



## Lost Profiles

MEMOIRS OF CUBISM, DADA, AND SURREALISM

Philippe Soupault

Translated by Alan Bernheimer

# CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

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DADA, AND SURREALISM

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Translated and with a Translator's Note  
by Alan Bernheimer

Introduction by Mark Polizzotti

Afterword by Ron Padgett



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# CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

INTRODUCTION

## Philippe Soupault Remembers

by Mark Polizzotti

Philippe Soupault's astute memoir of his literary friendships begins with a visit from four students come to hear his reminiscences of Dada and Surrealism. Like them, I, too, made my youthful pilgrimage to Soupault in search of wisdom from the source. It was 1986, barely four years before his death, and I was just starting work on a biography of André Breton. The idea that this man—one of Surrealism's founding pillars, Breton's co-author on *The Magnetic Fields* in 1919, and a protagonist of the early Dada and Surrealist scandals—might still be alive was startling enough; the fact that he had agreed to see me was mind-boggling.

Soupault was then eighty-eight years old, living in a nondescript residential building near Porte d'Auteuil, at the far end of Paris's sixteenth arrondissement. We talked in the lobby, surrounded by the building's impersonal modern décor, and as I recall we sat at a metal table. I later heard that he was intensely fond of chocolate and kept a huge ball of foil in his apartment, the compressed remnant of many years' worth of wrappers. I remember wishing I had known in time to bring him some.

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We spoke, naturally, of Breton—of the two men’s meeting via Apollinaire, of the fledgling poet whom Soupault characterized as “timid,” of the “authoritarian” Surrealist leader who broke with his old comrade, and of the chastened elder who renewed their friendship after World War II, and who by then seemed “much more interested in astrology” than in literature. We spoke of *The Magnetic Fields*, its genesis and composition, its indebtedness to the psychologist Pierre Janet, and of Breton’s neglect of Janet in his own accounts of the book—a purely personal and “spiteful” bias, judged Soupault, “but poets will be poets.”

In the end, what Soupault told me was not very different from what he said to his interviewers in “Following in the Footsteps,” and no doubt to many others between their visit and mine.<sup>1</sup> But that was hardly the point. This was a voice of living history, relating events it had experienced not in countless academic treatises but first-hand. And more than this, I sensed a generosity, which I expect his young visitors sensed as well; a willingness to share these experiences, and an openness to experience in general, that infused his responses to my questions, as it infuses the pages of *Lost Profiles*.

Readers familiar with the French edition of this memoir will notice that the publishers have reordered the chapters slightly to put Soupault’s recollections of Surrealism front and center—appropriately enough. The fact is, if Soupault is remembered today, it is largely because of his ground-floor involvement with a movement that ultimately emerged as one of the most influential of the twentieth century, but that at the time seemed more like youthful hijinks, an as-yet-unfocused response to a dynamite dose of compressed revolt. A contemporary of Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Benjamin Péret, Robert Desnos, and others whose names figure on the original

Surrealist roster, Soupault was one of the “Three Musketeers” (with Breton and Aragon) who founded the seminal avant-garde journal *Littérature* in 1919; co-authored that same year the first book of automatic poetry, *The Magnetic Fields* (and resisted, though not always successfully, Breton’s impulse to give the manuscript a stylistic cleanup before it was published); welcomed Tristan Tzara to Paris in 1920 and participated over the next two years in Dada’s notorious “demonstrations”; and joined Breton in breaking away from Dada to found their own movement in 1924. In the first *Manifesto*’s honor roll, Breton lists Soupault among the select few who “have performed acts of absolute Surrealism.”

For this alone, Soupault would deserve a place in literary history. But those who know him only as a Surrealist poet might be surprised by the range of friendships showcased in *Lost Profiles*, with Proust, Joyce, and Apollinaire, not to mention Blaise Cendrars, Georges Bernanos, René Crevel, and Pierre Reverdy. In this regard, the book could almost act as a personal panorama of twentieth-century modernism, a round-up of the “fantastic individuals” Soupault had the fortune to know in his extraordinary lifetime.

Moreover, Soupault has a talent for encapsulating his subject, whether the young Dadaists (“We were learning arrogance. But it was still only an apprenticeship”), Douanier Rousseau (“Rousseau didn’t deign even to respond to those who made fun of him. He knew he was a great painter”), or Reverdy (“Useless to contradict him or even to argue”). There are other lovely glimpses as well, such as Apollinaire in a curio shop (“All this old stuff fascinated him as toys do children”), or Crevel on the telephone, or Cendrars’s bedroom-cum-glory hole, or Proust quizzing a café waiter about the precise blossoming habits of the local trees. And he affords precious

first-hand insight into the working methods of James Joyce, for Soupault was among those (alongside Samuel Beckett and Eugène Jolas) who helped translate into French the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” passage of *Finnegans Wake*, back when it was still known as *Work in Progress*.

The generosity and open-mindedness I spoke of earlier did not always serve Soupault well. In late 1926, he was among the first to be ousted from the Surrealist ranks for questioning the group’s hardline embrace of Soviet Communism—ironic, given his remarks in *Lost Profiles* about the promise of the Russian Revolution. Tarrred by his former friends as “counter-revolutionary,” he was voted out during a harshly censorious gathering “with all the sanctions that exclusion entails.” But behind the political sectarianism lay a second grievance, one perhaps more visceral for Breton: that Soupault, eclectic by nature, was too interested in other currents to pledge his complete fealty to Surrealism. Moreover, his lack of tolerance for the daily café caucus that Breton imposed on members could only work against him. And while we might find his assessment of Surrealism at that point somewhat glib—it “was becoming a literary and pictorial ‘school,’” he writes, “a coterie [that] impressed the snobs”—no doubt it also contained enough inconvenient truth to make Breton squirm.

Old grudges die hard, and it’s no surprise that *Lost Profiles* did not find much favor among the latter-day Surrealists when it was published in 1963. The reasons are easy to guess: Soupault had been dishonorably discharged from the movement many years before, and his memoir includes some less than flattering portrayals of his former comrades-in-arms—in addition to ascribing more importance to Dada, and less to Surrealism’s own posterity, than Surrealism’s remaining members would have liked.

To be fair, there are some grounds on which the Surrealist firebrands had a point. Soupault tends to assign himself the starring role a bit more than is warranted, and he sometimes muddles his chronology. To cite two examples: The broadside against Anatole France, *A Corpse*, was issued not under Dada, as he says, but in 1924, well after Dada had imploded, and the scandal it provoked was linked with the birth of Surrealism (while the much less successful “trial” of Maurice Barrès, which Soupault presents as a direct consequence of *A Corpse*, actually took place three years earlier and helped hasten Dada’s end). No doubt more important, Soupault suggests that *The Magnetic Fields* was composed as a result of Dada’s demise, whereas the book was written the year before Paris Dada began, and more properly constitutes a first stab at the kinds of preoccupations that would characterize early Surrealism five years later. As strict history, the reader is advised to take some of this memoir with the proverbial grain of salt.

But again, that’s hardly the point, is it? What Soupault offers is not the exact furniture placement—there are plenty of tomes for that—but the taste, feel, and smell of a literary environment, as he lived it and as he evocatively and affectionately conveys it. *Lost Profiles* will not supplant Richard Ellmann’s biography of Joyce, for instance, or Michel Sanouillet’s magisterial history of Paris Dada. What it does do is flesh out the human story, provide the personal underpinnings and anecdotal contour on which such monumental studies are built, and that make them worth reading. It also invites us to share in the unique perspective of a man who, by thinking outside the norms of his time and place, wound up on the inside for some of the most thrilling moments of our modern intellectual history.

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## Translator's Note

An anecdote about Henri Rousseau, le Douanier, recounted in Roger Shattuck's *The Banquet Years*, first alerted and attracted me to Philippe Soupault's 1963 memoir, *Profils perdus*, and so the first in this line of thanks goes to Shattuck and the sumptuous meal he makes of the roots of the avant-garde in France. Next, to Ron Padgett, who nearly 50 years ago awoke me to the idea of translating for pleasure, and whose own recent translation of Guillaume Apollinaire's *Zone: Selected Poems* continues to inform and inspire. Padgett's account, in the afterword to the present volume, of meeting the older Soupault in Paris in the mid-1970s, turning the profiling mirror back on the author, is only the most obvious instance of his generosity and encouragement in this project.

My translation itself is indebted to several advisors who helped me through some rough passages, especially Leah Brumer, but also Mark Polizzotti, Stephen Emerson, and Bill Graves. I am grateful to Timothy Young of the Beinecke Library, Betsy Jolas, and Christine Chemetoff Soupault for generous help with photographs.

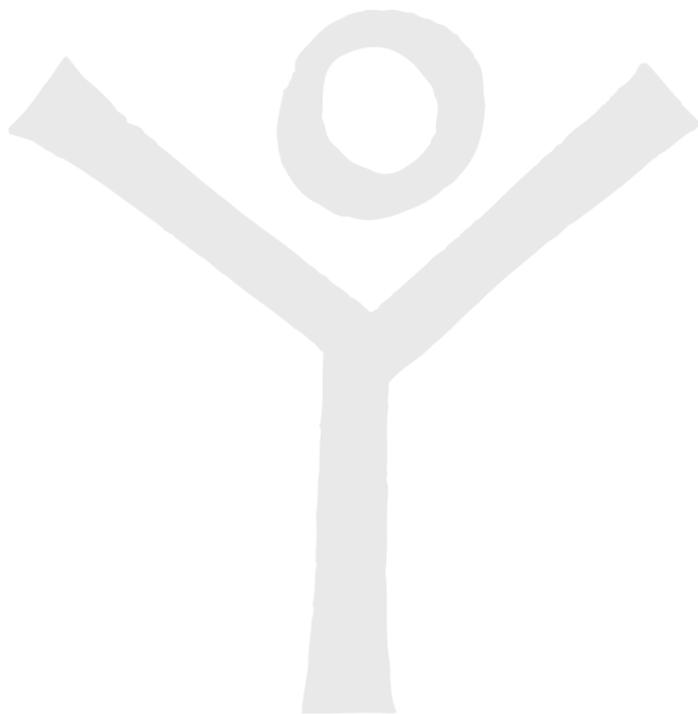
The chapters about Pierre Reverdy and René Crevel first appeared in *Catamaran Literary Reader*, thanks to editors Catherine Segurson and Thomas Christensen. Tom also advised me

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on finding a publisher, as did Kit Schluter, and finally Brent Cunningham, who paved the way to City Lights, where Garrett Caples and Elaine Katzenberger welcomed and supported my effort to bring Philippe Soupault to a wider English-speaking audience and help commemorate the centenary of what he calls the jolt that Dada and then Surrealism produced.

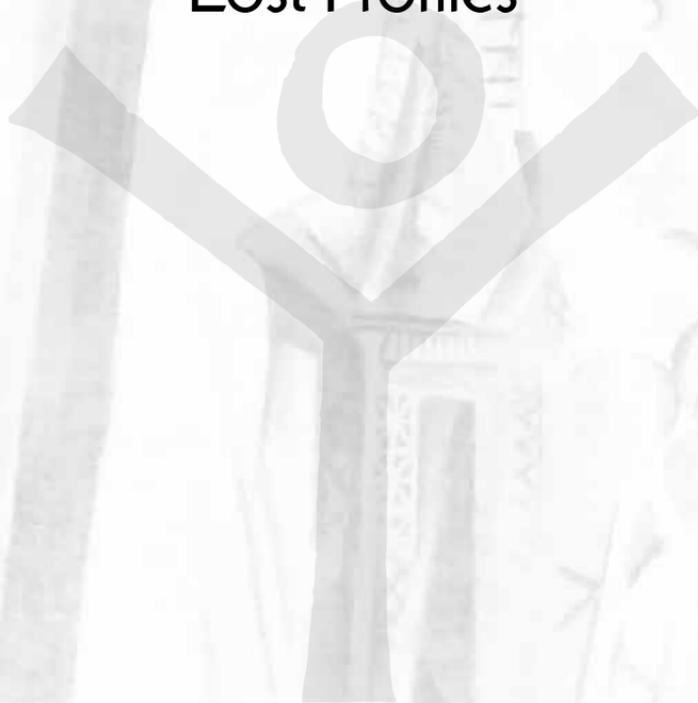
—*Alan Bernheimer*



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Lost Profiles



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## BOOKS

### Following in the Footsteps

FOUR YOUNG PEOPLE, STUDENTS, come to visit with the pretext of bringing me some poems. They look at me so closely that I get the impression of being some strange creature in their eyes. They observe my gestures and looks and they listen to what I tell them without interrupting. I am a little irritated at being the object of this examination. I suddenly remember that, at their age, accompanied by my friends Louis Aragon and André Breton, I would (leaving all modesty aside) pay visits to Apollinaire or Paul Valéry, but I was less watchful.

Finally, the ice is broken. The least timid of the four students begins to ask me questions. What especially interests them is less what I currently think than what I thought when I was their age. What they would like to know is why and how the Dada movement was born. But for them it is already ancient history. They even seem to forget that for the generations preceding theirs, Dada is synonymous with scandal. I try to explain to them:

“It’s because of the scandal it provoked that the Dada movement was misunderstood and mischaracterized. Along with my Dadaist friends, I believed, and I still believe, that it was necessary to cause scandal, even that it was one of the essential *raisons d’être* of this ‘movement.’ I am convinced,

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and the future proved me right, that my contemporaries were wrong to consider the Dada movement a schoolboy prank, a student protest, and a publicity campaign launched by upstart scribblers to call attention to their writing. It was much more than this, and today I am tempted to attach much more importance to it than when I was one of those responsible.”

In reality, I think the movement was the most violent and spectacular demonstration of a whole generation in revolt.

“Poetic revolt,” one of the young students reminds me.

“Without a doubt. The prophets of this movement were poets and, above all, Arthur Rimbaud. It is the poet of *Illuminations* who proposed and foretold the revolt. He created, for many who were young in 1914, a climate favorable to a liberation. But those who were the leading thinkers of the so-called Belle Epoque, Rimbaud’s contemporaries, did not understand, didn’t even listen to this warning. They were already out of tune with their time, with the youth of their day.”

I feel the need to recall for my interlocutors the names of those who were considered the representatives of French thought before and during World War I. Anatole France, considered a tremendous genius; Paul Bourget, who played the role of literary dictator; René Bazin, the herald of the “right-minded”; Maurice Barrès, the anarchist converted to chauvinism. When I cite these names, the students smile, but they laugh out loud when I declare to them that the famous poets of this period were Jean Aicard, Edmond Rostand, and Jean Richepin, whereas Stéphane Mallarmé and the Symbolists were viewed as ridiculous and harmless amateurs.

“We read a lot, and we did not agree either with our elders or with the ‘masters’ whose reputation and success were imposed on us. Very young, I was sixteen, after my first baccalaureate exam, I had the somewhat vague but persistent



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Since I was interested in literature, I had to realize that the famous literary people (save for rare exceptions like Romain Rolland<sup>2</sup>, who was considered a traitor and whose articles we thus could not read) accepted and even exalted the tragic misunderstandings that were the cause and consequence of the First World War. If one rereads the “literary” output of this period and what was called propaganda, it is astounding that this “literature” (which was already outraging a great number of combatants) could be appreciated so widely and for so long by those in the rear who boasted of belonging to a nation which they claimed was endowed with the sharpest critical mind.

At the time of the armistice, I thought, and I wasn't alone, that all writers were permanently discredited. I was wrong. After this four-year war that, for all who returned from it, evoked a tragedy “filled with blood and fury” and also with mud, those who were ironically called patriotic writers certainly intended to continue imposing their dictatorship and exercising their influence. Many young writers from before the war (Alain Fournier, Charles Péguy, to cite just two examples) had been killed. We spoke rather cynically of the lost generation.

But among the survivors at the end of the war was a poet that I wanted to meet, because I had read his poems and had sent him those I was beginning to write and publish, a poet who seemed to me to be the only one who was claiming the discovery of a new world, who more or less deliberately rejected the conformism of the official masters of literature and art, since the same conformism reigned in the domain of the arts, painting, or music. His name was Guillaume Apollinaire. Despite the goodwill gestures that he had unfortunately made to what I considered an intolerable dictatorship, this authentic poet continued to be the laughingstock of pundits and journalists because he spoke of the new spirit and the future. I was

astonished that he could stand provoking scandals, almost in spite of himself, by publishing poems without punctuation and warmly defending the Cubist painters. I already envied him for causing scandal and being abused by those I considered hypocritical adversaries. It was at this time that I began to realize the importance of scandal. Certain reservations notwithstanding, I was captivated by the personality of Apollinaire, who, I told myself, remembering a word of Rimbaud's, was a visionary. He helped confirm my point of view and encourage in me the spirit of rebellion whose fierceness I did not yet appreciate.

Remember too that at this time we witnessed, without being well informed, an upheaval that unleashed a campaign of slander, of false reports—the Russian Revolution. Russia was for me the country of Gogol, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Dostoevsky. For my generation, the word revolution, lit by historical memories, held an incomparable prestige. I believed that our entire civilization was going to be called into question, that the Russian Revolution was the start of a new era, that the whole world was going to be transformed, that it was a global revolution starting in Moscow, as a revolution had started in 1789 in the place de la Bastille.

I was still naïve, and all the same less naïve than my fellow citizens who were furious, especially the bourgeois that I lived among who worried about the collapse of “Russian values” and were terribly uneasy about what was called Bolshevism.

It was in this climate that I met two young medical students dressed in sky-blue uniforms. First, André Breton, whom Guillaume Apollinaire introduced me to, then Louis Aragon. Camaraderie first, then friendship, sharing experiences, enthusiasms, and especially indignation. The rediscovery of these feelings was all the more precious to me since my friend from childhood, my best friend, had just been killed at the front.

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We were, the three of us, like explorers leaving to discover the world of literature, but explorers who were severely appraising the fauna of arts and letters. We were prepared to be pitiless.

Thanks to Theodore Fraenkel, another medical student friend of Louis Aragon and André Breton, we were captivated and influenced by the devastating humor of Alfred Jarry.

The four students, who were listening attentively to this account until now (they were used to taking lessons), couldn't help giggling. I resumed:

Although we knew where we stood and that the youth of our generation had lost its sense of deference and hierarchy during the war, we were still impressed by certain writers and painters. Apollinaire had just died and we were saddened by his death; even more, we had the feeling that we were being thwarted, that a new gap had been opened between our generation and the one that had survived. We were trying to make choices. We were going to look closely at Paul Valéry, more and more disappointing as he cleverly cultivated success (he was already thinking about the Académie française and royalties); at André Gide, whom we were curious to know better because he had proposed in his *Caves du vatican* the character of Lafcadio, who captivated us because we believed we were somewhat like him; at Paul Claudel, whom we were the first to hail as a great poet but who rejected us roughly and stupidly, as was his custom.

The poet Pierre Reverdy, who published our poems in his *Nord-Sud* review, fascinated us because, like us, for the time being, he was interested only in poetry, which at this time seemed to us the only acceptable language, the sole means of making contact with the world. We had, however, some doubts. The literary world and that of the poets (Max Jacob, Francis Carco, Blaise Cendrars, André Salmon) appeared to us suspiciously tepid and, above all, shapeless. Rebellion was fermenting.

We shared our anger. It was at this point that we picked up some signals as startling as if they came from another planet. But first we wanted to assert our independence by publishing a magazine which we, who were already stupidly called the Three Musketeers, would edit. We hesitated a long time before choosing a name. In our naiveté, we thought about calling it *Le monde nouveau*<sup>3</sup> or *Le nouveau monde* (quite a task), but we were uncertain enough to consult Paul Valéry, who ironically and speciously persuaded us (we didn't at first understand the irony) to adopt the title *Littérature* (underlined, he said, and by antiphrasis recalling Verlaine's ironical line, "Tout le reste est littérature" [All the rest is literature.]).

Why did this 24-page, small-format magazine, whose very eclectic table of contents gathered the writers we judged the least conformist at this time, see such success from its first issue? I must record it as a symptom but I can't explain it, especially remembering that Marcel Proust, who was not a contributor, wrote me a twelve-page letter to subscribe and congratulated us on our audacity. Perhaps this publication, while positioned timidly enough, made it possible to foresee the "*orages désirés*."<sup>4</sup>

Thanks to *Littérature*, contacts were established with those who, like us, refused to accept the taboos that the patriotic writers, in declaring victory, wanted to impose on us.

The end of the war did not, indeed, represent victory to us but rather a sudden awakening. And so we welcomed the overtures of a group of young people from Zurich, Romanian and German émigrés, who published a magazine and organized events in a little theater called, much to our displeasure, the Cabaret Voltaire (always the classics!).

All the same, we realized our kinship quickly enough. We received provocative letters from a certain Tristan Tzara asking us to collaborate in his publications and participate in a

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movement that he claimed was revolutionary and that he had baptized the Dada movement, choosing at random from the dictionary a name that meant nothing and committed to nothing. This young Romanian who had emigrated to Switzerland was the most perceptive and the most energetic of all the young people who were starting (it was only the beginning) to anticipate and to hope for, meanwhile working together to bring about, the reign of the absurd (a reign that is not yet over).

This thought meets with approval by my young friends, which doesn't surprise me. I know they know what the fascination and prestige of the absurd means for several generations. They know it much better than we knew it.

Not only did Tristan Tzara present performances in Zurich that unfortunately recalled those of the Belle Époque in Montmartre cabarets, he also tried to make contact with people who seemed to him ripe for the intellectual revolt that he foresaw. He succeeded in making common cause with the Paris poets, the founders of *Littérature*, with the German painters and writers (Max Ernst, Hugo Ball, Kurt Schwitters), more anarchists at that time than creative artists, as well as with two French painters (Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia) who had emigrated to New York and one of their friends, the American painter and photographer Man Ray, the three of whom relished the art of making scandal and published the magazine *391*.<sup>5</sup>

So far, this was only the initial groundwork. The Dada movement did not reach its full significance and explosive force until Tristan Tzara came to Paris to meet those who, with Louis Aragon, André Breton, and myself, were becoming aware of our desire to be done with the literature of the past, with all its sacrosanct traditions. We repeated as a slogan this line of Apollinaire's, "À la fin tu es las de ce monde ancien." [In the

end you are tired of this old world.] I must acknowledge that at that time we knew what we no longer wanted but did not yet know where we wanted to go. We especially longed to destroy, despite a certain timidity that we suffered from and which was called, astonishingly, our “good upbringing.” “How well mannered they are,” said the Countess of Noailles, a remark that infuriated us. They’d see! The arrival of Tristan Tzara, which I compared to a bomb, was the starting point and the opportunity for the rebellion.

What must be remembered, what remains for me one of the important points in this history, is that at the very beginning we formed a team; I mean we exerted a decisive influence on one another at the same time that we rejected outside pressure with equal force and intransigence, dismissing caution warnings from our elders. We were learning arrogance. But it was still only an apprenticeship. Tzara, more experienced and less hampered than we by friendships and memories, proposed that we organize some public performances. The first of the events took place in the rue aux Ours in a neighborhood chosen because it was not “snobbish.” The poets recited their poems, and the painters showed their paintings to an attentive crowd, bigger than we could have expected.

Everything went along very calmly but, at the end of the performance, Tristan Tzara succeeded in causing a genuine scandal by proposing to compose a poem on the spot, in front of the audience, picking words written on scraps of paper thrown into a hat that he withdrew at random. This was too much. People hissed. And the event ended in great disarray. Although slightly concerned, we were delighted with this outcome, because it was this initial scandal that impressed upon us that if we wanted to articulate and spread our rebellion, we had to systematically cause scandal.

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Tristan Tzara, outstanding impresario, persuaded us to organize other performances, first at the Salon des Indépendants, where the thirteen Dada manifestoes were read that expressed the violence of the rebellion of those who were ironically called (all the press spoke angrily about us) the Dadaists.

At the same time that we understood the necessity for scandal (because it seemed to us, not unreasonably, that since the armistice, people, notably former combatants as well as intellectuals, were trying to forget, to resume the best possible little life, and were settling into indifference and even—it was a bit the case with us—skepticism), we were getting a taste for it. I think success would have intoxicated us less than the indignation and wrath of our contemporaries. The insults that were abundantly hurled at us in every tone, not to mention the rotten eggs, tomatoes, and pieces of meat, persuaded us that we were on the right path. So we didn't hesitate to collaborate very actively with Tzara to repeat our experiments with public performances, first at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre and then at the Salle Gaveau. In crowded and rowdy halls, we tried to outdo our arrogance and tossed challenges to all who claimed to assert their privilege in defending what they called tradition. With what pleasure we organized shooting galleries! We were determined to spare no one, not even those we had at first admired and respected. And of course, within our own team, no one-upmanship was avoided. No more limits. We were truly wild. What seems to me in hindsight to be a powerful symptom was the enormous repercussion that, despite our increasing insolence, surprised even us. We didn't clearly understand why these performances, which were deliberately more and more scandalous and in which the absurd was conscientiously glorified, provoked such a strong backlash in the press and the public. On reflection, I think these unusual performances, these incessant

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provocations and the violent invectives that we published in numerous magazines and publications and in open letters that some daily papers printed (with insulting comments) were interpreted quite rightly as the onset of a moral revolution that could become dangerous. Paraphrasing a famous statement, one journalist who didn't spare platitudes wrote, "It is more than a riot, it's a revolution." Deeply indignant, but also worried (which continued to delight and encourage us), journalists, critics, and writers began to understand that the Dada movement was much more than a student prank. The most perceptive and attentive critic of the time, Jacques Rivière, the editor of the *Nouvelle revue française*, a magazine that in 1922 enjoyed immense prestige and exercised considerable influence, was the first to seriously study in depth what was beginning to be called the Dada phenomenon. He published a long study, a very long article titled "Reconnaissance à Dada" [Gratitude to Dada], in which he explained the range and consequence of this movement. He maintained that Dada was going to try—not without some chance of success—to destroy all the established values, the literary practices, and the moral bias that the great captains of literature and journalism wanted to continue imposing, blinded by the victory of armies and the partisans of the various traditional formalisms.

Thanks to these violent reactions, we were confirmed in our intention to make a clean sweep. More than ever, it was a matter for us of denying and disowning. A phrase that had been proposed by Tristan Tzara served by way of a motto: "The absence of system is still a system, but it is still better."

All of us, presidents of the Dada movement because we had decided that all the participants were presidents, were becoming great friends. We recruited new comrades, such as the poet, painter, and musician Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes and

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CITY LIGHTS

the dandy Jacques Rigaut. We met up every day at a café, most often in Montparnasse, in all its glory at that time. Our evenings stretched until dawn. We were not looked on favorably, since we occasionally touched off or participated in brawls. One of the most famous of these evenings, a banquet given in honor of the poet Saint-Pol Roux at the Closerie de Lilas, left a noisy memory in the history of Montparnasse. I was even accused of swinging from a chandelier to sweep the plates and glasses off the table. The scandal was more serious even than for the earlier events, because this time we had not presented a performance but had directly attacked the literati, the artists, the institutions, and the politics of the rulers of France and Europe. The press decided to boycott us and no longer mention us. But never was so much spoken and written about Dada.

More and more young poets and writers sympathized with us and asked to participate in our meetings, notably René Crevel, Robert Desnos, Jacques Prévert, Jacques Baron. Too rapidly for my liking, Dadaism, as the movement was called from that point on, adopted the customs of a congregation, which was contrary to its spirit. It was likewise at this time that several painters who had been among the first Dadaists—Arp, Max Ernst, André Masson, Man Ray—made their influence felt. In the plastic arts it was more difficult to disown, and perhaps only Francis Picabia succeeded in giving his work the quality of absolute revolt, of anti-painting. But despite errors in interpretation, Dada exerted a profound influence whose depth the Dadaists themselves overlooked. All the taboos that had been blindly respected for a half century were seen to rapidly disintegrate. The best example was the confrontation we undertook on the day that Anatole France died. When the Academician, who was considered not only the best French writer but also (this made us smile) a thinker and moralist

of extreme subtlety—assured of immortality as the most untouchable of idols—died, the Dadaists published a pamphlet entitled *Un cadavre* [A Corpse] on the eve of his state funeral, in which we expressed with fierce insolence our scorn for the character and the work of a man the world passionately admired and respected.

The disapproval and indignation surpassed our hopes. I had the impression, nevertheless, that we had “struck a nerve” and that, basically, hypocrisy aside, people didn’t disagree with us. Our taking a stance, which still seemed rather courageous, resulted in Dada’s being taken seriously.

This, which we considered a more significant success than our performances, prompted us to hold a public trial of Maurice Barrès, still at the height of his fame. As a result of this “trial,” which was, moreover, quite pitiful and poorly staged, Barrès was “condemned to die.” When he heard of this sentence, I know that the writer, who fifty years before had wanted to be the “prince of youth,” was rather flattered that young people were still interested in him. But he absolutely did not understand that what he took for a joke had deeper consequences for his fame than the letters from readers he received following the articles he spearheaded in the *Echo de Paris*.

This trial of Maurice Barrès marked for my friends and me the onset of Dada’s death pangs. Tzara and I still hoped that we could continue to carry out activity, but several of our friends, especially Breton, no longer thought so. Rivalries among groups, struggles for influence, and various ambitions broke up the team. I was the first to declare this “break-up.”

My four listeners interrupted me. They wanted to know how Dada died.

I’m trying to remember. It was rather sad: the death throes of friendships. First, one can’t continuously repudiate without

wanting to repudiate oneself. We all had the impression, at the moment when Dada's influence and importance was growing, even while greater and greater numbers of young poets were joining up, that we were at a standstill, that henceforth we could only repeat ourselves. And that seemed to us to already look like old age, like driveling on, that we were ourselves on the point of proposing an aesthetic and a morality. One last event, the visit to the Church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, was a failure. An exhibit at the Galerie Montaigne was only half successful. And however individually we had become, without false modesty, notorious, we were considered future great writers. We did not enjoy this irony and it made us mad. I remember my anger and Louis Aragon's when we had this sentence in *Le temps* from the pen of Paul Souday, who was then the most influential critic: "When M. Louis Aragon and M. Philippe Soupault present themselves to the Académie française in some thirty years, they will be a bit embarrassed if a competitor unearths these sorry flights of fancy." We were already being buried. Nevertheless, we were too young, younger even than our age, not to soon recover from the death of Dada. One more demolition, after all. What was sadder and rather demoralizing to me, was to witness the often bitter quarrels, the arguments, among my comrades in arms, whose friendship I refused to forget.

The systematic demolition scheme that had been Dada had not, for that matter, absorbed all our activity. There existed a realm where we had never stopped feeling like ourselves, where we could breathe freely—that of poetry. During these years of conflict, the great mediator remained Arthur Rimbaud. We had also rediscovered Lautréamont. The destinies of these two poets seemed to me to justify what I still thought was my vocation, poetry, which assured us liberty. The vocation that I continue to deem the highest. André Breton and

I, in the course of daily conversations, had discussed poetry at length, explored this realm, analyzed works of poetry, *Illuminations* and *Les chants de Maldoror*, various texts by Apollinaire, and the poetry of Pierre Reverdy. It seemed to us that poetry was still paralyzed by a number of taboos and that it was not fulfilling the possibilities of the dream, which André Breton had studied and whose powers and privileges he revealed to me while introducing me to the works of Freud. We had a kind of revelation.

We were struck by the remarkable importance of images and compared those that ornamented everyday language, those that poets worthy of the name had created, with those that illuminated dreams. Excited by this revelation, I thought only of pursuing experiments, and, as in many other areas, I have preserved this attitude while regretting having perhaps remained alone in preserving it, fearing, since the death of Dada—which marked me deeply—dogmatism, systems, and definitions. I was against all bias, all preconceptions. At this time, while André Breton and I had not yet been baptized Surrealists, we wanted foremost to devote ourselves only to experiments. They led us to regard poetry as a liberation, as the possibility (perhaps the sole one) to give the mind a freedom that we had known only in our dreams and to free us from the entire machinery of logic.

In the course of our research we had noticed, indeed, that, freed from all critical pressure and scholarly habit, the mind provided images and not logical propositions, and that if we were willing to adopt what the psychiatrist Pierre Janet called automatic writing, we would record texts in which we described a “universe” heretofore unexplored. So we decided to give ourselves two weeks to write collaboratively a work in which we prohibited correcting or erasing our “flights of fancy.”

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We had no trouble respecting this deadline, and with growing delight we became acquainted with texts that we decided to publish under the title *Les champs magnétiques*. What we at first cautiously called a method was born from this book, which we baptized Surrealism in memory of Guillaume Apollinaire, who had characterized as Surrealist one of his texts, *Onirocritique*. We were in raptures, André Breton and I. We communicated our enthusiasm to Louis Aragon, the first to understand straightaway the importance, the scope, and the future of our discovery and who wrote with his amazing virtuosity *Une vague des rêves* [A Wave of Dreams], the second Surrealist text, which proved to us the excellence of our “method.”

And soon, our other friends, Éluard (not without hesitation), Desnos, Péret, and Crevel, were won over. We were certain we had liberated poetry. After so many years, I maintain this conviction, but I think that having participated so actively in the Dada movement greatly helped to free us and allowed us to carry out the experiment that was the birth of Surrealism.

We wanted to win over in other fields and we suggested that our painter friends, Max Ernst in particular, try the same experiment. Which he did, with enthusiasm and conviction. His successes were dazzling. André Masson also was interested at first in Surrealism, taking the measure of its power and all that it could bring to painting by liberating it. Picasso himself, although customarily on guard, was not unappreciative. In my opinion, Surrealism brought about the end of Cubism. In the musical realm, which was colonized by snobs, Surrealism wasn't able to exercise any influence, which explains the decadence in the French school of music up until Messaien. We tried, André Breton and I, to transpose our Surrealist experiments to the stage, and we wrote two plays, but (rapidly persuaded by the commercialization of French theater) we quickly

abandoned these experiments, which were taken up with great success twenty years later by Eugene Ionesco. As for film, where we had tried to point out some new directions, the influence of Surrealism was very distinctly felt, but only belatedly.

I hoped that Breton and I, supported by our friends and by the enthusiastic young poets, would be able to pursue our experiments, our explorations. I was thinking only about poetry. I was wrong. André Breton wanted to systematize (which was his vocation, as I found out only too late) Surrealism, to impose rules and directives. Thanks to the fervent friendship I felt for him, I did not rebel (not yet). Besides, the love of a woman and of revolt for revolt's sake (Rimbaud's example) diverted me from my friendships. I did not dream of exploiting the undeniable and growing success of Surrealism. After six years of complete fidelity, I could no longer bear the atmosphere of the little coterie where we extolled each other, an atmosphere that seemed harder and harder to breathe. I had no ambition because I had too much pride. When my friends made the mistake of wanting to put Surrealism in the service of a political party, I broke away from their group, not without sadness but without bitterness. I wanted to get away from it. I wanted to get to know the world and escape from literary circles, aesthetic or political. Without regret, I left for some lengthy travels. Surrealism, guided by André Breton and Paul Éluard, was transformed. Artaud, who had been one of the effective experimenters since the beginning of Surrealism, as well as Roger Vitrac and Robert Desnos, violently denounced the new direction of what in their eyes was becoming a literary and pictorial "school," a coterie, a tribunal—everything that I too wished to avoid. Surrealism, despite my defection and that of its most vigorous adherents, and thanks especially to the will and perseverance of André Breton and his new friends,

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extended its influence, impressed the snobs. It was a new experiment, but in a very different spirit from what I wished.

New adherents appeared, of whom the most restless were three Spaniards—Buñuel, a director who was the most genuine Surrealist in the realm of film, and two painters, Miró and Salvador Dalí, the latter wavering still between the careers of clown, painter, and businessman. These three “artists” exploited more than they served Surrealism, despite their acrobatic virtuosity. My estrangement notwithstanding, I realized that Surrealism, such as I had dreamed it, was losing all its purity for me.

But, despite its popularization, which was visible and continues to be visible in posters, shop windows, and vocabulary, Surrealism has never ceased exercising its power. I cannot forget that, in spite of the excommunications that always seemed ridiculous to me, like all excommunications, I have never ceased to be Surrealist. Indeed, Surrealism is not a literary school or a religion. It is the expression of an attitude and a state of mind and especially the expression of freedom. All the rules, all the definitions, all the masks imposed on it have not diminished its power. Historically, one can claim that it is lost in the sands, but like a river, it continues to bore its course deep underground. Surrealism, like Dadaism, has become an “epoch” in the history of the human spirit, and it is not for me, as witness and participant, to judge its significance. I think, however, that after a quarter of a century it remains very great. What seems singular and difficult to explain (I turn then to my visitors) is that after the Second World War it is only in England, with its “angry young men,” that one was able to witness a jolt comparable to what Dadaism and then Surrealism produced.

And this time, it was I that put the question. My interviewers replied with only these words: “For us, that’s another story. . . .”