

ON THE TIME WHEN THE SURREALISTS WERE RIGHT (1935)

In notifying the "International Congress for the Defense of Culture" of their collective support, Surrealist writers, who looked forward to participating in a real discussion, had two principal goals in mind: (1) drawing attention to how unconditional and dangerous the words "defense of culture," taken by themselves, can be; (2) preventing all the sessions that had been set up from dribbling away into antifascist soapbox preaching that would be more or less vague, and seeing to it that there was debate on a certain number of questions that are still disputable, questions which, if left systematically in shadow, would assure that any affirmation of a common outlook, any will to convergent action, would remain mere words at this juncture.

In their letter of April 20 to the organizers, Surrealist writers made it clear that for them there can be no question of defending and upholding culture in a capitalist regime. We are interested, they stated, only in the *development* of this culture, and this very development necessitates above all the transformation of society through proletarian Revolution.

They demand in particular that the following questions be put on the agenda of the Congress: the right to pursue, both in literature and in art, the search for new means of expression;

the right of the artist and writer to continue to study the human problem in all its forms (demanding the freedom of the subject, refusing to judge the quality of a work by the present size of its audience, resisting all attempts to limit the field of observation and action of any man who aspires to create intellectually).

This wish to have a say on specific questions encountered nothing but obstacles: after the participating Surrealist writers were persuaded, without difficulty, to let only one of their number speak for them, they were constantly kept away from the work of organizing the congress, and on the ridiculous pretext that a personal difference that had nothing to do with the congress was being settled—by the person whom the Surrealists had designated to express their point of view—none of their names appeared on the poster or on the program.*

It was only because of the very insistent entreaties of René Crevel and doubtless because of the act of despair, whose

* More than a week before the opening of the Congress, André Breton, meeting Mr. Ehrenburg by chance in the street, apparently committed the error of recalling a few passages of his book, *Seen by a Writer of the U.S.S.R.*, and giving him a severe dressing down. Mr. Ehrenburg's quips may be remembered: "The Surrealists are kindly disposed both to Hegel and Marx and to the Revolution, but what they refuse to do is work. They have things to keep themselves busy. They study pederasty and dreams, for example. . . . They apply themselves to gobbling up an inheritance here, a wife's dowry there. . . . They begin with obscene words. Those of their number who are less sly admit that their program consists of making amorous advances to girls. Those who know more or less what's what understand that they won't get very far that way. For them a woman means conformism. They preach a completely different program: onanism, pederasty, fetishism, exhibitionism, and even sodomy. But it is hard to astonish anybody in Paris even with such a program as this. So . . . Freud comes to the rescue and ordinary perversions are covered with the veil of the incomprehensible. The stupider it is, the better!"

How surprised we were to learn that there was no longer a place for Breton at the Congress, from the moment that the Soviet delegation sided with the man who insulted us! Organizers of the Congress censured what Breton had done and asked him "whether he meant to say that recourse to brutality was the synonym of culture." Breton replied: "Recourse to brutality is no more a 'synonym of culture' to me than recourse to the most contemptible calumny is. In the present case the former can be viewed only as a natural consequence of the latter. It is as impossible for me to admit that I offended the Soviet delegation in the person of Mr. Ehrenburg as it is for me to consider myself offended by this delegation when a book entitled *Seen by a Writer of the U.S.S.R.* appears. I did not know, need I say, that Mr. Ehrenburg, who usually lives in Paris, was a member of this delegation, and all I saw in him was a false witness like any other." We are of the opinion that the question is now closed.

causes are not clear,* committed by him the following night, that Paul Eluard on June 25, at the very end of the session, was allowed to read the text that in the beginning Breton was scheduled to read. The president, moreover, saw fit to interrupt him at one certain sentence to warn the public, whose opinion at that juncture was quite divided but with hostile elements having the upper hand, that since the hall was only rented until 12:30 the lights might go out in a few minutes and that the end of the speech, and any reply to it, would be postponed until the following day. The reply—as noisy, servile, and nonexistent as one could wish for, but permitting no other—which opened the closing session on June 26 again brought out the total lack of impartiality with which the debates had been conducted from beginning to end.

After that we are not surprised to see the following scandalous statement in M. Barbusse's paper, in the report on the work of the Congress: "Eluard declared that he was against the Franco-Soviet pact and against cultural collaboration between France and the U.S.S.R."

The "International Congress for the Defense of Culture" was held under the sign of systematic suppression: the suppression of real cultural problems, the suppression of voices not recognized as being those of the ruling clique. Addressed as it was to that majority of confirmed new conformists, the sentence from Gide's opening speech: "In the capitalist society in which we live today, it seems almost impossible for literature of value to be anything but a literature of protest" took on a rather cruel and enigmatic meaning. There was partial suppression of the speeches of Magdeleine Paz, of Plisnier, pure and simple skipping of that of the Chinese delegate, and complete withdrawal of Nezval's right to speak (and how many others, having learned of these methods, had chosen not to be there!), but in the meantime, on the other hand, there were moving declarations such as those of Malraux, Waldo Frank, or Pasternak—a veritable bath of useless repetitions, infantile considerations,

* *Commune*, the organ of the A.E.A.R., naturally takes it upon itself to draw "the lesson of a lifetime, interrupted only because of René Crevel's despair at not being physically able to maintain himself at the level of that immediate sense of reality that he intended to give all his attention to." We leave the responsibility for this completely gratuitous, crudely pragmatic, and fundamentally dishonest statement on the shoulders of its anonymous authors. What a contrary "lesson" *Commune* would justify our drawing from the suicide of Mayakovsky!

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and toadying: those claiming to be saving culture chose an unhealthy climate for it. The way in which this Congress, supposedly a revolutionary one, was dissolved is the exact counterpart of the way in which it was announced. It was announced by posters with certain names standing out in larger letters in red; it ended with the creation of an "International Association of Writers for the Defense of Culture" directed by a board of 112 members, having at its head a presidium—a board which to all appearances elected itself, since neither the participants nor members of the audience were consulted on its composition.

We can do no more than formally notify this board, this association, of our mistrust.

We foresee the attempt that will be made to use such a declaration against us. Being bent on the ruin of the ideological position that was theirs for some time and still is ours, the former Surrealists who have become functionaries of the Communist Party or aspire to become such, people who, doubtless in order to get themselves forgiven for their past trouble-making, have abandoned all critical sense and are anxious to be examples of the most fanatic obedience by being ever ready to contradict on order what they have affirmed on order—these former Surrealists will of course be the first to denounce us as professional malcontents, as systematic opponents. Everyone knows the revolting content people have managed to read into this latter grievance: declaring that one disagrees on such and such a point with the official party line is not only to perform an act of ridiculous purism, but also to do a disservice to the U.S.R., to try to snatch militants away from the Party, to give arms to the enemies of the proletariat, to behave "objectively" as counter-revolutionaries. "We in no way consider Marx's theory as something perfect and unassailable; on the contrary, we are persuaded that it has provided only the bases of a science that Socialists must necessarily perfect in every way if they do not wish to lag behind life": Lenin, who expressed himself in this fashion in 1899, thereby gives us every reason to think that in this regard Leninism today is undergoing the same fate as Marxism. At the very least this assurance does not dispose us to accept the present watchwords of the Communist International without examination and to approve of the way in which they are applied *a priori*. We would think that we were failing

our duty as revolutionary intellectuals if we were to accept these watchwords before having thought them over. If there are some that we do not accept in the end, we would again fail in this duty if we did not point out that our entire being balks at them, that we need to be convinced in order to follow with the same heartfelt enthusiasm.

We deplore, once again, the more and more habitual recourse to certain ways of discrediting people which in the revolutionary struggle result in strengthening particular resistances rather than destroying them. One of these ways, which merely comes to the rescue of the preceding method, consists of representing the various opposition elements as an organic, almost homogeneous whole moved by feelings that are wholly negative, in short as a single instrument of sabotage. Merely expressing a doubt about an instruction that has been received suffices to relegate you to the category of public malefactors (at least that is what they ridiculously try to make you out to be in the eyes of the masses): you are under orders from Trotsky, if not of Doriot. Socialism is being built in only one country, you are told; consequently you must have blind confidence in the leaders of that country. Whatever it may be that you object to, any hesitation on your part is criminal. This is the point we have reached, this is the intellectual freedom that is left us. Any man who thinks in a revolutionary way today is faced with a system of thought that is not his own, that at best it is up to his ingenuity to foresee, that at best it is up to his flexibility to try to justify from day to day.

In this frenetic need for orthodoxy, it is impossible, both for an individual and for a party, to see anything but the mark of a feeble self-awareness. "A party establishes itself as a victorious party by dividing itself, or by being able to bear division," Engels said, and also: "The solidarity of the proletariat is everywhere realized in groupings of different parties which engage in a life and death struggle as did the Christian sects in the Roman Empire during the worst persecutions." The spectacle of the divisions of the Workers' Social Democratic Party in Russia in 1903 and of the numerous and lengthy conflicts between tendencies that followed, *in conjunction with the extreme possibilities of regrouping the most divergent—but intact—minds to bring about a truly revolutionary situation* furnishes the most striking proof of these words. Disregarding insults and attempts to intimidate us, we shall continue to try to keep ourselves intact and to that end safeguard at any cost the inde-

pendence of our judgment, without for all that aspiring to keep ourselves free of error in any and every circumstance.

We lay entire claim to this right, so extensively employed by "professional revolutionaries" in the first part of the twentieth century, for all revolutionary intellectuals, *on condition that they participate actively in the efforts to unite the present situation, dominated by the awareness of the fascist menace, may necessitate.* Our collaboration in the *Call to Struggle* of February 10, 1934, appealing to all workers, organized or not, to bring a unity of action into being as quickly as possible, and apply to this process "the very broad spirit of conciliation demanded by the seriousness of the present hour," our immediate adherence to the Intellectuals' Vigilance Committee, our survey on unity of action of April 1934, our presence in the street during all the great workers' demonstrations suffice, we believe, to confound those who still dare speak of our "ivory tower." We nonetheless persist in defining ourselves as specifically as possible on the intellectual plane; we intend not to be forced to give up anything that appears valuable to us and proper to us on this plane, just as we reserve the right, if need be, in the presence of such a decision, to say: "In our opinion this is unjust, this is false" of any measure that clashes with what lies deepest within ourselves, and to do so with all the more reason if the approval of any collectivity, which is always easy to exploit, is behind it. We maintain that the free statement of all points of view and the permanent confrontation of all tendencies constitute the most indispensable ferment of the revolutionary struggle. "Everyone is free to say and to write what he pleases," Lenin stated in 1905; "freedom of speech and freedom of the press must be total." We shall consider any other conception to be reactionary.

Opportunism today unfortunately tends to annihilate the two essential ingredients of the revolutionary spirit such as it has always manifested itself till now: the refractory nature—dynamic and creative—of certain beings, and their careful and complete fulfillment of their pledges to themselves and to others during common action. Whether in the field of politics or in the field of art, two forces—the spontaneous refusal of the conditions of life offered man and the imperative need to change them, on the one hand, and enduring fidelity to principles or moral rigor on the other—have carried the world forward. One cannot hem them in with impunity, and even combat them for years, only to replace them with the messianic idea of what is

being accomplished in the U.S.S.R. and cannot help but be accomplished by the U.S.S.R., an idea that necessitates an *a priori* sanction of a policy of more and more serious compromises. We say that by traveling farther and farther along this road the revolutionary spirit cannot help but become blunted and corrupted. On this point, we again assure ourselves that we have Lenin on our side, for on September 3, 1917, he wrote: "The duty of a revolutionary party is not to proclaim an impossible renunciation of all sorts of compromises but to know how, in the course of all compromises, insofar as these are inevitable, to keep one's fidelity to one's principles, one's class, one's revolutionary aim, and to prepare the revolution and the education of the masses that must be led to victory." If these latter conditions were not fulfilled, we believe that it would no longer be a question of compromises, but of a surrender of principle. Need we grant that they have been fulfilled?

No. We were moved, in fact, as so many others were, by the declaration stating, on May 15, 1935, that "Stalin understands and fully approves the national defense policy promulgated by France to keep its armed forces up to the standards required by its security." If at the very beginning we insisted on considering this to be only another particularly painful compromise on the part of the head of the Communist International, we nonetheless immediately expressed, with all the force of our desire, the most explicit reservations about the possibilities of accepting the instructions that people here hastened to deduce from it: the abandonment of the watchword "transformation of imperialist war into civil war" (the condemnation of revolutionary defeatism), the denunciation of the Germany of 1935 as the one instigator of a war that is soon to come (the discouraging of all hope of fraternization in the event of war), and the reawakening among French workers of the idea of loyalty to one's country. The position we took against these directives, from the very first day, is well known. This position is consonant in all respects with that of the Intellectuals' Vigilance Committee: it is against any policy of encirclement and isolation of Germany, for the examination by an international committee of the concrete offers of limitation and reduction of armaments made by Hitler, and for the revision of the treaty of Versailles, the principal obstacle to continued peace, through political negotiations. It is hardly necessary to emphasize that since the time the signing of the Anglo-German convention allowing German naval rearmament has sanctioned this way of looking at

Stalin favors the French military

things, in the very measure that this convention can be regarded only as a consequence of the policy of increasingly barring Germany from power, a policy which the Franco-Soviet pact has suddenly made even more painful for her.

By itself such a consideration does not dispose us to accept the idea of loyalty to one's country, in whatever transitional form it is put before us. Any sacrifice on our part to this idea and to the famous duties which result from it would immediately conflict with the very definite initial reasons for becoming revolutionaries that we know we had. Long before becoming aware of economic and social realities, outside of which the struggle against everything that we wish to overthrow would have been pointless, we were struck by the absolute inanity of such concepts, and on this point nothing will ever force us to make honorable amends. What is happening in the U.S.S.R. and what has happened there in the past? No denial has come to us to dissipate the dense shadow that Vaillant-Couturier, Thorez and Company have cast over events. We have spoken of how this shadow hung over the International Congress of Writers (whose speakers' stand was the scene of the symbolic parading of the author of this wildly chauvinistic declaration: "I have again been told: 'It is you who have forced Germany to rearm, because of the humiliation that you have subjected her to for twenty years with your treaty.' I say in reply that she had to accept this humiliation. Germany wanted war [I mean the German people, if it is true that a people ever want anything] and lost it. They must pay the price for these things. I have no taste for forgiveness.")*

If we violently object to all attempts to rehabilitate the idea of loyalty to one's country, against all appeals to national sentiment in a capitalist regime, it is not only, I insist, because in the deepest and remotest part of ourselves we feel ourselves totally incapable of subscribing to it, it is not only because we see in it the stirring up of a sordid illusion that only too often has set the world on fire, but above all because even *with the best will in the world* we cannot avoid taking these concepts as a symptom of a general evil that can be described. This evil is definable from the moment that such a symptom can be compared with equally morbid symptoms and form a homogeneous group with them. We were often reproached, once upon a time,

* Julien Benda (*Nouvelle revue française*, May 1935).

for having echoed the protests raised by the spectacle of certain Soviet films, such as *Road of Life*, that tended to stupid moral preaching. "The wind of systematic cretinization that blows from the U.S.S.R.," one of our correspondents was not afraid to write about them. A few months ago, the fact of our having read in *Lu* some of the answers to a survey conducted by Soviet papers on the present conception of love and the common life of men and women in the U.S.S.R. (there was a choice of confidential replies by men and women, each more heart-breaking than the last) made us ask ourselves for a moment whether the attitude just mentioned—that until then we had not sided with—was that extreme. Let us pass rapidly over the disappointment caused us by the wretched products of "proletarian art" and "Socialist realism." Nor have we ceased worrying about the *totalitarian cult* through which certain selfish zealots are trying to secure the loyalty of the working masses not only to the U.S.S.R. but also to the person of its chief (the "everything thanks to you, great educator Stalin" of the former bandit Avdeenko brings to mind the "so long as it is your sire, general" of the ignoble Claudel). But if we still entertained some doubt about the hopeless outcome of such an evil (it is not a question of not knowing what the Revolution has been, what it has done; it is a question of knowing what state of health it is in if it is still alive), this doubt, we declare, could not possibly withstand the reading of the letters which *Lu* reprinted from *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in its issue of July 12, 1935, under the title:

RESPECT YOUR PARENTS

On March 23 *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published the letter of a worker in the Ordjonikidze factory. This letter criticized the attitude of a young worker named Tchernychev who was arrogant to his parents. A hard worker at the factory, he was unbearable at home. The paper has received a great many letters on the subject:

I WAS ASHAMED

I showed my parents the letter about the young communist Tchernychev. I was ashamed: this letter could also apply to me. My mother said to me: "You see, Alexandre, you're like Tchernychev in several ways.

You think I don't understand anything, you don't let me get a word in, you don't respect your brothers and sisters, and you don't want to help them with their studies. My father agreed: yes, your attitude is hardly that of a Young Communist.

It was unpleasant for me to hear such reproaches, but they were justified. At a family reunion, I gave my word that I would change my habits. I promised to keep an eye on my brother Leo who is a bad student and sometimes drinks with his schoolmates; I also promised to keep an eye on the progress of my sisters at school and to help them if they need help. I am the head of the Young Communist organization. If I don't keep my word, if I don't reform, what will the rank and file say? It is I who must furnish an example.

Smolov, Kolkhoz Frounzé.

RESPECT YOUR ELDERS

I love my mother very much, I always help her, and now that I am independent, I do not forget to write her long detailed letters. It is a joy to have such a dear and beloved being somewhere and always be able to tell that person about your life.

The attitude of many of my fellow students toward their parents always used to surprise me.

I often heard these words:

"I haven't written my parents for two months."

I remember the following incident. I had just written a letter. Young Communist Savine said to me: "Who are you writing to?" "My mother."

"Isn't your letter too long?" "Only eight pages." "Eight pages!" he said, astonished. "I never write more than a page. I put 'Am in good health' and that's all. How can my mother understand anything, she's a peasant on a collective farm."

My mother is a simple peasant on a collective farm too. Nonetheless she'll be happy to receive a detailed letter from her son, who has become a brigadier in the shock troops and a student.

No, Tchernychev is not a civilized man. He does not deserve this title because he doesn't respect his parents.

Krachennikov, student.

It is almost useless to emphasize the ultra-conformist wretchedness of such elucubrations, which a privately owned paper in France would hardly make space for. The least that can be said of them is that they give a semblance of belated justification to the famous "Moscow the dotard," an expression coined by one of those personages who today are quite at home serv-

ing Moscow, dotard or not, on their knees, in return for a few small advantages. Let us limit ourselves to noticing the process of rapid regression that would have it that after the fatherland it is the family that escapes the dying Russian Revolution without a scratch (what does André Gide think of that?). For the finest victories of socialism to be sent down the drain all that remains to be done is to reestablish religion there—why not?—and private property. Even at the cost of arousing the fury of their toadies, we ask if there is any need of drawing up another balance sheet in order to judge a regime by its works—in this case the *present* 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.

We can do no more than to formally notify this regime, this chief, of our mistrust.

André BRETON, Salvador DALÍ, Oscar DOMINGUEZ, Paul ELUARD, Max ERNST, Marcel FOURRIER, Maurice HEINE, Maurice HENRY, Georges HUGNET, Sylvain ITKINE, Marcel JEAN, Dora MAAR, René MA-GRITTE, Léo MALET, Marie-Louise MAYOUX, Jehan MAYOUX, E.-L.-T. MÉSENS, Paul NOUGÉ, Méret OPPENHEIM, Henri PARISOT, Benjamin PÉRET, Man RAY, Maurice SINGER, André SOURIS, Yves TANGUY, Robert VALANÇAY.

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