

# Magician of Innocent Wonder

By ANNA BALAKIAN

**I** MAY live another ten years but my work is done," André Breton said in the fall of 1964, the last time I saw him. On September 28 the founder of the surrealist movement died of a heart attack, having attained exactly the Biblical three score years and ten, though he was deprived of those bonus years that his senior confrères such as Mauriac, Claudel, Gide, and Romaines have enjoyed.

They called him the lion, and indeed his appearance belied his age: His Nordic dimensions beautifully preserved in the erectness of his bearing, his voice virile, his expressive face marked with the furrows of thought rather than age, his thick hair reluctantly graying, he could hardly have played the role of venerable senior poet. He will be identified by posterity with youth and movement, as a powerful figure, a torch. "Old writers should not appear on television," he said in his apartment on the Rue Fontaine. "They should hide their withered faces and let their works speak for them."

At that very moment on the kiosks of Paris André Breton's brightest literary jewel, *Nadja*, first published in 1928, was finally reaching beyond the limited circle of his friends and coterie disciples. This tribute to man the dreamer—crystallized in his youthful adventures with a hallucinated and ethereal heroine—was beckoning as a paperback to a new generation of youth.

Like so many famous Parisians, André Breton had come from the provinces. Born in Tincebray in the northwestern part of France on February 18, 1896, he brought to the disciplined rationalism of his classic education the imaginative flair of his Celtic ancestry. It takes the confidence of a solid lucidity to challenge the conventional limits attributed to reason as did the young, revolutionary Breton.

Prior to embarking on a literary career the poet studied medicine, and during World War I served in neurological wards of army hospitals, where he discovered in Freud's psychiatry a major resource for the renewal of the arts. But when he confronted Freud with his liter-

ary applications of automatism and psychoanalysis the latter's reception was one of puzzlement rather than gratification. "Perhaps I am not made to understand it," said Freud of surrealism, "for I am so far removed from art."

During and after the First World War Breton led the many avant-garde activities rampant in Paris, and with the founding of the surrealist movement in 1924 he organized, directed, and codified the numerous and varied forces for renovation of literary and art forms. To make the dream part of one's waking hours, to liberate the mind for purposes beyond the earning of the daily bread, to discover in human relationships magical contacts and illuminating interchange, to restore the Golden Age of the earth's innocent wonder and communion with things and beings—such should be the function of the poet in the twentieth century, thought André Breton.

**H**E made clear in his First Manifesto in 1924 that surrealism was not simply a reform in prosody or in the techniques of the artist but a reformation of the mental process of the writer and the artist, and by the same token of the reader and the viewer. Though Breton had no religious faith in the parochial sense of the word, he demanded a destiny beyond the carcass. Other young writers and artists shared his stand against the cynical world that they had inherited. And many collaborated with him in his two major periodicals, *La Révolution Surréaliste*, and *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*. Some were co-authors with him of psychological experiments in automatic writing, the transcription of dreams and the simulation of the deranged mind—among them Soupault in the earliest prose-poem collection, *Les Champs magnétiques*, and Eluard in *L'Immaculée Conception*. Breton was also influential in publicizing young artists, such as Ernst, Miró, Dalí, Tanguy, and Mata, in his art criticism, of which the most outstanding collection, *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, was widely distributed in an American edition during the Second World War. His volumes of verse were illustrated by Picasso, Derain, Magritte, Giacometti, Duchamp, and so many others that the list reads like the hall of fame of modern art.

In the course of the six years that elapsed between the First and Second Manifestoes several of Breton's early affiliates found themselves expelled from



—Anne Posener (Pix).

**André Breton (1896-1966)—  
to the end, "nonslavery to life."**

the coterie, accused of having compromised their artistic integrity. Breton was also angered that certain comrades had confused the principles of surrealism with the current political dogmas of Communism, in which he saw only feeble and limited applications of the idealism of Engels and Marx.

During World War II Breton exiled himself in America, knowing that he would be persona non grata whether the Germans occupied France or the Soviet Army rescued her. In the Far West he marveled at the spontaneity and primitive acceptance of the irrational in Indian art. And when he returned to France after the war, his home was ever to abound in fetish objects and examples of African and Inca art as monuments to the essential creativity of human imagination.

**D**ESPITE the war he had maintained his faith in man and in the eventual federation of a united world. Breton's long poems of the war years, such as "Ode à Charles Fourier" and "Les Etats Généraux," convey, without being circumstantial works, the spiritual climate that prevailed at the founding of the United Nations. In the postwar years he devoted himself almost exclusively to the writing of philosophical essays, which were totally in disharmony with the existentialist attitudes of the epoch. Maintaining to the end his "nonslavery to life," Breton sought no official honors in his own country, and the Nobel Committee bypassed him.

Curiously, little has been written about André Breton's private life. When asked a personal question he would transform it into a humanistic one. Where so many of his contemporaries made literature the mirror of their personal eccentricities and even scandals, he left us with the history of his thought, often difficult to probe because the key words he used

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were colored by the particular sense that he gave them in his philosophy.

Only after the wind has subsided can we determine the impact of its movement. The driving force that was André Breton abated a decade before his death; thus there is already much evidence of its effects on the literary and artistic scene. Though regarded by many as a preposterous dream, his god served as a star that guides, if not one that can be reached. Breton electrified with a sense of purpose and solidarity many who were uncomfortable in the role of artist in a mechanistic society.

Art, unimpeded by the unfortunate barriers of language, conveyed more universally its applications of esthetic theory as Ernst, Dalí, Tanguy, Man Ray, and others, each in his own manner but all affected by their relationship with Breton, demonstrated obvious kinships in their basic search for a metaphysical vision on earth. In the case of literature the diffusion has been slower because Breton's poetry is virtually untranslatable, and his prose is generally too dense and cryptic, too lacking in the Gallic *esprit*, to recommend itself to popular reading. However, French literary criticism suggests by its ever-increasing references to Breton his predominant presence today in problems of esthetics, and the consensus is, even among those who were exasperated by the messianic demeanor of the man, that as Einstein gave new dimensions to the physical concept of the world, so Breton has shaken the notion of reality for the entire realm of the arts.

### To an Infant Daughter

WHAT I HAVE LOVED, whether I was able to preserve it or not, I shall love always. As you too will be called upon to suffer in time to come, I wanted to explain this to you in finishing my book. I spoke of a "sublime point" on the mountain. I never expected to make of it my abode. Besides it would have stopped being 'sublime,' and I would have ceased to be a man. Unreasonable as it was to expect to reach it, at least I never lost sight of it. I had chosen to be the guide, I had consequently willed never to become unworthy of the power which, in the direction of eternal love, had made me *see* and granted me the privilege, even more rare, of making others see. I had never been undeserving of it, I have never ceased to make into one the flesh of the being I love and the snow of the summits in the rising sun.

—From "L'Amour fou" (1937).

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## Sin Was a Chronic Disease

***Tremor of Intent: An Eschatological Spy Novel*, by Anthony Burgess (Norton. 240 pp. \$4.95), confronts a morally sickened secret agent, on the path to regeneration, with a series of reversals and challenges to the flesh. Saul Maloff, who edited "Young Readers' Treasury of British and American Verse," is literary editor for Newsweek Magazine.**

By SAUL MALOFF

THE PRODIGALLY gifted Anthony Burgess begins his new (or annual) novel with a conscious cliché and ends it in paradox. En route from one to the other, he is heisted by his overreaching ambitions, crossed by his clashing purposes, which, rebounding, ricochet in opposing directions; and though he tries by main force and sheer dexterity to fuse them, they remain at odds—in fact, neutralize one another. Will—abetted by all Burgess's narrative agility and stunning verbal resources—still cannot do the ordering and synthesizing work of the imagination.

In this instance it cannot discover adequate metaphors for radical evil; and without them, the novel falls short of the order of seriousness to which it aspires. Failing that, it achieves a kind of theological farce, or farce-thriller with theological-moral overtones. Burgess merely calls our attention to this cruel dilemma by characterizing *Tremor of Intent* as an "eschatological spy thriller."

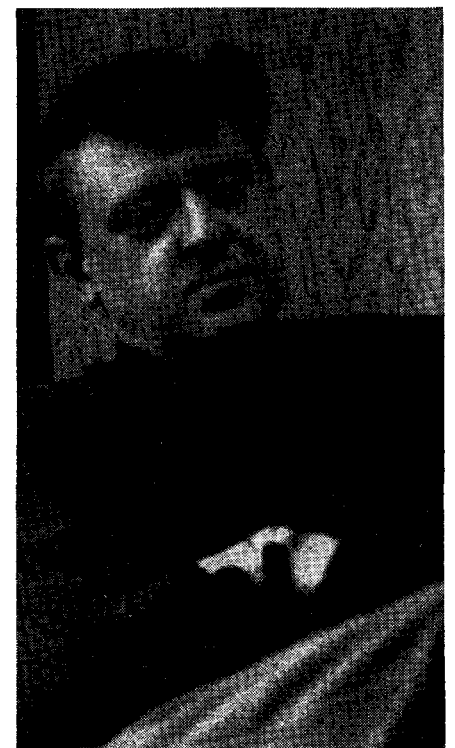
The hero is by this time a stock figure—a deliberate mock-up of elements out of Le Carré, Fleming, and Graham Greene: British secret agent Hillier (the name, it may be reported, is allegorical), middle-aging, battered and scarred from previous exploits, exhausted in spirit and morally sickened by the evil inherent in his squalid profession, bound on his final mission before retiring to an anonymous life.

Or so he supposes. The stage is set for a series of reversals; for him and for the reader the rocky road is hilly and hillier. In a climate totally amoral every man is traitor to his brother. Just as Hillier's mission is to betray the only friend we know him ever to have had (a British scientist, Roper—again the name is allegorical—who has defected to the USSR), so he himself is to be betrayed by the nameless, faceless men in his home office

—the spring of the novel's action—who cannot possibly allow a veteran agent who knows what he knows to retire to private life. The mission is a ruse for his undoing.

In Hillier's world there is no private life. It is a world from which feeling has been banished as amateur and prewar, as an obstruction, a delusion. There are instead violence and sex, treachery and moral ambiguity.

But the actual content with which Burgess invests his drama is so extravagantly portentous as to be ludicrous—as if Burgess had set out to illustrate the seven deadly sins in garish colors, or charcoal. The "chronic diseases" from which Hillier must redeem himself are those of "gluttony and satyriasis." The setting for much of the action is a cruise ship specializing in gorging and fornication. The lures besetting his stony path are, first, visceral (surely some of the most dazzling menus and wine lists in contemporary fiction); and, second, genital—a sixteen-year-old child-woman whom he seduces, or who seduces him in an encounter symbolically incestuous, and an Indian sex-priestess who inducts him into the Tamil mysteries, by the



—Laurence Josephs.

Anthony Burgess—"brilliant, essentially frivolous gestures on the part of a novelist who is capable of anything."