

Growing up with anarchists, surrealists and pataphysicians (with some comments on *Surrealism in Britain* by Michael Remy)

THE COLLEGE I ATTENDED in the mid-30s was deemed 'progressive' at the time, and proud of its Charter granted by Elizabeth I. Despite the attendant horrors — compulsory sports, compulsory chapel, marching up and down with the absurd O.T.C (Officers Training Corps), the administration did show some aesthetic aspirations, such as the drama society (in which I shone) and the art class whose intelligent teacher twice inspired his boys to win prizes at the annual national student painting competitions. Maybe he can be thanked for the fact that the school library's art section included Herbert Read's 1936 anthology *Surrealism*. The discovery of all those challenging texts, those marvellous illustrations, was exhilarating and gave a new dimension to my love, from a tender age, of Carroll's *Alice* books and *The Hunting of the Snark*.



Simon Watson Taylor, 1946

I was brought up in West Sussex among the South Downs (great for sliding down a hill on a tin tray), but, for domestic reasons which I have long forgotten, in 1940 we abandoned our rural delights — pine and birch woods, heather, gorse, sandy lanes — for the rigours of London. Our house at the top of Highgate Hill had a fine panoramic view over the city stretched out below. When the bombing started, the blacked-out night created an apocalyptic vision of the flames of hell. In 1941 I left the family home and moved to Chelsea, rooming in a series of bohemian lodgings and finally acquiring a flat just off the King's Road. I was an actor by now, having plunged into what turned out to be a fairly brief career, starting off with the loveable Robert Atkins's Shakespeare Company at the Open Air Theatre and continuing at the Birmingham Rep, where Margaret Leighton and Yvonne Mitchell were fellow-members of the company. And so on.

On the track of surrealism

In fact, I began to realise that I lacked the necessary single-minded devotion to theatre, and was probably simply not talented enough. In any case, my thoughts were elsewhere on the track of surrealism. And that meant, above all, visiting Anton Zwemmer's splendid bookshop in Charing Cross Road, presided over by the imposing figure of Rudolf Friedmann, authority on surrealism and a devotee of the Marquis de Sade, whom he referred to reverentially as 'The Master'. It was here that I found *The London Bulletin*, containing the address of the editor, E.L.T. Mesens, Belgian art dealer, one-time composer, surrealist poet. So I wrote to Mesens, got a friendly reply and paid him a visit at his Hampstead home (in the same street as Roland Penrose, whose front lawn featured Henry Moore's sculpture of a hollowed-out female figure which so outraged their neighbours that they organised a petition to the local council to have it removed). Mesens and Penrose became close friends, and remained so over the years. By 1942 I had been inducted into the London-based surrealist group, a bizarre and attractive amalgam, at that time, of pre-war adherents (Eileen Agar, John Banting, Gordon Onslow-Ford...) and the new enthusiasts, whose names included young

exiles from France and Belgium serving with their 'Free Forces' or working for the BBC. The Barcelona Restaurant in Soho provided the site for the weekly meetings of this obstreperous collective in an atmosphere enlivened by the presence of an ever-changing cast of delectable girlfriends. Ah, Marie-Louise! With her in the picture, I must backtrack...

Discovering the anarchists

At school, I had enjoyed annoying the teachers and fellow-students, from the comparative safety of the Upper Sixth form, by sporting the lapel-pin of the YCL (Young Communist League) on my blazer. Once installed in London I joined my local branch of the organisation, and was set to work for the cause: predictably, my father was apoplectic when he discovered me selling *The Daily Worker* outside Archway tube station. Naturally, I went along to Trafalgar Square in January 1941 to attend a rally called by the People's Convention (in reality, of course, a Stalinist front with the usual luminaries up on the plinth under the benign gaze of the Dean of Canterbury). A huge crowd, and on the fringes people offering literature that peddled every conceivable left-wing or 'progressive' viewpoint. Somewhere along this line of advocates of some political or spiritual goal I glimpsed a radiantly beautiful face, Latin features, black hair and eyes, olive skin: someone as vibrant as this must be selling something interesting! It turned out to be *War Commentary*, a weekly newspaper/bulletin published by the London Anarchist Group from their office and library in Red Lion Street. I dashed off to see them the following day, and there indeed was the young woman of Trafalgar Square, Marie-Louise Berneri, daughter of the celebrated Italian anarchist Camillo Berneri. She became a close friend, as did Philip Sansom, the political cartoonist of *War Commentary*, and Vernon Richards, Marie-Louise's companion, who owned a commercial printing press in Whitechapel which also printed *War Commentary* and a host of anarchist books and pamphlets. Amid these libertarian surroundings my communist pretensions evaporated without a trace.

Free Unions/Unions Libres

Inevitably, I introduced Marie-Louise and Philip to my recently acquired surrealist friends at one of our evening gatherings at the Barcelona. Quite rightly, all the men, with the exception of Mesens — married but misogynistic, fell in love with her. In 1944 I had inherited £2,000 (a tidy sum in those days) from an uncle, so in that year I began to plan a surrealist review, Mesens and Brunius having approved the project. I intended to call it *Free Unions/Unions Libres*, in homage to André Breton's love poem *Union Libre*. Here, Marie-Louise and Philip would prove indispensable, since Express Printers could not only print the review but also get hold of the high-quality paper which was practically unobtainable during those war years (yes, my anarchist friends had good contacts in the 'black' economy). I immediately set about collecting the material for the review. Meanwhile, Mesens and Brunius spent most of the time exchanging recriminations by letter over policy and activity; the only point on which they seemed to agree was that I was performing a useful task in putting together a surrealist publication. By the end of the year I had assembled all the material destined for the review and was awaiting the arrival from Birmingham of Conroy Maddox's cover design. All the contributors — prose texts, poems, illustrations — were from surrealists, apart from my friend of those distant days, Lucian Freud, who was, even then, far too canny to associate himself with any group but happily offered me a pen-and-ink drawing representing a stuffed owl with walrus tusks perched in a glass cylinder on a rush-bottomed chair — in my view, then and now, an essentially surrealist still life. He called it 'Room in West Sussex'.

The Special Branch Raid and John Olday

Then at the end of the year disaster struck. Early one Sunday morning my flat was invaded by Scotland Yard Special Branch police. It transpired later that they had been searching for my German anarchist friend, the artist-poet John Olday, one of the contributors to *Free Unions*. Their raid on his studio had

proved unfruitful, but they did find my number scrawled on a wall near his phone. Hence the visit. No sign of Olday, of course (they never did catch up with him). All they could find that seemed of the slightest interest was the mass of typescripts, photos and art-work heaped on my desk. After rifling in total bemusement through this incomprehensible gibberish and those rude pictures they decided to haul the whole lot off to Scotland Yard, in a large cardboard box, for further investigation.

It took several months for me to get the material returned. Here again, my anarchist comrades proved useful. One of the group's sympathisers, a charming ex-solicitor (barred for some legal hanky-panky) luckily had a respectable brother sitting in parliament as a Labour M.P. Questions were raised in the House, and eventually the box, with its contents intact but well-thumbed, was delivered to my flat by a plain-clothes detective-constable who remarked cordially that this 'surrealism' seemed very interesting, and was it possible to join the society?



John Olday, 1957

Disaster strikes

Soon, however, another disaster struck. At the end of 1944 four leading anarchists — Vernon Richards, Marie-Louise Berneri, Philip Sansom and Dr John Hewetson — were arrested by the same bunch from Special Branch on a charge of 'incitement to disaffection', having been discovered at Waterloo Station distributing anti-war leaflets to soldiers about to embark for the Middle East. They came up for trial at the Old Bailey in April 1945, and three of the four were given a nine-month jail sentence. I stood bail for Philip at the preliminary hearings. So getting *Free Unions* printed was delayed even more, until Philip and the others were released in October. At last, Express printers were able to get to work on the production, and *Free Unions/Union Libres* finally appeared in July 1946, after the end of the war and about fifteen months behind schedule.



John Olday, 1973: performing his cabaret act at the Centro Iberico, Haverstock Hill, London (on the wall behind him hangs one of his paintings)

Surreal thing

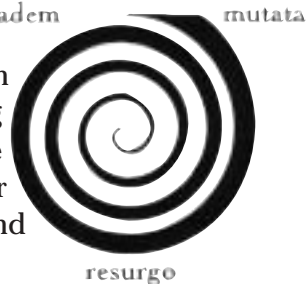
One of my first priorities was to send a copy of the review to André Breton, now back in Paris from the USA where he, along with other surrealists, he had sought refuge during the war. Preparations were already in place there for an international surrealist exhibition, in which the British surrealist artists were expected to participate, but by the spring of 1947, Breton, alarmed by Mesens's apparent apathy and Brunius's indecision, wrote to me as secretary of the London group demanding that specified artists (including Penrose, Maddox, Trevelyan, McWilliam) be invited urgently to contribute works. Eventually, since by then I was travelling a great deal and often out of London, Penrose took over the arduous task of rallying the troops; finally, the text of a manifesto was thrashed out and sent to Breton in time to be included in the Exhibition catalogue. It has to be said that this manifesto proved to be the last gasp of the London-based group, though attempts were occasionally made in later years to revive its fortunes.

I myself came to know Breton quite well. He was delighted with *Free Unions*, and when in Paris I was able to join gatherings of his friends in his apartment, and occasionally attend meetings of the newly reconstituted group at one of their regular rendezvous — the Mabilion, the Rhumerie

Martiniquaise, the brasserie of the Place Blanche — graced for a time by Breton's favour. He invited me to contribute to the first of their several post-war surrealist journals, *Néon*, and its sixth issue (1948) included my brief prose text 'Une tache de sang intellectuel', a fervent plea to the surrealists to stop bickering and get on with the revolution. Whistling in the wind, of course: the usual procession of Breton-dictated exclusions continued (Max Ernst for showing at the Venice Biennale, Matta for 'disqualification et ignominie morale', Victor Brauner and five others for 'travail fractionnel'). The last straw, as far as I was concerned, was the 'affaire Carrouges', a complex dispute that pitted Breton and Péret against a number of other leading figures of the movement. The resulting split produced several resignations, including those of two of my closest friends, the essayist and art historian Patrick Waldberg and the painter Jacques Hérold. I refused to sign a declaration in support of Breton's position, sent to me in London by the 'caporal de garde' Jean Schuster, and disputed the version of events set out by Péret in a letter to me, pleading that I should not join the dissidents. So bye-bye official surrealism!

After a period of reflection, I followed the example of my friend the French writer Jean Ferry, who had quit the surrealists in a previous dispute, and in 1954 joined up with the recently created Collège de Pataphysique, which aimed, in its own idiosyncratic way, to celebrate the 'science of imaginary solutions' embodied in the exploits and opinions of Alfred Jarry's creation, Dr Faustroll. Already an admirer of Jarry (I had included scenes from *Ubu Rex* in *Free Unions*), I guessed correctly that the pataphysicians would prove a good deal more entertaining than the surrealists, and their publications more fun to write for. My very first piece in the *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* shot a final salvo at the Bretonian fortress: My pseudo-letter

'The Manifesto Game' explored in turn each of the manifestos promulgated by the surrealists from 1946 onwards, listing the names of signatories who had been expelled or had resigned before the following manifesto appeared, a fascinating record of comings and goings (more of the latter than the former) within the movement as Breton, with what Aragon once accurately described as 'son air majoritaire', exercised ruthless control, excommunicating recalcitrants and welcoming fresh zealots.



Au revoir to the Collège de Pataphysique

But the Collège de Pataphysique is another story (and an interesting one)! I myself abandoned my hypothetical status in the hierarchy (Provéditeur-Délégateur, Régent de Britannicité Faustrollienne et de Travaux Pratiques de Alcoôlisme among other imaginary honours) and bid au revoir to them with a centre-spread article in the *T.L.S.* in 1968, 'Alfred Jarry: the magnificent pataphysical posture'. In the course of the text I voiced some mild criticism of one of the College's sacrosanct mythologies. This earned me the classification of 'dead by resignation' in the index of a recent volume celebrating the 'réoccultation' of the College after 25 years of purported silence. Well, all that was a long time ago! At present I am on excellent terms with the recently created London Institute of Pataphysics, and am delighted by its occasional investigations of what passes for 'reality'. Recently, the members celebrated Palindrome Day.



Simon Watson Taylor, 1960s

Surrealism in Britain — crimes and misdemeanours

Returning finally, and briefly, to my surrealist roots, a footnote is essential in the cause of historical veracity. In 1999, an exhaustive and copiously illustrated history of Surrealism's British outpost

appeared, *Surrealism in Britain* by Michel Remy (Ashgate as publishers in the hardback edition, Lund Humphries/Ashgate in the paperback edition). The author's coverage of the pre-war years is, on the whole, reasonably accurate, but he comes a cropper when it comes to the war years, especially the period between 1943 and 1947. In particular, I am horrified by the section of Chapter Six devoted to *Free Unions*, where his version of the events surrounding the seizure from my flat by Scotland Yard's Special Branch of the material destined for the review, and the subsequent arrest of four leading anarchists by the same bunch, is almost total fiction. Alas, the author, professor of English literature at the University of Nice, who claims in the blurb to have spent '20 years of patient research' in the project, never made any attempt to find me and discuss these quite complicated matters with me, despite the fact that I was living in London until the end of 1974 (listed in the telephone directory). Even after I quit the UK at the beginning of 1975 and commenced what turned out to be 28 years of continuous nomadic travels across the world, I could have been contacted via the publishers of *The Ubu Plays* (Methuen) or my London literary agent, both of whom had contact addresses for me. When I finally returned to the UK in 2000 and regretfully hung up my backpack friends told me about the book, and I wrote to Michel Remy asking him to have the publishers send me a copy. After reading the relevant chapter I wrote to him expressing astonishment that he had never tried to get in touch with me, and enclosing about twenty pages of corrections to the text. His answers, eventually (during a phone conversation), was that he had been too busy interviewing surrealists who lived in England to go looking for others who were not around (not his precise words, but the sense is exact). 'Patient research'? Here is a brief summary of just some of the resulting literary crimes and misdemeanours:

Chapter Six: 'Watchman, What of the Night? the *Free Unions* years 1945-51'. The first two pages, incredibly, present a complete travesty of the facts.

For instance:

1. Scotland Yard raided my flat, not 'the premises of Freedom Press'.
2. The police were looking for John Olday, not hoping to find 'evidence of spying activities'.
3. The papers they seized were the typescripts of the review, due to go off soon to Philip Sansom at Express printers. Obviously, they were not 'proofs' as stated.
4. The claim in the next sentence that 'the poems, drawings and articles ready for this new surrealist review were soon declared to be coded messages and as such not to be released' is a fiction dreamed up by the author. Obviously, the police never could have made any such declaration!

The only conclusion I can come to is that the gullible professor was fed this nonsense from someone. My guess is that the culprit is very probably my old acquaintance the garrulous and inventive Conroy Maddox!

5. The following paragraph is nonsense, too. The letters of protest to *Tribune* were in fact written in response to the arrest in March of the four anarchists, not after the seizure of the documents, which had been returned intact by the police at that time.
6. The Freedom Press Defence Committee, of which I was appointed secretary, was set up at this later time, not as a result of the police raid and seizures — a totally different affair. Nor, of course, were my anarchist friends arrested during the raid, but much later, in March 1945, and sentenced, not for 'revolutionary activities' but on a charge of 'incitement to disaffection'. It was the jail sentences imposed on my three comrades that provoked the protests by Herbert Read and many others.
7. The author goes on blithering cheerfully: 'eventually they [the three anarchists] were released and the nature of the documents cleared', remaining totally confused about the facts, still convinced that the police were holding the *Free Unions* material.
8. A bit farther on in the chapter, the author sums up his views on *Free Unions* by opining that 'the review can be seen as a manifesto, produced in a communal spirit'. Not only untrue but insulting:

Free Unions was deliberately the very opposite of being a manifesto; and it was put together by myself alone, with some technical help from Marie-Louise, Philip and enthusiastic support from Jacques Brunius.

9. The following paragraph adds another insult by making the outrageous suggestion that the review's 'Editorial' (by which he means my introduction) was 'probably written by Mesens and Taylor'. I think I detect, here too, Maddox's impish sense of humour at play. In any case, the fact is that Mesens's sole contribution was the Indian ink-and-collage 'score', *The Complete Score Completed*.

10. There are more assertions: that the contributions to the review struck 'a strangely unachieved, unfinished note'. The author observes correctly that the material had been assembled in 1944, but then adds the really silly hint that war-time censorship 'may well have restricted their freedom of expression'! Dear oh dear...

11. Finally, in the following paragraph, where he refers to the imminent International Exhibition in Paris, and to Breton's frustration at Mesens's inactivity, he reproduces the text of the letter that Breton wrote demanding the participation of some of the leading British surrealists, but fails to mention the relevant fact that the letter was addressed to me. (A little gem of misinformation on the



same page: I am referred to as 'S.W. Taylor' and, worse, my sister Sonia is referred to as my 'wife'!)

I could go on, but enough is enough. A paperback edition of *Surrealism in Britain* appeared recently, some three years after the original publication. A long time ago I sent the author some twenty pages of corrections which needed to be made, and he promised, at the time, to approach the publishers. In the event, the text in both editions is identical — nothing has been changed! In answer to my complaint to him about this, he excused himself by saying that the publishers were adamant that no alterations could be made to the text. And there the matters rests.



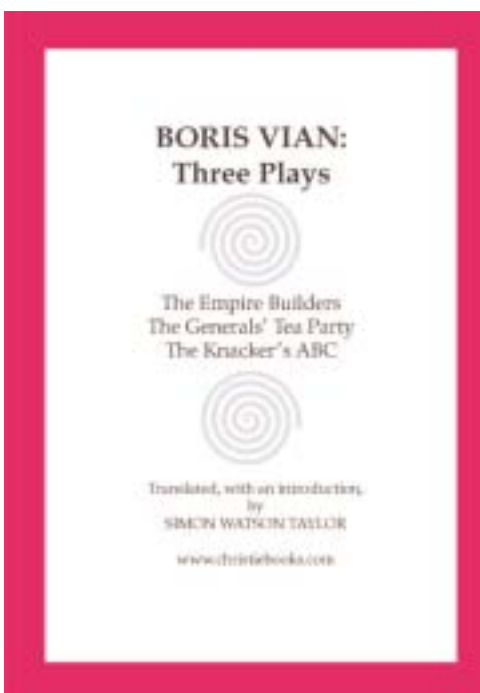
Simon Watson Taylor, Katmandu, 1970s, Top, Goa

Simon Watson Taylor (London, July 2002)

Simon returned to London in 2002 where he died on 4 November, 2005. He remained an anarchist until the end of his life. Before he died, Simon Watson Taylor wrote a new introduction for the ChristieBooks' edition of his revised translations of Boris Vian's three plays: 'The Empire Builders', 'The Generals' Tea Party' and 'The Knacker's ABC'.



Left: original covers of *The Empire Builders* and *The General's Tea Party*.



Three Plays: *The Empire Builders, The Generals' Tea Party, The Knacker's ABC*, by Boris Vian. Revised translation and introduction by Simon Watson Taylor, 2003. (£18.00) ISBN 187397616X ChristieBooks PO Box 35, Hastings, East Sussex, TN34 2UX

Below: Boris Vian

