

Herbert Read's Surrealism

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(for Federico Arcos)

In 1937, at the opening of the London exhibition, "Surrealist Objects and Poems," anarchist art critic Herbert Read delivered a short talk proclaiming the movement's artists as "angels of anarchy." The show's catalogue cover also featured a sculpture by the Argentinean-English surrealist Eileen Agar entitled, "The Angel of Anarchy." Who was this "Angel?" The mystery was cleared up in the December 1938-January 1939 issue of the English surrealists' *London Bulletin*, where a photo of Read, author of *Poetry and Anarchism*, appeared alongside a reproduction of the work.

Read's anarchism was as much a product of his life experience as it was of his powerful intellect. His father was a tenant farmer who died in 1903 when Read was 11 years old. Read's mother was forced to vacate their farm and from that point the family was desperately poor—so poor that she sent Read and his younger brother to a state orphanage and only reclaimed her sons after securing a job in Leeds in 1908.

Remarkably, given his circumstances, Read did well at school and in 1912 gained entrance to Leeds University on a scholarship. That same year he got his first exposure to anarchism through Non-Governmental Society, written by the anarchist-communist arts and crafts theorist and mystic, Edward Carpenter.

During his university years, Read also joined the Leeds Arts Club, a debating organization affiliated with a leftist-journal, *The New Age*. It was there he attended a lecture by the anarchist painter Wyndham Lewis on the difference between cubism and the vorticist art movement for which Lewis was a prime spokesperson. Read was very taken with Lewis and sought out the anarchist-individualist *Egoist* journal, where Lewis and Ezra Pound wrote extensively on vorticism and its relation to the philosophy of Max Stirner, author of *The Ego and its Own*. In an essay published towards the end of his life, Read recalled his admiration for the anarchism of Stirner during those years.

However, at this early stage, Read was still confused about his allegiances. In the fall of 1914, at the onset of World War I, he hastily completed his degree and joined the army with a rank of second Lieutenant. During 1915 through 1916, he participated in the most horrific trench battles of the war until being severely wounded in late 1916. Read emerged from this experience a self-declared anti-imperialist and anarchist-communist. In the early 1920s he settled in London, where he renewed his contacts with the *New Age*, worked as a curator at the Victoria and Albert Arts and Crafts Museum, and wrote on art for the *Listener* magazine.

Read's distinctively anarchist interpretation and defense of modernism came to the fore in the 1930s. His support for modernism rested on the assumption that this art was the free creation of individuals whose response to the world was manifest in two stylistic tendencies: abstract formalism and superrealism—the latter term referring to the surrealists. Read's first major statement of this thesis is found in *Art Now*, an overview of contemporary art published in 1934.

In an appreciation of the sculptor Henry Moore, Read wrote that Moore explored abstract formal relationships and textural elements while at the same time expressing the "vital rhythms present in natural forms" filtered through his own subjective experience. At the time, Read was a supporter of an association of English abstract artists whose ranks included Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and Ben Nicholson. The association called itself Unit One

and existed until 1936, when it was dissolved into a much larger group composed of Naum Gabo and other foreign-born abstractionists who had fled the rise of fascism on the continent.

Read supported these artists on the grounds that they were expressing universal aesthetic principles originating in human psychology, principles which, potentially, could play a role in the beautification of everyday life. For example, Nicholson's goal was to provoke an immediate sensation of harmonious spatial relations. To this end, naturalism was purged in favour of abstract forms in combination with projected qualities of surface and depth in equilibrium. Hepworth, on the other hand, dealt with qualities of balance and scale through explorations of asymmetry in three-dimensional objects. Her sculptures were "plastic projections" which distilled elemental psychological and perceptual sensations such as "tension, balance, volume, mass, contour, displacement and 'volume.'"

The abstractionists were complimented by the surrealists, who cleaved to an illustrative "literary" style of art. In *Art and Society*, published in 1936, Read cited André Breton to the effect that surrealism unified the artist's interior reality with exterior reality, thus bringing to the surface the contradictions present in contemporary capitalist society. Any conventions that stifled the artist's unconsciousness prevented art from becoming a vital force of social change. Surrealism's goal, therefore, was to liberate art so as to liberate society—a tall order for an artistic movement, but then that was why Breton aligned surrealism with Russian communism in the 1920s and Trotskyism in the late 1930s, before finally concluding Marxism was a bankrupt political tendency (Breton declared himself an anarchist in the wake of World War II).

Read spelled out his own vision of the politics of abstraction and surrealism in a symposium on Revolutionary Art published in 1935. Here, he characterized abstractionists as insurrectionary artists whose discoveries would be fully realized only in a classless society, where principles of formalist expression could be fused with industrial production for the aesthetic betterment of all. Read, of course, had an anarchist-communist form of socialism in mind. The surrealists were an equally volatile force. By discrediting art that catered to bourgeois ideological norms and academic conventions, these "Bakuninist" destroyers fueled the transition to the classless society. Surrealism might develop into a new romanticism once capitalism was overthrown, but Read refused to speculate if the movement would evolve beyond its transitional role.

At the crux of his argument were two related assumptions about abstract and surrealist modernism. First, both were materialist. Abstract art was founded on physical qualities in nature filtered through the artist's perception while its socially critical counterpart, surrealism, was materialist in an historical rather than psychological sense. Secondly, they were libertarian and creative. The freedom of the artist was at the forefront of their artistic programs, ensuring that the content of abstract and surrealist art proceeded from individual rather than imposed values.

To recapture the urgency of Read's claims and the uniqueness of his anarchist pro-modernist polemic, we need to recall the alternative vision of revolutionary art then prevailing in leftist circles. In his essay, Read referred to the socialist realist injunction to paint pictures of red flags, hammers and sickles, factories and machines and the adulation among leftists for Marxist artists such as Diego Rivera.

Rivera's brand of art was for politicians; it killed the creative element with formulaic class-based subject-matter executed in a didactic style, capped by a deadening puritanical sheen. The political touchstone of such art was its disconnection from the creativity of the individual, a disconnection that mirrored the dictatorial mode of governance at the foundation of all state-ruled societies, including Marxist Russia.

Here, Read borrowed a dichotomy derived from the anarchist-syndicalist writings of the French philosopher George Sorel, who contrasted Marxism's mechanistic world-view with the organicism of anarchism. Marxists imagined revolutions were predetermined by set rules laid down in concrete, a view that gave rise to Marxist political parties prone to dictatorial rule over the very "masses" whose interests they claimed to represent. Anarchists, on the other hand, valorized spontaneous insurrection and the creativity of the people themselves to make a revolution. Read's modems were similarly anarchist, because they put the creativity of the individual first, thus avoiding the pitfalls of predetermination in artistic matters.

I began this article mentioning Read's organization of the first surrealist exhibit in Britain in 1937. This was a pivotal year, not only for surrealism, but for international anarchism as well. Following the declaration of a republic in Spain in 1936, reactionaries in the Spanish army had rallied around General Francisco Franco and the cause of fascism. A civil war began, with Franco's forces suffering their first major defeat at the hands of workers

mobilized by the anarchist syndicalists of Barcelona that summer. In the wake of this victory, radical insurgence swept through republican controlled Spain, a development that led anarchists around the world to believe their movement had finally found a haven under which it could develop and prosper.

For his part Read rallied the English surrealists, who issued a declaration supporting military shipments to the Spanish anarchists under the banner headline, "Arms for the People of Spain." In early 1937 he also published two statements encapsulating his profound belief that modernist art and anarchist insurrection were inseparable aspects of the same revolution. In March 1937, he declared himself a surrealist in an article published in the *New English Weekly*. If the world was finally entering the period of transition, Read reasoned, then the time was ripe for surrealism to play its role in the artistic realm. Then, in the fall of 1937, he published a three-part article in the mass circulation *Adelphi* magazine, outlining "The Necessity of Anarchism." Here, readers were alerted that, as far as Read was concerned, anarchism was the sole means of realizing a just, socialist future.

But this art critic was not content with polemics. While the civil war in Spain raged, he spoke at anarchist rallies, wrote for the English-language anarchist journal *Spain and the World*, and worked with Emma Goldman, who was the official representative of the Spanish anarchist-syndicalists in England, to channel financial support to the anarchist cause.

Other English surrealists were also participating in the anti-fascist, pro-anarchist struggle. In the summer of 1936, a delegation of three English surrealists traveled to Barcelona and spoke in support of the revolution on the radio; a second two-person delegation followed this gesture with another trip in the autumn of 1937. Back in England, the surrealists participated in several street actions and protests, including confrontations with English fascists in 1937, and a huge May Day demonstration in 1938 protesting the British government's policy of non-intervention in Spain, which included a ban on any arms shipments to the Spanish left.

Over 1937 and 1938, Read also composed a cycle of poems about the civil war. One, entitled "Bombing Casualties," was inspired by a Spanish anarchist newspaper photo of the corpses of children laid out for burial after a fascist bombing raid. It reads:

Dolls' faces are rosier but they were children
their eyes not glass but gleaming gristle
dark lenses in whose quicksilver glances
the sunlight quivered. These blench'd lips
were warm once and bright with blood
but blood
held in a moist bleb of flesh
not spilt and spatter'd in tousled hair...

.
They are laid out in ranks
like paper lanterns that have fallen
after a night of riot
extinct in the dry morning air

This poetic protest against fascist barbarism prefigured one of the major events in the history of English surrealism—the exhibition of Picasso's anti-fascist mural, "Guernica," in England in the fall of 1938.

The origin of Picasso's painting bears retelling. On April 26, 1937, fighter planes and bombers of the German Condor Legion, which Hitler had sent to Spain to aid Franco's war effort, attacked the undefended Basque town of Guernica with horrific effectiveness. This was the first carpet-bombing of a city in human history and it threw a harsh light on the hypocrisy of the world's capitalist democracies, which feared a victory for Spain's anarchists more than the prospect of triumphant fascism.

Before the bombing, Picasso had been commissioned to create a mural for the Spanish Republic's pavilion at the World's Fair in Paris, scheduled to open on May 24. The artist was well-known as a staunch anti-fascist, who had contributed half a million francs to the Spanish Relief Fund and was working on a series of anti-Franco etchings, "The Dream and Lie of Franco." Picasso began sketching "Guernica" shortly after news of the bombing, on May 1, 1937, and completed his mural little more than a month later. It was installed in the Spanish pavilion in mid-June

and remained on display for the duration of the World's Fair. The painting then travelled to Norway and from there was shipped to England, where the surrealists had arranged a series of exhibitions.

Just before "Guernica" arrived in England, Germany, Italy, Great Britain and France signed an agreement of nonaggression in Munich on September 29th that sealed the fate of Spanish anarchism. This made the painting's exhibition particularly poignant. Here, for all to see, was modernism's most powerful condemnation of fascism, war, and capitalism the very forces that had just colluded to defeat Spain's anarchists. Reflecting on the gravity of the situation in the October, 1938 issue of the *London Bulletin*, Read wrote:

"Picasso's great fresco is a monument to destruction, a cry of outrage...amplified by the spirit of genius...The light of day and night reveals a scene of horror and destruction: the eviscerated horse, the writhing bodies of men and women, betray the passage of an infuriated bull, who turns triumphantly in the background, tense and full of lust and stupid power; whilst from the window, Truth, whose features are a tragic mask in all its classical purity, extends her lamp over the carnage. The great canvas is flooded with pity and terror, but over it all is imposed that nameless grace which arises from their cathartic equilibrium. Not only Guernica, but Spain; not only Spain, but Europe, is symbolized in this allegory. It is the modern Calvary, the agony in the bomb-shattered ruins of human tenderness and faith."

"Guernica" was first shown in London's New Burlington Galleries during October 1938. In November, it travelled to Oxford and Leeds, where it drew large crowds. The purpose of these exhibits was to raise money for the anti-fascist cause in Spain, and the Burlington, Oxford and Leeds events did succeed in this regard. The most successful event, however, was the two-week exhibit of the mural at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, located in London's working-class East End district, during December 1938.

In a note for the January-February 1939 *London Bulletin*, the surrealist Ronald Penrose reported that 100 pounds were raised on the first day alone and over 12,000 people entered their names in the gallery's guest book. Evening lectures on the painting were also packed to overflowing.

"This response," Penrose observed, "forms a stark contrast to the semi-indifference of the intellectuals in the West End, where only about 3,000 people visited the [New Burlington Galleries] exhibition during the month it was open." One can imagine Read's own sense of vindication. Modernism victorious among the working class!

Ultimately, the anarchists of Spain were destined to go down in defeat in March 1939 before the combined onslaught of well-armed fascist forces and the divisive anti-anarchist machinations of the Spanish Communist Party, which wreaked havoc among the republican forces. Simultaneously, the pending threat of war, which came hard on the heels of Spanish anarchism's fall, left Read and his demoralized comrades in a beleaguered situation.

War mobilization so threatened the anarchist press in England that Read transformed his home into a secret storage depot to protect the publications of London's *Freedom* newspaper from anticipated police raids. As the political skies darkened in the spring of 1939, he also meditated on a viable role for anarchism, writing to Penrose that, "our purpose must necessarily be to build up a group of revolutionary, anarchist intellectuals with a very definite program behind it." Sometimes, however, history confounds such efforts. What avenues lay open for British anarchists when the assassins of anarchist Spain were preparing for a world war that pit fascist and Marxist dictatorships against the "lesser evil" of capitalism's cut-throat democracies?

With this question in mind, I return to Elgar's "Angel of Anarchy." The original was lost after its exhibit at the last pre-war European show of surrealist art held in Amsterdam in the fall of 1938. However, in early 1940, Elgar was moved to create a second tribute to Read, the still resolute defender of modernism in the name of anarchism. This "Angel" was bound and its eyes blindfolded—a telling portrait of Read's own uncertainty about humanity's prospects in 1940.

More to the point, the angel of anarchy itself was transformed, from a herald of a future possibility into a hauntingly mysterious enigma, banished, for a time, from the realm of history.

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