when the chips were down, in the magic capital of old Europe. And by then the chips emphatically were down. In the midst of these quarrels between old friends, Breton was called up as a medical auxiliary.⁸⁵ What got him drafted was the Munich crisis.

5

Unless we count “Anschluss” Vienna, Prague was the first European capital to be occupied by Hitler’s Wehrmacht, on 15 March 1939, and the last to be liberated by the Soviet Red Army, on 9 May 1945. Toyen’s graphic cycles “Střelnice” (The Shooting Range, 1940) and “Schovej se, válko!” (Hide Yourself War, 1944) are among the dark

⁸⁰ Teige, Karel: Doslov k výstavě Štyrského a Toyen [Foreword to the Exhibition of Štyrský and Toyen]. Praha 1938. In: *Teige: Výbor z díla* 2, 664–665 (cf. fn. 8).

⁸¹ Nezval, Vítězslav: Řeč ke studentstvu o roztržce se skupinou surrealistů 24.3.1938 [Speech to Students on the Breach with the Surrealist Group 24.3.1938]. In: *Tvorba* 13 (1938) 150. Quoted in: Pfaff, Ivan: Česká levice proti Moskvě 1936–1938 [The Czech Left against Moscow 1936–1938]. Praha 1993, 130.

⁸² Schůze surrealistické skupiny v Praze 14.3.1938 [Meeting of the Surrealist Group in Prague 14.3.1938]. In: *Teige: Výbor z díla* 2, 662 (cf. fn. 8).

⁸³ André Breton to Vítězslav Nezval, 18 March 1938. In: Korespondence Vítězslava Nezvala 96–99 (cf. fn. 15). – The full correspondence between the majority (Teige, Štyrský, Toyen, Biebl, Brouk, Honzl) and Breton and Péret is reproduced in facsimile on the DVD accompanying the 8-volume auction catalogue *Breton, André: 42 rue Fontaine, 3: Manuscrits*. Paris 2003, 166, lots 2220 and 2221.

⁸⁴ Jean-Charles Gateau, quoted in *Polizzotti: Revolution of the Mind* 468 (cf. fn. 42).

⁸⁵ Breton, André: *Oeuvres complètes*. 4 vols. Paris 1988–2008. Vol. 2 (1992), lviii. – Breton was called up between 29 September and 8 October 1938.

glories of Czech surrealism. This “strange still-life made out of junk and toys,” wrote Teige of “The Shooting Range”, is “a “Desastres de la Guerra”⁸⁶ of our age.” The drawings are populated with objects from childhood, depicted with minute realism:

Destroyed houses on a lawn built from a children’s toy construction set, bombed out ruins of cities and children killed at play; the torn bodies of birds lying on the ground like shot down airplanes; broken dolls; a school girl, departing somewhere behind the background horizon of the picture; funeral wreaths scattered along the ground around a rickety chair when Paris fell; a puppet theater on which a disembodied finger is suspended limply, plucked poultry set on the stage as at a market stand, slaughtered with their necks dangling down; flyers with sale prices implying that even on the slaughterhouse of history it is possible to do business and make profit; the curtain of a second theater pulled shut, and we don’t know what drama will be performed there [...] All these things, deteriorating and half-rotten, are pregnant with many and distant meanings. Toys from a children’s paradise form scenery for today’s historical tragedy and become the object of our alarm; the age of childhood, the lost paradise of humanity ruined in time’s wild rage. The playful shooting into a fairground target is being transformed into the blood-ridden horror of world catastrophe.⁸⁷

“Pregnant with many and distant meanings” is a phrase that might equally well be applied to the series of collages on which Teige had himself been working since 1935. He never attempted to exhibit or publish these works, showing them or giving them as gifts only to his closest friends. It is tempting to conclude that their very existence is testimony to the growing impossibility of reconciling the personal and the political of which Breton had warned in his lecture to the Left Front. Teige made close to 400 collages between 1935 and his death in 1951, an output that demands comparison with such giants of the genre as Max Ernst, Hannah Höch, or Georges Hugnet. Whether the mood is somber, menacing, playful or melancholic, one motif repeats itself again and again. Women’s bodies (or parts thereof) commandeer the stage of the National Theater, hang upside-down from the dome of Saint Nicholas’s Church on the Old Town Square, and beckon from the diving board at the Barrandov Terraces. Critics predictably differ over the politics of Teige’s “violation, amputation, destruction and reorganization of [female body] parts,” which Vojtěch Lahoda thinks gives the collages “a strange, almost masochistic erotic quality”⁸⁸ – a quality some might think appropriate to a city where Leopold Sacher-Masoch’s father was once Chief of Police. But for me the more interesting question is why Teige should have chosen to take up *this* artistic project, employing *this* visual language, at this stage in his life at all. Here – and arguably only here – Teige actually *feels* like a surrealist.

⁸⁶ Teige is alluding to Francisco Goya’s famous series of prints “The Disasters of War” (Los Desastres de la Guerra), executed between 1810 and 1820.

⁸⁷ Teige, Karel: Střelnice [The Shooting Range]. Trans. William Hollister. In: *Analogon* 37 (2003) I, xiii–xxi. – An alternative English translation (by Kathleen Hayes) is now available as Teige, Karel: The Shooting Gallery. In: *Bydžovská/Srp: New Formations* 235–243 (cf. fn. 1).

⁸⁸ Lahoda, Vojtěch: Teige’s Violation: the Collages of Karel Teige, the Visual Concepts of Avant-Garde and René Magritte. In: *Lahoda, Vojtěch/Srp, Karel/Dačeva, Rumana: Karel Teige: surrealistické koláže 1935–51* [Karel Teige: Surrealist Collages 1935–51]. Praha 1994, 13. – Compare *Toman: Foto/Montáž tiskem* 324 (cf. fn. 23).

Together with the poet and graphic artist Jindřich Heisler,⁸⁹ whom she had hidden in her Žižkov apartment for much of the Occupation, Toyen left for Paris in March 1947. The Czechoslovak Surrealist Group dissolved itself upon their departure. Toyen and Heisler designed two of the “pagan altars” that formed the centerpiece of the first postwar international surrealist exhibition “Surrealism in 1947”, which opened at the Galerie Maeght in Paris on 7 July 1947. Organized by Breton and Marcel Duchamp, the show featured 86 artists from 27 countries, “most of which,” as Breton was at pains to point out, “had yesterday formed coalitions against one another.”⁹⁰ Heisler also contributed an essay to the catalogue, along with, among others, Georges Bataille, Hans Bellmer, Benjamin Péret, and Aimé Césaire, but the catalogue is probably better remembered today for Duchamp’s cover, a facsimile of a female breast constructed out of latex, velvet, and lipstick labeled “Please Touch.”⁹¹ A scaled-down version of the same exhibition opened in Topič’s Salon in Prague on 4 November under the title “Mezinárodní surrealismus” (International Surrealism). It was a pale echo of the original. Only twenty artists – fewer than a quarter of those shown at the Galerie Maeght – were exhibited. The catalogue was an equally meager offering by comparison with its Parisian counterpart. There were no soft breasts to caress here, only a flimsy octavo brochure containing a list of the 55 exhibits, ten black-and-white reproductions, three poems by Heisler, Benjamin Péret, and Hans Arp, and two essays by Karel Teige and André Breton.⁹²

“Twelve years have gone by since surrealism staged a series of events in Prague,” begins Breton’s “Second Arch” (Seconde Arche),

[...] and half of that period which may have been harder to endure over there than anywhere else since, when we look back to its beginning, we have to lay a finger on that *unhealed* wound that is called Munich could not fail to blur, or even tarnish, the memory of it.

The surrealist leader obstinately holds onto the memory of everything the magic capital had once seemed to promise. “Will surrealism which, as its name indicated and by explicit definition, aimed at transcending these miserable conditions of thought,” he asks, “make a show of repentance, as its turncoats, its renegades, wickedly enjoin it to do?” His answer is a resounding no. “On the contrary, it upholds, in all their integrity, the principles that were formulated during my stay with Éluard in Prague in 1935.” He ends with a clarion call:

No politico-military directive can be accepted or promulgated without treason. The sole duty of the poet, of the artist, is to reply with a categorical NO to all disciplinary slogans. The despicable word “engagement” [commitment], which has caught on since the war, exudes a ser-

⁸⁹ Heisler joined the Czechoslovak Group in 1938, shortly after the break with Nezval. – For background, see *Toman, Jindřich/Witkovsky, Matthew S.: Jindřich Heisler: Surrealism under Pressure, 1938-1953. Chicago/New Haven 2012.*

⁹⁰ *Breton, André: Surrealist Comet. In: Free Rein. Trans. Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline d’Amboise. Lincoln 1995, 96.*

⁹¹ *Le Surréalisme en 1947: Exposition internationale du Surréalisme présentée par André Breton et Marcel Duchamp. Paris 1947.*

⁹² *Breton, André/Teige, Karel: Mezinárodní surrealismus 30. (410.) výstava Topičova salonu od 4. listopadu do 3. prosince 1947 [International Surrealism. 30th (410th) Exhibition at Topič’s Salon, 4 November to 3 December 1947]. Praha 1947.*

vility that is abhorrent to art and poetry. Fortunately, the great testimony of mankind, the one that has managed to endure until now, tramples on these petty prohibitions, on those amends qualified (how ironic!) as “honorable,” on those shameful compromises. Am I not right, Jan Hus? Is it so, [Giordano] Bruno? What say you, Jean-Jacques [Rousseau]?⁹³

In the circumstances, Breton’s appeal to the spirits of the past may have reminded his readers – such as they were – of Don Quixote and the windmills. “Engagement” was the flavor of the month, and surrealism (in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre) “a phenomenon from after the other war, like the Charleston and the yo-yo.”⁹⁴

6

Less than three months later the KSČ launched the Victorious February (Vítězný únor) coup d’état that brought the party to power for the next forty-two years, and the Prague surrealists slipped into the shadows. Breton’s last brush with the magic capital is no more than a footnote to the dreams and desires of 1935, but it is an instructive one. It might be appreciated by aficionados of the “humour noir” beloved by the surrealists, which Breton defined as “the mortal enemy of sentimentality.”⁹⁵ In any event, it provides an alternative, and I would argue a more pertinent perspective on what might be considered surreal about twentieth-century Prague. Závěš Kalandra, the KSČ journalist who reviewed “Communicating Vessels” so favorably for “Doba”, and contributed to the Karel Hynek Mácha Festschrift “Ani labut’ ani Lúna” was arrested in 1949, accused of Trotskyism. The following year he was one of those indicted in the first great Czechoslovak show trial, that of the parliamentary deputy Milada Horáková. He confessed to the trumped-up charges of treason and espionage, as people usually did, and was duly sentenced to death. Breton’s “Open Letter” begging Paul Éluard to intercede with the Czechoslovak authorities was dismissed with the haughty one-liner, “I already have too much on my hands with the innocent who proclaim their innocence to occupy myself with the guilty who proclaim their guilt.”⁹⁶ Éluard had rejoined the PCF in 1942, while working with the French Resistance. Breton, by contrast, spent most of the war in the safety of exile in North America. Kalandra was hanged in Pankrác Prison on 27 June 1950.

Three years later Breton wrote the introduction to a French monograph on Toyen, who was by now permanently exiled in Paris, where she would eventually die in

⁹³ Breton, André: Second Arch. In: *Free Rein* 99-101 (cf. fn. 90). (Emphasis in the original, translation modified). – I believe “Second Arch” is a better rendition of Breton’s title than “Second Ark”, since the first “arche” to which the text implicitly refers was clearly the arch bridging the Paris and Prague surrealists in 1935.

⁹⁴ Mauriac, Claude: Sartre contre Breton. In: *Carrefour* 10 (1947) 7, quoted in *Polizzotti: Revolution of the Mind* 538 (cf. fn. 42).

⁹⁵ Breton, André: *Anthology of Black Humor*. Trans. Mark Polizzotti. San Francisco 1997, vii.

⁹⁶ Breton, André: “Lettre ouverte à Paul Éluard.” In: *Combat*, 13 June 1950, reprinted in: Breton, André: *Œuvres complètes*. Vol. 3. Paris 1999, 896-898. – The text is translated in *Breton: Free Rein* 229-231 (cf. fn. 90). – Éluard’s reply is given as a footnote to Breton’s “Lettre ouverte”. In: *Breton: Œuvres complètes*. Vol. 3, 898.

1980. One of the “world-shaking events which we shall have the doubtful advantage over many generations of our forebears to ‘witness’, events pushing us a considerable way forward in the night of the Apocalypse,” he writes, is “the repression already weighing on Prague, the magic capital of Europe.” He dolefully reminds his readers of Štyrský’s premature demise in 1942, of Kalandra’s execution in 1950, of Teige’s suicide, as he then wrongly believed it to be, on 1 October 1951, and of Heisler’s untimely passing in Paris (he was 38) in 1953. While enumerating the fates of the Prague surrealists he might also have listed Jaroslav Ježek’s lonely death in 1941 in New York, Bohuslav Brouk’s flight to France (then Melbourne, then London) in 1948, and Konstantín Biebl’s suicide in Prague in 1951. Possibly he remembered Vítězslav Nezval with affection, as Milan Kundera has recently suggested,⁹⁷ but he does not mention him here. The founder of the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group was still alive and well and living in the magic capital. Nezval died on 6 April 1958, an honored National Artist (Národní umělec) and a cultural pillar of the regime.

It is not these ghosts, though, that haunt Breton’s text. Notwithstanding all that had happened in Prague since 1935, he drags us back to the realm of poetic thought, which is always more or less adrift in space, completely apart from the geographical, historical, and economic considerations that this city and its inhabitants may lend themselves to. There is no recognition either of the contingencies that brought the French and Czech surrealists together in the spring of 1935 or of the multiple tensions concealed behind their improbable rapprochement. What instead endures is a timeless memory of “surrealist Prague”:

Prague, with the magnificent bridge flanked by statues, leading out of yesterday into forever; the signboards, lit up from within at the Black Sun, at the Golden Tree, and a host of others; the clock whose hands, cast in the metal of desire, turn ever backward; the street of the Alchemists; and above all, the ferment of ideas and hopes, more intense there than anywhere else, the passionate attempt to forge poetry and revolution into one same ideal.⁹⁸

In Breton’s mind, the Bohemian capital would always remain the magic capital of old Europe in which, once and forever, Marx’s “transformer le monde” and Rimbaud’s “changer la vie”⁹⁹ met and made love – a place out of time. T. S. Eliot once remarked that humankind cannot bear very much reality.¹⁰⁰ In this case, it would appear, surrealists cannot bear too much surreality.

⁹⁷ See Kundera, Milan: Encounter. Trans. Linda Asher, London 2010, 110–113.

⁹⁸ Breton, André: Introduction to the Work of Toyen. In: *Breton: What Is Surrealism* 286–287 (cf. fn. 22).

⁹⁹ “Transform the world, said Marx; change life, said Rimbaud: for us, these two watchwords are one (A. B.).” Entry on Karl Marx in: *Breton, André/Éluard, Paul: Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* (1938). Facsimile reprint. Paris 2005, 17. – Breton is quoting the closing words of the speech he was not allowed to deliver to the 1935 Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture; Manifestoes of Surrealism 241 (cf. fn. 18). – For interested readers, a very much fuller treatment of the events discussed in the present essay can be found in Sayer, Derek: Prague, Capital of the 20th Century: A Surrealist History. Princeton 2013 (forthcoming).

¹⁰⁰ Eliot, T. S.: *Burnt Norton*. In: *The Four Quartets*. London 1983, 14.