CROSSED WIRES

On the Prague-Paris Surrealist Telephone

Derek Sayer

In memory of Václav Havel

I prefer, once again, walking by night to believing myself a man who walks by daylight.
—*André Breton*, L'Amour fou

André Breton's grave is not to be found where we might expect it, in the great romantic necropolis of Pére Lachaise alongside Guillaume Apollinaire, Paul Éluard, and Max Ernst, or in Montparnasse Cemetery cheek-by-jowl with Charles Baudelaire, Samuel Beckett, and Juliet and Man Ray. The founder of surrealism, whose heart failed him shortly after six o'clock in the morning of September 28, 1966, sleeps in the more prosaic surrounds of Batignolles Cemetery on the northwestern outskirts of Paris. Only a handful of other literary and artistic celebrities (Paul Verlaine, Blaise Cendrars, Feodor Chaliapin, Léon Bakst) are buried there. Not that André would have wanted for surrealist company: his faithful lieutenant

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Benjamin Péret had been laid to rest in Batignolles seven years earlier.[1] So was the Czech surrealist poet Jindřich Heisler, who died an untimely death in 1953 (but whose mortal remains were apparently later removed when the lease expired on his plot).[2] Toyen (née Marie Čermínová), with whom Heisler abandoned Prague in March 1947, joined them in 1980. Annie Le Brun relates how, in her seventies, the exiled Czech painter used to "take herself off several times a week to the cinema to see X-rated films. Watching her go silently into the uncertain night, how many times have I not thought of this confession of her friend Štyrský in 1938: 'My eyes need to be thrown constant food. They gulp it down with a brutal avidity. And at night, during sleep, they digest it.'"[3] A stalwart of the postwar Paris surrealist group, Toyen moved into Breton's Pigalle apartment at 42, rue Fontaine, at his widow Elisa Claro's invitation after his death. Elisa, who was the poet's third wife, was buried beside her husband in 2000.

Around a thousand mourners made the long trek out to the city limits for Breton's funeral. Marcel Duchamp, Philippe Soupault, Michel Leiris, Jacques Prévert, and Simone Kahn, Breton's first wife, were among those who came to pay their last respects. Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, and Louis Aragon, who had all at one time or another been members of the Paris surrealist group, did not attend, although Aragon, who had not spoken to Breton since the two men's very public split over surrealism's relations with the French Communist Party in 1933, published a tearful memoir in *Lettres françaises* of "the friend of my youth . . . that great poet whom I never stopped loving."[4] "[Breton] was the lover of love in a world that believes in prostitution," gushed an uncharacteristically sentimental Duchamp: "Who has loved this floating world [*ce monde en dérive*] more than he?"[5] Michel Foucault, whose *Les Mots et les choses* had been published just six months earlier, wrote that "Breton's death . . . is an all-powerful death, very close to us, like Agamemnon's death was for the House of Atreus (that is, for every Greek)."[6] Batignolles is no Mycenae; the cemetery lies in a drab suburban landscape bisected by a flyover of the Boulevard Périphique. Some might nevertheless think it a fitting resting place for a poet who devoted his life to revealing the magic that lurks in the mundane.

1. According to Marc Lowenthal, Breton wished to be buried next to Péret. See Lowenthal's introduction to Benjamin Péret, *The Leg of Lamb: Its Life and Works*, trans. Lowenthal (Cambridge: Wakefield Press, 2011), x. He gives no primary source for this claim.

2. I owe this information to my friend Jindřich Toman, who is Heisler's nephew.

3. Annie Le Brun, "A l'instant du silence des lois," in *Štyrský, Toyen, Heisler*, ed. Jana Claverie, ex. cat. (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1982), 57.

4. Louis Aragon, "André Breton," *Lettres françaises* 1 (October 6, 1966), as quoted in Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (New York: Da Capo, 1997), 622–23.

5. Marcel Duchamp, untitled tribute to Breton, in *L'archibras* 1 (April 1967): 17.

6. Michel Foucault, "André Breton: A Literature of Knowledge," interview with Claude Bonnefoy, *Arts-Loisirs*, October 5, 1966, translated in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961–1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext[e], 1996), 10.

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"I seek the gold of time," reads the inscription on Breton's grave. His friends chose the epitaph, a line from his *Discourse on the Paucity of Reality*, on the morning of his death, supposedly at random and "without reference to its context."[7] The gravestone itself is a plain rectangular slab, devoid of any embellishment save for an incongruous stone ornament carved with multiple triangular facets that Breton had found while vacationing in the Dordogne a month earlier. To most visitors the object would be meaningless. Historians of surrealism have had nothing to say about it either. But to Breton, who believed in *hasard objectif*, stumbling across such a memento was an encounter pregnant with significances. The explanation for the presence of the ornament in Batignolles can be found in two photographs that accompanied the encomiums to the surrealist leader published in the first issue of the Paris surrealists' journal *L'archibras* in April 1967. One photograph, taken by the Yugoslav poet Radovan Ivsić, a close friend of Toyen's, shows Breton's *objet trouvé*. It is captioned, "Roof ornament? André Breton recognized above all in this object, the last he found, in August 1966 at Domme in the Dordogne, the Starry Castle in Prague. Cf. *L'Amour fou*, p. 145." The other image is on a postcard that Breton reproduced alongside photographs by Brassaï, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Man Ray in *L'Amour fou* (1937), the incandescent text inspired by his love for his second wife, Jacqueline Lamba, whom he met in the Café Cyrano on the place Blanche in May 1934. Though there is nothing to indicate it, the card depicts a well-known Czech landmark: Letohrádek Hvězda (Star Castle) at Bílá hora (the White Mountain) on the western outskirts of Prague.[8] The resemblances are plain for all to see.

1

This unlikely echo of Prague in the suburbs of Paris seems a perfect example of that "fortuitous meeting of two distant realities on an inappropriate plane" by which Breton, quoting Max Ernst, defined "the surrealist situation of the object," in the lecture of that title he delivered at Prague's Mánes Gallery on March 29, 1935.[9] Breton's obsession with Star Castle began during the two weeks in spring that he spent in the Czech Lands with Lamba and his fellow-poet Paul Éluard as a guest of the recently formed Czechoslovak Surrealist Group.[10] It would be

7. Philippe Audoin, "Comme dans un rêve," *L'archibras* 1 (April 1967): 15.

8. The photographs are reproduced in *L'archibras* 1 (April 1967): 21.

9. André Breton, "Surrealist Situation of the Object: Situation of the Surrealist Object," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 275.

10. The poet Vítězslav Nezval edited the first Czech surrealist magazine, *Zvěrokruh* (*Zodiac*), which produced two issues in November and December 1930. He met Breton in the Café de la place Blanche in Paris on May 9, 1933. The Group of Surrealists in Czechoslovakia (Skupina surrealistů v Československu) was officially launched on March 21, 1934. The members listed in "Surrealismus v ČSR" ("Surrealism in the Czechoslovak Republic"), the group's founding manifesto, were Nezval, the poet Konstantín Biebl, the psychoanalytic theorist Bohuslav Brouk,

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Breton's only visit to the city, though he would have liked to return.[11] Bathed in the glow of *l'amour fou*, the trip seems to have left nothing but rosy memories behind it. André and Jacqueline had celebrated their nuptials the previous August (the bride stripped bare for her guests and Man Ray's camera in a re-creation of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*),[12] and a week later Éluard married his fiancée Nusch, whose own naked body, also posed and shot by Man, would soon merge with Paul's verses in the "carnal perfection" of the collection *Facile*.[13] Angelo Maria Ripellino is no doubt right that Jacqueline's daughter Aube, André's only child, was conceived in Prague; the mood of the moment colored everything.[14] "Often," Breton wrote the Czech poet Vítězslav Nezval on his return to Paris, "in the mornings, before we met up for lunch, I would look out of the window of the room at the rain as beautiful as the sun over Prague and I would enjoy this very rare certainty that I would take away from this city and from you all one of the most beautiful memories of my life."[15]

Though the surrealist leader had never previously set foot in the Czech capital, he immediately felt at home. He saw affinities, at every turn, between the city on the Vltava and the surrealist worldview. "I am very happy to be speaking today," he told the several hundred people who had gathered to hear him at the Mánes Gallery,

> in a city outside France which yesterday was still unknown to me, but which of all the cities I had not visited was by far the least foreign to me. Prague with its legendary charms is, in fact, one of those cities that electively pin down poetic thought, which is always more or less adrift in space. Completely apart from the geographical, historical, and economic considerations that this city and its inhabitants may lend them-

the theater director Jindřich Honzl, the composer Jaroslav Ježek, the sculptor Vincenc Makovský, and the painters Štyrský and Toyen. The critic Karel Teige joined a few weeks later. Three friends of Nezval's listed in "Surrealismus v ČSR," Imre Forbath, Katy King, and Josef Kundtadt, left soon afterward; Makovský was later expelled. Jindřich Heisler joined after Nezval's unilateral dissolution of the group (which immediately reconstituted itself without him) in March 1938. It finally disbanded when Toyen and Heisler left Prague for Paris in 1947. The group's first exhibition took place at the Mánes Gallery from January 15 through February 3, 1935; see Karel Teige and Vítězslav Nezval, *První výstava skupiny surrealistů v ČSR: Makovský, Štyrský, Toyen*, ex. cat. (Prague: Mánes, 1935). Both *Zvěrokruh* and "Surrealismus v ČSR" are reprinted in facsimile in *Zvěrokruh 1/ Zvěrokruh 2/ Surrealismus v ČSR/ Mezinárodní bulletin surrealismu/ Surrealismus* (Prague: Torst, 2004). This latter collection is hereafter cited as Torst Surrealist Reprints.

11. In his letter to Nezval of August 25, 1936, Breton speaks of his plans to spend "several years in Prague (or Mexico)." Vítězslav Nezval, *Korespondence Vítězslava Nezvala: Depeše z konce tisíciletí* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1981), 95.

12. *André Breton: La beauté convulsive*, ex. cat. (Paris: Éditions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1991), 214.

13. The description is René Char's, in an undated letter to Man Ray, quoted in Dominique Rabourdin, "Postface," in Paul Éluard and Man Ray, *Facile* (Paris: La Bibliothèque des Introuvables, 2004), unpaginated. This is a facsimile reprint of the original edition of 1935 (Paris: Éditions G.L.M.).

14. Angelo Maria Ripellino, *Magic Prague*, ed. Michael Henry Heim, trans. David Newton Marinelli (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 57.

15. Breton to Nezval, April 14, 1935, in *André Breton: La beauté convulsive*, 225. The full text (in Czech translation) can be found in *Korespondence Vítězslava Nezvala*, 81–83.

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selves to, when viewed from a distance, with her towers that bristle like no others, it seems to me to be the magic capital of old Europe.

"By the very fact that [Prague] carefully incubates all the delights of the past for the imagination," he assured his audience, "it seems to me that it would be less difficult for me to make myself understood in this corner of the world than any other."[16] The building in which he was speaking nicely illustrated his point, for Otakar Novotný's ultramodern concrete and plate-glass gallery entwined itself around an onion-domed water tower built in 1588–91, the sole survivor of a mill complex dating back to 1419 that the Mánes Artists' Society demolished after it purchased the site in 1926.[17] The past is hard to escape in Prague.

It was not only the city's historic charms that bewitched the visitors. Unlike in Paris, where the surrealists had for years been at odds with the French Communist Party (PCF), the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group appeared to enjoy unusually cordial relations with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ). Breton lectured on "The Political Position of Today's Art," and Éluard recited surrealist poetry at the City Library on April 1 to the Left Front (Levá fronta), a broad coalition of left-wing artists and intellectuals founded in 1929.[18] Reporting on the evening in *Haló-noviny* (*Hello-News*), the KSČ journalist Záviš Kalandra applauded the visitors for "not wanting to degrade their poetic activity to . . . agitational doggerel."[19] A few months earlier, Kalandra had favorably reviewed the Czech translation of Breton's *Les Vases communicants* (1933), which argues for a reconciliation of surrealism and Marxism, insisting that "in this marvelous poetic book of surrealism there is a *scientific* act."[20] *Haló-noviny* also interviewed Breton, who assured its readers that "the authentic art of today goes hand in hand with revolutionary social activity; like the latter, it leads to the confusion and destruction of capitalist society."[21] "This trip is a revelation," Éluard wrote to his ex-wife Gala: "Their [the Czech surrealists'] situation in the Communist Party is exceptional. [Karel] Teige edits the only communist periodical in Czechoslovakia. In every issue there are one or more articles about surrealism. . . . Our photos in the magazines, the laudatory articles in the communist newspapers, the interviews, I believe that for us Prague is the gate to Moscow."[22]

16. Breton, "Surrealist Situation of the Object," 255–56.

17. Zdeněk Wirth, V. V. Štech, and V. Vojtíšek, *Zmizelá Praha, 1. Staré a Nové město s Podskalím* (Prague: Václav Poláček, 1945), 63, 66, and plates 34 and 35. The Mánes Gallery was built in 1930.

18. See the report in the communist daily *Rudé Právo*, April 3, 1935, in Torst Surrealist Reprints, 127.

19. Záviš Kalandra, "A. Breton a P. Éluard v Levé frontě," *Haló-noviny*, April 3, 1935, quoted in *Bulletin internationale du surréalisme/Mezinárodní bulletin surrealismu* 1 (1935): 6, in Torst Surrealist Reprints, 126.

20. Záviš Kalandra, review in *Doba*, 15–16, quoted in *Bulletin internationale du surréalisme/Mezinárodní bulletin surrealismu* 1 (1935): 4–5, in Torst Surrealist Reprints, 124–25. The translators were Nezval and Honzl.

21. "Interview with *Haló-noviny*," in André Breton, *What Is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Monad, 1978), bk. 2, 142.

22. Éluard to Gala, April 7–8, 1935, in his *Lettres à Gala, 1924–48*, ed. Pierre Dreyfus (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 252–53. The magazine to which Éluard refers is *Tvorba* (*Creation*).

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Notwithstanding a packed schedule of lectures, interviews, book signings, radio broadcasts, excursions, and work on the *Bulletin internationale du surréalisme/Mezinárodní bulletin surrealismu*—a project that Nezval says originated over dinner at the Mánes Gallery on April 5 and that Éluard reckoned "very important"[23]—the surrealists found time to do a good deal of exploring in the magic capital. They visited Hradčany Castle, where they took in Zlatá ulička (Golden Lane), whose miniature houses were believed once upon a time to have housed Emperor Rudolf II's alchemists, and the Saint Wenceslas Chapel of Saint Vitus' Cathedral, where Guillaume Apollinaire had seen his face "with its somber jealous eyes" reflected in the agates encrusting the walls.[24] Nezval showed them Úvoz, "more for the house-signs, interesting surrealist objects with a latent sexual significance, than the view,"[25] as well as Neruda Street, Kampa Island, Charles Bridge, the Jewish Quarter, and the Old Town Square (Staroměstské náměstí), which Breton much admired.[26] But the image that seems to have stuck most firmly in his mind was of Star Castle. Built in 1555–57 for the Habsburg governor, Archduke Ferdinand, and his (secret) Jewish wife Philippine Welser, the building takes its name from its shape, a six-pointed star. "Le Château étoilé" (as he soon baptized it) provided Breton with the title for a cascading meditation, published the following year in *Minotaure*, on his love for Jacqueline, *hasard objectif*, and the landscapes of the Canary Islands (which he visited for a surrealist exhibition soon after his return from Prague).[27] The text ends with the sentence "On the side of the abyss, made of philosopher's stone, the starry castle opens." Breton's poetic peregrinations were illustrated with seven *frottages* by Max Ernst, as photographed by Man Ray; the last of them portrays a building perilously

23. Vítězslav Nezval's diary entry for April 5, 1935, MS in Památník národního písemnictví, Prague, quoted in Lenka Bydžovská and Karel Srp, *Český surrealismus 1929–53: Skupina surrealistů v ČSR: Události, vztahy, inspiraci*, ex. cat. (Prague: Galerie hlavního města Prahy/Argo, 1996), 83; Éluard to Gala, April 7–8, 1935, in *Lettres à Gala*, 253. The publication of the *Bulletin*, whose first (bilingual French and Czech) issue came out in Prague later that month, marked the official internationalization of the surrealist movement. Subsequent issues were produced from Tenerife, Brussels, and London.

24. Nezval's diary entry for March 28, in Bydžovská and Srp, *Český surrealismus*, 82. Zlatá ulička was actually more likely to have housed tradesmen (including goldsmiths) than alchemists; hence its name. The incident in the Saint Wenceslas Chapel is related in Guillaume Apollinaire, "The Wandering Jew," in *The Wandering Jew and Other Stories*, trans. Rémy Inglis Hall (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1967), 9.

25. Nezval, diary entry for April 2; the quotation is from his later article "Surrealisté." Both are quoted in Bydžovská and Srp, *Český surrealismus*, 82.

26. These details are taken from Nezval's diary as quoted in *Český surrealismus*, 82–83, and Éluard's letter to Gala of April 7–8, 1935. It is not clear from these sources when—or indeed whether—Breton actually visited Hvězda. He took souvenir photographs during the visit to Czechoslovakia, which he mounted in an album sold in the 2003 auction of his estate. Hvězda was not among these (but nor are there, for instance, any photographs from Brno, which he undoubtedly did visit). These photographs are all reproduced on the DVD accompanying the eight–volume auction catalog. See Claude Oterelo, *André Breton: 42 rue Fontaine* (Paris: Calmels Cohen, 2003), lot no. 5057.

27. The most beautiful of the prewar surrealists' magazines, *Minotaure*, was founded in collaboration with Georges Bataille and published by Skira but was soon taken over by Breton's group. For background, see *Focus on Minotaure: The Animal-Headed Review*, ex. cat. (Geneva: Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, 1987).

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perched over a void. It is undoubtedly Hvězda—even if the old hunting lodge has been newly refurbished with strip windows worthy of Le Corbusier and behind it looms what is likely, judging by the context, to be the summit of Mount Teide in Tenerife.[28] Ernst must have worked from Breton's postcard.

The trouble with the delights of the past is that they come burdened with its baggage. What Breton does not tell us—if indeed he knew it—is that Star Castle has a more determinate location in the local imaginary; it stands on the site of the Battle of the White Mountain (Bílá hora) of November 8, 1620, which has since come to be remembered—at least by Czech nationalists—as the blackest day in Czech history. The defeat led to the final incorporation of the medieval kingdom of Bohemia into Habsburg Austria, heralding what later generations would characterize as a long Darkness (*Temno*) of economic confiscations, religious persecution, political repression, and mass emigration, in which Bohemia became so Germanized that even the Czech language had to struggle to survive. For the patriotic artist Mikoláš Aleš, a product of the nineteenth-century "national revival" (*národní obrození*), Breton's "starry castle" was a grim symbol of the national tragedy: in his 1907 drawing "Bílá hora," beneath the stark legend "1620," the instantly recognizable silhouette of Hvězda provides the backdrop for a lone horseman whose face has been replaced by a skull.[29] When Breton recycled "Le Château étoilé" as part of *L'amour fou* the following year, he illustrated the text with his postcard of Hvězda but gave no indication whatsoever of where the mysterious photograph was taken.[30] The effect was to rid the image of any associations of time and place, setting it adrift in poetic space where it was free to signify as it would. Franz Kafka, whose short story "Metamorphosis" found its way into Breton's *Anthologie du humour noir* a few years later, might have appreciated the irony in this appropriation of so haunted a symbol.[31] He did once remark of his beautiful hometown: "this little mother has claws."[32]

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Less than eighteen months after Breton's death, Alexander Dubček replaced Antonín Novotný as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czecho-

28. André Breton, "Le Château étoilé," in *Minotaure*, facsimile reprinted in 3 vols. (Paris: Skira, 1981), no. 8 (1936), 25–40. The illustration is reproduced (and ascribed to Max Ernst and Man Ray, who is not credited in *Minotaure*) in *Man Ray: Despreocupado pero no indiferente/Unconcerned but Not Indifferent*, ex. cat. (Madrid: La Fabrica, 2007), 193.

29. Mikoláš Aleš, "Bílá hora," pen and ink drawing (1907), reproduced on website "Mikoláš Aleš," www.mikolasales.org/gallery/Herbert/Herbert.htm (accessed March 9, 2012).

30. André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 97–98. The card may have been bought on April 8; Nezval's diary entry reads (in part): "Mrs Breton goes out with Breton, Éluard, and Toyen through Old Prague, the clock, postcard(s)." Bydžovská and Srp, *Český surrealismus*, 83.

31. André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997).

32. Letter to Oskar Pollak, December 20, 1902, in Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken, 1977), translation modified.

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slovakia, and the 1968 "Prague Spring" began. One sign that change was in the air was an exhibition called *The Pleasure Principle* (*Princip slasti*), which showed in Brno, Prague, and Bratislava to a large and appreciative public. Organized by Vincent Bounoure, Claude Cortot, and José Pierre, younger members of the revived surrealist group that Breton had gathered around him after the war, it was the first international surrealist show to have taken place in Czechoslovakia since a much-reduced version of the Paris spectacular *Surréalisme en 1947* was staged in Prague under the title *Mezinárodní surrealismus* (*International Surrealism*) in November 1947.[33] Breton supplied a catalog essay for the latter in which he reiterated "the principles that were formulated during my stay with Éluard in Prague in 1935," insisting: "ART MUST NEVER TAKE ORDERS, WHATEVER HAPPENS!" He had nothing but contempt for "the despicable word *engagement*."[34] It turned out to be a prescient warning: the KSČ coup of "Victorious February" 1948 was just three months away. Thereafter surrealism went underground in Czechoslovakia, until the 1960s.[35] Accompanying the catalog for *The Pleasure Principle* was a leaflet entitled *Surréalistický telefon Praha-Paříž* (*The Prague-Paris Surrealist Telephone*), which consisted of questions by the second-generation Czech surrealists Stanislav Dvorský, Vratislav Effenberger, and Petr Král, along with responses by the Parisians. A series of lectures was concurrently organized under the rubric "Surrealism and Art" at the Prague City Library. Following in the footsteps of Éluard, Lamba, and Breton, a new wave of French surrealists hastened to a *rendezvous des amis* in the magic capital.[36]

33. See *Le surréalisme en 1947: Exposition internationale du Surréalisme présentée par André Breton et Marcel Duchamp*, ex. cat. (Paris: Maeght Éditeur, 1947); *Mezinárodní surrealismus, 30 (410) výstava Topičova salonu od 4. listopadu do 3. prosince 1947*, ex. cat. (Prague: Topičův salon, 1947).

34. André Breton, "Second Ark," in *Free Rein*, trans. Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline d'Amboise (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 99–101, translation slightly modified. I believe "Second Arch" is the better translation of Breton's title, since the first *arche* to which the text implicitly refers was clearly that bridging the Paris and Prague surrealists in 1935.

35. Štyrský, Teige, and Toyen were included in the exhibition *Imaginativní malířství 1930–50* (*Imaginative Painting, 1930–50*) at the South Bohemian Gallery of Mikoláš Aleš in Hluboká nad Vltavou in 1964, which was not open to the general public; part of this exhibition then traveled to the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague. Teige's surrealist collages were exhibited at the Vincenc Kramář Gallery in 1966, and the exhibition then traveled to Brno. Works by Teige and Toyen were included in the 1966 exhibition *Symbols of Monstrosity* (*Symboly obludnosti*) at Gallery D in Prague, which also included the postwar surrealists Václav Tikal, Josef Istler, Mikoláš Medek, and Emilie Medková, among others. The same year saw a retrospective of Štyrský and Toyen at the Moravian Gallery in Brno, which traveled in 1967 to the Mánes Gallery. *Karel Teige: From Poetism to Surrealism* (*Karel Teige: Od poetismu k surrealismu*), with a catalog by Vratislav Effenberger, showed in Brno in June 1967. There were several public lectures and conferences on the interwar avant-garde over the same period, including a discussion of surrealism hosted by the review *Plamen* (*Flame*) in the Club of Czech Writers on April 6, 1966. For fuller details, see "Selected Chronology," in "Anthology of Czech and Slovak Surrealism, III," *Analogon* 40 (2004): xxx–xxxii.

36. See "Selected Chronology," in "Anthology of Czech and Slovak Surrealism, III," xxxii; Stanislav Dvorský, Vratislav Effenberger, Petr Král, and Karel Šváb, "Prague aux couleurs du temps," *L'archibras* 6 (December 1968): 9; and Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, trans. Alison Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 640–42 and 763 n. 58. The artists shown in *The Pleasure Principle* were Baj, Benoit, Camacho, Cárdenes, Dax, Der Kervorkian, De Sanctis, Ginet, Klaphek, Legard, Laloy, Lam, Matta, Miró, Parent, Schröder-Sonnerstern, Silbermann, Télémacque, Terrossian, and Toyen.

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The visitors and their hosts agreed on a statement of principles, the "Prague Platform," which they hoped would serve as a basis for a renewal of international surrealist activity. The tract took aim at "the demented imbeciles of progress" on both sides of the Iron Curtain, arguing that surrealism was "especially well placed to verify the fallacious character of the myth of Progress or historical irreversibility." Linking the new journals "*L'archibras* in Paris and *Aura*, which is shortly to appear in Prague"—"not only the organs of the surrealist groups in these cities but global expressions of the surrealist movement as it defines itself today"—the text concluded with a reminder of Prague's pride of place in the history of surrealism:

On 9 April 1935 the *Bulletin Internationale du Surréalisme* was published in Prague.
On 9 April 1968 the surrealist exhibition "The Pleasure Principle" will open in Prague.
THE VASES ALWAYS COMMUNICATE
(André Breton).
Prague-Paris—April 1968[37]

But while communication on the revived surrealist telephone was enthusiastic, it was not always easy. Postwar geographies had taken their inevitable toll on surrealist dreams.

A singularly poignant example of this disconnection — or an instructively comical one, depending on your point of view — was the French surrealists' pilgrimage in April 1968 to Star Castle, an item that was understandably high on their agenda. The visitors can have had no more idea of how much, or just what, this *lieu de mémoire* signified to Czechs than did Breton and Éluard thirty-three years earlier. The pilgrims of 1968 only knew the starry castle as a poetic image from *Minotaure* and *L'Amour fou*. In particular, they knew nothing of what the building had come to signify within Czechoslovakia during the preceding two decades. Petr Král tells the story:

At the most exalted moment of our history, in 1968, we were not able to share the enthusiasm of our friends from Paris, discovering in their turn, thirty years after Breton, the celebrated "Starry Castle"; metamorphosed in the meantime into the museum of a grotesque local genius, destined for school excursions and guarded by a veritable army of giant slippers (which it was obligatory to wear for the visit), this marvel didn't enchant us any longer other than as a bastion of stupidity. While the two attitudes might not be incompatible, our "cynical" laugh alone rapidly freed our friends from the snare of a beautiful illusion.[38]

37. "La plateforme de Prague," *L'archibras* 5 (September 1968): 15.

38. Petr Král, *Le surréalisme en Tchécoslovaquie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 28.

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There is an undoubted appreciation for the surreal in Král's anecdote, but it is an appreciation less for the marvelous than for the absurd.[39]

In 1951 Klement Gottwald's communist government had turned Hvězda into a museum to Alois Jirásek, the "Czech Walter Scott," in celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Jirásek's birth. The building was officially handed over to the custody of the ministry of education on March 12. Photographs of the ceremony capture the starry castle incongruously poised between gigantic posters of Gottwald and Joseph Stalin.[40] The surrealists would have encountered a marble plaque in the entrance hall, whose text was also by Gottwald. It sought to explain what might otherwise be regarded as another fortuitous meeting of two distant realities on an inappropriate plane, for there was no obvious affinity between the old patriotic novelist and the communists. Indeed, Jirásek had at one time been a parliamentary deputy for the National Democratic Party, which was banned from standing in the 1946 elections. "We claim Jirásek," the plaque boasts, "and he is close to us — closer than to the old capitalist society — in that in his work he expressed in masterly fashion what in our traditions leads forward, toward freedom and the blossoming of the nation. His work thus teaches us a correct view of our past, strengthens our national pride, and fills us with historical optimism and faith in the creative powers of the people."[41]

The opening of the museum was the culmination of the Jirásek Action (*Jiráskova akce*) launched by the KSČ in November 1948. "Jirásek's life and work as well as the epochs and events that his work records" (in Gottwald's words once again) saturated socialist Czechoslovakia over the next decade.[42] The old novelist was not the only nineteenth-century "awakener" (*buditel*) to be posthumously enlisted in the service of socialist construction. The next year — coincidentally the year of the great Slánský show trial — was officially proclaimed the Aleš Year (*Alšův rok*). The centennial of the birth of the author of the spectral horseman of Bílá hora was celebrated with a six-month-long homage that colonized four separate venues in what was probably the largest celebration of the work of a single artist ever seen in the city then or since.[43] The principal exhibition took

39. Král's long opening essay in *Le surréalisme en Tchécoslovaquie* is an extended discussion of the differences in sensibility between French and Czech surrealism, as well as between prewar and postwar Czech surrealism. Among other things, he stresses the postwar Czech surrealists' anti-Romanticism, hostility to ideology, relish of the erotic, sense of the absurd, and engagement with the trivia of the everyday—a stance not unconnected with the history I have related in this essay. My forthcoming book *Prague, Capital of the Twentieh Century: A Surrealist History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press) is an extended exploration of Prague and surrealism.

40. The photograph is reproduced in Miloslav Novotný, *Roky Aloisa Jiráska* (Prague: Melantrich, 1953), 413.

41. Quoted in Novotný, *Roky Aloisa Jiráska*, 419.

42. Speech of November 10, 1948, in Novotný, *Roky Aloisa Jiráska*, 403.

43. See *Výstava díla Mikoláše Alše*, ed. František Nečásek et al. (Prague: Orbis, 1952); *Výstava díla Mikoláše Alše: Seznam děl vystavených v Jízdárně pražského hradu*, ed. Emanuel Svoboda and František Dvořák (Prague: Orbis, 1952); and *M. Aleš: Výstava jeho života a díla pro českou knihu a divadlo*, ed. V. V. Štech and Emanuel Svoboda (Prague: Národní muzeum, 1952) (all ex. cats.). I have discussed the communists' appropriation of Jirásek, Aleš, and other nineteenth-century figures at length in Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

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place in the Riding School of Prague Castle. "Today," František Nečásek wrote in his introduction to the catalog, "[Aleš's] art rings out to us in newer tones than before, in the capitalist past":

> Aleš's *Sirotek* [*The Orphan*] or *Za chlebem* [*In Search of Bread*], these really are narrations of a past, which will not return; his Cossacks with the Soviet star on their caps really did come to the Old Town Square and have brought us freedom; his Hussites really have come back to life today in our people, in our mighty struggles for peace and the building of socialism; and happily, as never before, the joyful shrieks of Aleš's children and the songs of his skylarks ring out over the freshly green hereditary field of our nation.[44]

It was only fitting that "the founder of the national tradition in painting, our most Czech artist," as the largest art encyclopedia of the time characterized him, should join his old friend Alois Jirásek in Star Castle in 1964.[45]

3

One can understand why Breton's starry castle should have invoked in Král and his friends only sardonic laughter. *Humour noir* is seldom out of place in the city that has given world literature Franz Kafka and Jaroslav Hašek, Milan Kundera and Bohumil Hrabal. Before long the reality principle triumphed over the pleasure principle, in the shape of the Soviet tanks that brought the Prague Spring to an abrupt end on August 21, 1968. *Aura* never saw the light of day. Vratislav Effenberger did manage to produce a single issue of a new Czech surrealist journal called *Analogon*, but "Krise vědomí" ("The Crisis of Consciousness") would be the magazine's last issue until after the Velvet Revolution of 1989.[46] Notable among its contents were several pages of extracts from Záviš Kalandra's writings on politics and art. Having spent the war in German concentration camps, the KSČ journalist was arrested as a Trotskyist in 1949 and piggybacked on the infamous show trial of Milada Horáková the following year. Breton published an "Open Letter to Paul Éluard," for whom the gate to Moscow had long been

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Press, 1998), chap. 7, and explored the changing place of Jirásek and Aleš in Czech historical "memory" in Sayer, "A Quintessential Czechness," *Common Knowledge* 7.2 (Fall 1998): 136–64.

44. František Nečásek, "V Alšově jubilejním roce," in Nečásek et al., *Výstava díla Mikoláše Alše*, 13–14.

45. Prokop Toman, *Nový slovník československých výtvarných umělců*, photo reprint of the 3rd edition of 1947–49 (Ostrava: Chagall, 1994), workbooks 1, 12.

46. *Analogon* 1/1 (June 1969). The masthead read, "Surrealism—Psychoanalysis—Structuralism." Apart from the extracts from Kalandra's writings and Breton's "Open Letter to Paul Éluard," the issue's contents included Breton and Trotsky's 1938 manifesto "For an Independent Revolutionary Art," some of Teige's letters from May to July 1948, and interviews with Herbert Marcuse and Claude Lévi-Strauss. A "second edition" (reprint) of one hundred numbered copies was published in Prague by Surreálistická galerie Gambra sometime in the early 1990s (the edition is undated).

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as open as he could have wished (Éluard rejoined the PCF in 1943), begging the poet to intercede with the Czechoslovak authorities on behalf of the man who had given the surrealists such a warm welcome in the communist press back in 1935. Éluard refused ("I already have too much on my hands with the innocent who proclaim their innocence to occupy myself with the guilty who proclaim their guilt"), and Kalandra was hanged in Prague's Pankrác Prison on June 27, 1950.[47] Éluard died on November 18, 1952. He is buried in Pére Lachaise—next to PCF General Secretary Maurice Thorez, in a grim section of the cemetery given over to Holocaust memorials, executed partisans, and Communist Party luminaries.

Back in Paris, *L'archibras* published a special, unbound issue *hors série* dated September 30, 1968. The word *Tchécoslovaquie* was stamped diagonally across the top of the page inside a rectangle in green ink. It was here that the "Prague Platform" belatedly saw the light of day.[48] The issue opened with an editorial entitled "Réalité politique et réalité policière," which attempted to cling onto the year's fading dreams. The "political reality," it proclaimed, "is one and new, the movement of emancipation of the interior *repressed* which, emancipating individually, invents the collective destiny." Against the "wild forces of the interior world" stand "the ideological uniforms of the cops. . . . The police international is stripped naked, De Gaulle and Séguy, co-prefects of France, resemble each other and resemble Brezhnev, the prefect of Moscow and Prague, who resembles Johnson, the prefect of Washington and Saigon. Long live the political reality of S.D.S., of Black Power, of the Vietcong, of the American and African guerrillas, of the *enragés* of Nanterre, of the workers of Flins, of the Czechoslovak people!"[49]

The article that follows is entitled "On n'arrête pas le printemps"—but of course the spring *was* stopped. The piece was written, we are told, by "the Czech surrealists who left Prague on the 30th August," who are not named, but one of whom was Petr Král.[50] "Despite the tanks with which they have not hesitated to shackle a whole country," the refugees end, "the heirs of Stalin have only gained a still greater isolation in their fortified ivory tower. . . . In the *subterranean* regions where man always re-creates himself, flamboyant revolts are being born, red as

47. André Breton, "Open Letter to Paul Éluard," June 13, 1950, in *Free Rein*, 229–31. Éluard's reply (which I quote in full) is given as a footnote in André Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 898.

48. "Le plateforme de Prague," *L'archibras* 5 (September 1968): 11–15. The text was signed by twenty-eight members of the Paris surrealist group. "In other circumstances," the editors explained, "it would have carried the signatures of twenty-one Czechoslovak surrealists and eleven foreign surrealists resident in Paris." Most of the text is translated into English as "The Platform of Prague," *Analagon*, no. 40 (2004): xxiv–xxix. Stanislav Dvorský, Vratislav Effenberger, Roman Erben, Zbyněk Havlíček, Jaroslav Hrstka, Bohuslav Kováč, Petr Král, Ivo Medek, Juraj Mojžiš, Ivana Spanlangová, Martin Stejskal, Ivan Sviták, Karel Sebek, Ludvík Šváb, and Prokop Voskovec are among the Czech signatories listed. So is Toyen.

49. "Réalité politique et réalité policière," *L'archibras* 5 (September 1968): 1.

50. Those who fled included Petr Král, Stanislav Dvorský, Ivana Spanlangová, Ludvík Šváb, and Prokop Voskovec. All of these except Král returned home within a few months. "Chronologický přehled," *Analogon* 41/42 (2004): i.

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the blood with which the soil is saturated."[51] But it soon became clear which way the winds were blowing. In what would turn out to be its penultimate issue, published in December 1968, *L'archibras* carried an attempt "to define the interior situation of surrealism in Czechoslovakia." The essay, titled "Prague aux couleurs du temps," was prefaced by a note making clear that "recent events have rendered parts of this text, dated from Prague December 1967–January 1968, purely historical."[52] The moment of the wild forces had passed. The field belonged to history.

To the dismay of many of its affiliates around the world — not least in Prague, where those Czechoslovak surrealists who had not fled abroad were preparing once again to walk by night — the Paris surrealist group formally dissolved itself on February 8, 1969.[53] With Breton gone and the dreams of 1968 on the run across the globe, there was little to hold it together any longer. The seventh and last issue of *L'archibras*, published in March 1969, was (in the words of Gérard Durozoi's magisterial *History of the Surrealist Movement*) "the last collective expression of a surrealist group that had indeed ceased to exist."[54] It included a souvenir of the tumultuous events of the previous year: Adrien Dax's "Attempt at Reconstitution of an Associative Visual Trajectory in the Course of a Distracted Observation of the Square Neighboring the Old Prague Horologe on Friday 12 April 1968 at around 3.00 p.m."[55] Devoid of any pretensions of changing the world, it served only to underline how rapidly the Bohemian capital had drifted back into poetic space.

I do not wish to do anything as silly as try to extract a moral from this twisted tale. But if we are interested in elective affinities between the Bohemian capital and surrealism, we do well to bypass the

> Prague, sung by Apollinaire; Prague, with the magnificent bridge flanked by statues, leading out of yesterday into forever; the signboards, lit up from within — at the Black Sun, at the Golden Tree, and a host of others; the clock whose hands, cast in the metal of desire, turn ever backward; the street of the Alchemists

51. "On n'arrête pas le printemps," *L'archibras* 5 (September 1968): 4.

52. Dvorský, Effenberger, Král, and Šváb, "Prague aux couleurs du temps," *L'archibras* 6 (December 1968): 6–9.

53. See "The Possible against the Real," *Analogon* 41/42 (2004): x–xii. This text was a response to the quarrels among surrealists in Paris. For background, see Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, 640–44. The Czechs were insistent that "surrealism, placing the possible in opposition to the real, is an inspiring medium, renewing, in the most concrete way, human consciousness" (xii). "The possible against the real" was dated September 22, 1969, and signed "Stanislav Dvorský, Vratislav Effenberger, Roman Erben, Andy Lass, Albert Marenčin, Juraj Mojžiš, Martin Stejskal, Ludvík Sváb, and others."

54. Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, 642.

55. Adrien Dax, "Essai de reconstitution d'un trajet visuel associative au cours d'une observation distraite de la place avoissinant la vielle horologe de Prague, le vendredi 12 avril 1968 vers 15 heures," *L'archibras* 7 (March 1969): 36–37.

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—and the rest of the city's "historic charms." I quote Breton again, lamenting "the repression already weighing on Prague, the magic capital of Europe," in an introduction to Toyen's work written in 1954.[56] The poet had more than enough reason to mourn the unraveling of his dreams of 1935—Štyrsky was dead, Teige was dead, Heisler was dead, and his "great friend of the legends," Vítězslav Nezval, was lost to the communists—but Breton offers us little more than a rosary of clichés.[57] He makes no mention of Hvězda. Perhaps the starry castle had by then accumulated too many painful associations, even for him.

Petr Král's *Prague* is a more reliable surrealist companion to the city. Untranslated and hardly cited in the anglophone literature, this "poem-guide, reverie-guide, phantom-guide" (as a reviewer in *Le Monde* described it) came out in French, not Czech, in 1985. Like Breton, Král was wandering a landscape of memory; he had lived in Paris since 1968. Prague, he writes, drifts in a "*no-man's land*"—the phrase is in English—oscillating between "a here and an elsewhere, a presence and an absence." It is a place where we can turn a corner and stumble across "the Russian steppes between two baroque domes, like an antechamber of the Gulag comfortably situated in the suburbs of Paris or Munich." It inhabits "a time outside time where it seems condemned to slumber," telescoping "the past and the present, the mythical and the quotidian." It is at once "ancient and modern, real and imaginary," compounded of equal parts "nostalgia and promise." But unlike Breton, Král locates Prague's surrealities firmly within the geographical, historical, and economic circumstances of the city's modernity. Its nostalgias and promises, most of them broken, are achingly twentieth-century:

> In the summer twilight the nostalgic sigh that rises from the stones and the gardens of the capital is not so much the reminder of a Prague of alchemists or Jesuits, as the tourist guides would like. The spirit, revived by memory, which pulses in the walls and behind the façades is above all that which inhabited the city between the wars. Rather than Rudolf II and his picturesque court it is Nezval or Voskovec and Werich who are remembered one evening in the twenties in a wine-cellar that may be historic, but from which you can already hear in the distance the screeching and ringing of the trams. . . . The memory of Mozart's celebrated stay is eclipsed by that of the almost anonymous visit Marcel Duchamp made to Prague for a chess tournament.[58]

Hasard objectif, Breton told his listeners at the Mánes Gallery, is "that sort of chance that shows man, in a way that is still very mysterious, a necessity that escapes him, even though he experiences it as a vital necessity."[59] He never

56. André Breton, "Introduction to the Work of Toyen," in *What Is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, bk. 2, 286–87.

57. Breton to Nezval, March 25, 1936, quoted in *André Breton: La beauté convulsive*, 226.

58. Petr Král, *Prague* (Seyssel: Éditions du Champ Vallon, 1985), 74.

59. Breton, "Surrealist Situation of the Object," 268.

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explained (and perhaps never knew) exactly what it was that attracted him to "the starry castle." In view of the building's associations in Czech history, it was (and remains) a decidedly ominous image. It seems to have been—in the mysterious manner of *hasard objectif*—an ironically appropriate choice of *point de capiton* for the surrealist imagination. "Prague is a breeding ground for phantoms, an arena of sorcery," Ripellino warns: "It is a trap which—once it takes hold with its mists, its black arts, its poisoned honey—does not let go, does not forgive."[60] But what else should we expect to find at the heart of modern Europe?

60. Ripellino, *Magic Prague*, 6.

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