

## BRETON, ANDRE

**André Breton, Early Life.** Andre Breton (1896-1966) was born in Normandy, of a working class family, a fact of importance for his subsequent solidarity with the working class through the mediation of the Communist party. As a young man he studied medicine and psychiatry, and took particular interest in mental illness and its symptoms. In WW I Breton worked in a neurological ward in Nantes. (It seems of note that while there Breton met a young man named Jacques Vache, whose natural rebelliousness and anarchism fascinated Andre, and helped accentuate what was to become Breton's mature life of resistance to middle class values. He took due note of the fact that Vache committed suicide at age twenty four.)

**Breton, mature life and works.** In 1921, Breton moved back to Paris, and set up his apartment on the rue Fontaine. He began there the assembling of a collection of artifacts, photographs, books, painting, objets d'art, which was to grow to 53,000 in number, and to grow into a vast resource for such as cultural anthropologists. (There was a strong emphasis, throughout the collection, on materials relating to the Native Indians of Northwest America.) At the same time, Breton was immersing himself in the drama of the current literary world in Paris. In 1919 Breton—along with two fellow writers, Philippe Soupault and Louis Aragon—founded the journal *Littérature*, in which the group devoted much attention to the phenomenon of automatic writing, and its ways of letting the subconscious out into expression. (Breton was to make the acquaintance of Sigmund Freud, in 1920, and to remain true, throughout his writing life, to his desire to discover and display the meeting points between dream and ordinary language.) In 1924 Breton served as editor of a widely distributed Parisian journal, *Les recherches surréalistes (Surrealist investigations)*, as well as of the prominent *Manifesto of Surrealism*, to which many of the outstanding 'liberated poets of the day' contributed. In the *Manifesto* Breton makes evident what he foresees as the achievement of a new kind of person, through surrealism; one to whom the egalitarian social perspectives of Marxism are very congenial, who believes in the simple oneness of humanity, and who at the same time is devoted to the personal transformation of the individual, as it can be roadmapped in the work of a brilliant forbear like Rimbaud. It should be noted that Breton joined and remained in the Communist Party from 1927-33; maintaining to the Party the same kind of complex fidelity that shows in his colleague Louis Aragon and in many contemporary French intellectuals. (In 1938 Breton met Trotsky in Mexico, and was inspired by some social prospects from within a revised Communism.) For these thinkers, as for many throughout Western Europe and the United States in the 1930's and 40's, Communism seemed to offer a practical platform for a new organization of human society.

**Breton in later life.** In 1940 Breton once again served in the Medical Corps of the French Army, but as he came under pursuit by the Vichy government—his Communism sufficed for that—he staged (with two American friends) a necessary escape from Europe. He located both in the United States, and in the Caribbean, where he made the acquaintance of Aime Césaire. In New York City he met his third wife; he also shared his valuable personal art collection in an extraordinary exhibit at Yale University in 1942. In 1948 he returned to Paris, where he committed himself to new movements of Anarchism, and denounced French colonial occupation in Algeria. True to himself, he remained outside the system, right to his death.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

*Nadja*, tr. Richard Howard, 1994.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Raymond, Marcel, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, 1957.

### **Further reading**

Broome and Chesters, *Anthology of Modern French Poetry, 1850-1950*, 1976.

### **Original language reading**

Cauvin, Caws, *Poems of Andre Breton: A Bilingual Anthology*, 2006.

### **Suggested paper topics**

How do you related Breton's poetry to his extensive career collecting primitive works of art? Was he an anthropologist/collector in his writing?

Does Andre Breton's experience in mental wards, and his knowledge of neurology, play a role in his finding of his poetic powers? How does Communism belong to this mix of poetry and science? Is Breton a lover of the people?

### **Excerpt**

<http://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm>

So strong is the belief in life, in what is most fragile in life – *real* life, I mean – that in the end this belief is lost. Man, that inveterate dreamer, daily more discontent with his destiny, has trouble assessing the objects he has been led to use, objects that his nonchalance has brought his way, or that he has earned through his own efforts, almost always through his own efforts, for he has agreed to work, at least he has not refused to try his luck (or what he calls his luck!). At this point he feels extremely modest: he knows what women he has had, what silly affairs he has been involved in; he is unimpressed by his wealth or his poverty, in this respect he is still a newborn babe and, as for the approval of his conscience, I confess that he does very nicely without it. If he still retains a certain lucidity, all he can do is turn back toward his childhood which, however his guides and mentors may have botched it, still strikes him as somehow charming. There, the absence of any known restrictions allows him the perspective of several lives lived at once; this illusion becomes firmly rooted within him; now he is only interested in the fleeting, the extreme facility of everything. Children set off each day without a worry in the world. Everything is near at hand, the worst material conditions are fine. The woods are white or black, one will never sleep.

But it is true that we would not dare venture so far, it is not merely a question of distance. Threat is piled upon threat, one yields, abandons a portion of the terrain to be conquered. This imagination which knows no bounds is henceforth allowed to be exercised only in strict accordance with the laws of an arbitrary utility; it is incapable of assuming this inferior role for very long and, in the vicinity of the twentieth year, generally prefers to abandon man to his lusterless fate.

Though he may later try to pull himself together on occasion, having felt that he is losing by slow degrees all reason for living, incapable as he has become of being able to rise to some exceptional situation such as love, he will hardly succeed. This is because he henceforth belongs body and soul to an imperative practical necessity which demands his constant attention. None of his gestures will be expansive, none of his ideas generous or far-reaching. In his mind's eye, events real or imagined will be seen only as they relate to a welter of similar events, events in which he has not participated, *abortive* events. What am I saying: he will judge them in relationship to one of these events whose consequences are more reassuring than the others. On no account will he view them as his salvation.

Beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality.

There remains madness, "the madness that one locks up," as it has aptly been described. That madness or another.... We all know, in fact, that the insane owe their incarceration to a tiny number of legally reprehensible acts and that, were it not for these acts their freedom (or what we see as their freedom)

would not be threatened. I am willing to admit that they are, to some degree, victims of their imagination, in that it induces them not to pay attention to certain rules – outside of which the species feels threatened – which we are all supposed to know and respect.