

Introduction

When Surrealism emerged in the 1920s, Victor Hugo's reputation hovered between two extremes. On the one hand, this was the poet whose more recognized and right-thinking poems schoolchildren were made to learn by heart; while, on the other, he was more or less held in contempt by academics, and vilified for his politics both by far left-wingers and the extreme right. For André Breton to have named him as one of the ancestors of Surrealism in the 1924 Manifesto could be said to have been going somewhat against the grain for an avant-garde movement.

In fact, the Surrealists did not adopt Victor Hugo wholeheartedly. But, to a greater or lesser extent, they did help rescue him from the conventional image that had grown up around him. They did this by laying emphasis on a whole section of his work that, until then, was either unknown or unappreciated. Hugo had placed freedom, love, dreams, vision, and imagination at the heart of his poetic approach, and it was this Hugo – the totally unbounded, visionary, lyric poet – whom, along with Baudelaire and Rimbaud, the Surrealists would reveal to the world.

It was also the case in the world of plastic art. Using techniques borrowed from art as a pastime – things such as stencils, prints, frottage, decalcomania, and inkblots – the Surrealist painters, led by Max Ernst and André Masson, seemed very much to be walking in Hugo's footsteps. There too, they had the vision to seek nature beyond nature and to look for reality beyond the real.

It is these kinships, which are a matter of sensibility as much as of technique, that this exhibition hopes to make palpable; and to do so by means of a thematic journey that takes in his castles, love, forests, the night, and questions of rhyme, poetic images and wordplay.

Room 1

The question of Castles

"I clung to the work of my fancy; and a work of fancy it was fated to remain", said Victor Hugo standing before the *Rat Tower*. Even when they were real, Hugo's castles were not entirely so. They loomed up round a bend in a river, with pallid façade and scrawny face, the image of a dream or a nightmare. They were generally hollow, allowing you to slip inside as into a reverie, covered by that "rising tide of ideas that slowly invades you, until it almost submerges all intelligence" (*The Rhine*). Surely, Surrealism would have to find the equivalent, for its period, of what castles had been for the Romantics? This was the 'question of castles' as formulated by Breton, which led to so many attempts to find a contemporary version of the Romantic castle. To a greater or lesser extent, the Surrealist castle remained a place of magic. It was a promontory, a tavern, a semaphore tower, and a pocket of resistance. And yet, what was there to defend unless it was, contrary to all worldly reality, the locus of the utmost fantasy, which is to say the utmost freedom, which is to say poetry itself, the absolute and unfathomable sign of the unknown – its last refuge, one might almost say?

Kinship

The Romantic and the Surrealist movements both grew out of profound historical, social and political upheaval – the French Revolution and its European consequences, for the Romantics, the First World War and its disastrous aftermath in Europe for the Surrealists. Both movements share an undoubted and, as it were, constitutive violence, born of revolutionary zeal and radical criticism. Each felt the need to shake off a historical, ideological and philosophical yoke, to contemplate both the unity and the infinity of the visible and the invisible world, and to extend the realm of poetry – particularly to take in dreams – and to make poetry the horizon point of a new awareness. The avowed and accepted kinship of Surrealism with Romanticism, a movement which the Surrealists were largely responsible for restoring to prominence, was the subject of Breton's second lecture in Haiti. He was talking about the French Romantics, with particular emphasis on Hugo, but he also developed his argument to take in English and German Romanticism.

Room 2

Prints

Among the many techniques that Hugo used in his drawings were several that belonged to the world of 'family pastimes', such as stencilling, cutouts, blots, masking, prints, and frottage. This taste for games and twisting the rules was something the Surrealists, too, shared in abundance, whether in literary games - the 'little papers' that became 'exquisite corpses' and 'dialogues' – or in drawing games. What was in evidence here was an attraction for rules and processes that "forced inspiration to come to the aid of [the] meditative and hallucinatory faculties" (Max Ernst).

From this shared source of inspiration, Victor Hugo and, particularly, Max Ernst created works that are very much in tune with one another. It may be that this was because they shared the same notion of a superior unity (supernatural or surreal) in nature, which only manifested itself in dreams and the imagination. "There is no great mind that has not been possessed, charmed, frightened, or, at least, astonished by the visions evoked by nature. Some have spoken of them, and, as it were, preserved within their works [...] those wonderful fugitive shapes, those nameless things of which they had caught a glimpse *in the obscurity of the night*." (Victor Hugo)

Inkblots

Decalcomania, which Oscar Dominguez revived in the middle of the 1930s, was a variation on the 'inkblot', an amusing pastime that had been taken up in 19th century parlours. Victor Hugo made free use of the inkblot. Unlike decalcomania, most of Hugo's blots were projected onto the paper or were simply a spread of wash. But when Breton presented 'Decalcomania without Preconceived Object', he was explicitly referring to "Victor Hugo's washes, [which] seem to imply a systematic search in the direction we are interested in". The question as to how 'involuntary' (i.e. automatic) the blot was – at least in Hugo's case – is an imponderable. He sometimes just let his blots live their own life, but he sometimes found cities or castles in them and highlighted these. As with frottage and prints, the trick was to make *something* appear out of the ink: "the hallucinatory burls, the caves, the black lakes, and the will o' the wisps on the heath" (Breton, *Decalcomania without Preconceived Object*).

Room 2, smals texts

Word games and hand games

Victor Hugo adored word games of all kinds, whether puns, charades, spoonerisms, anagrams or poems in set rhymes, an exercise in which he excelled. In slang, he found examples of this greedily sensual pleasure in words with its virtuoso capacity for mischief and he claimed to have been the first to introduce it into books, thereby shattering the proprieties and decorum of literature. In similar fashion, he had no hesitation in merging his drawings with those of children, in order somehow to appropriate their spontaneity and playfulness, their abrasiveness and occasional vulgarity. He also indulged in the rebus – sometimes a purely visual puzzle, sometimes one with words – as a trick or for fun, or perhaps out of a need for putting things into code.

On this terrain of word and picture games, some of the Surrealists were worthy heirs. Louis Aragon for the apparent casualness of certain poems, particularly those in *La Grande Gaité*, and Robert Desnos for the skilful awkwardness of his drawings, for his "verbo-visual" games, or for his rebuses. Like Hugo, Desnos was keen on lowbrow forms – songs, fables, radio advertisements.

Portraits

In the first years of his exile, Victor Hugo thought of adding a photographic portrait to *Napoléon le petit* and *Les Châtiments*. In 1852, a studio was installed at Marine Terrace, the Jersey house. Charles Hugo and Auguste Vacquerie did the donkey work while Victor Hugo directed the photo sessions and

the poses. Numerous portraits of the father and master were made, with a variety of expressions ranging from the inspired poet to the paterfamilias, the unkempt poet, or the exile perched on a rock, gazing into the distance. This was a genre that the Surrealists indulged in too. When it was 'real' photographers taking the pictures (Man Ray, Lee Miller, Brassai, or Uzac), the young poets staged the portraits à la Victor Hugo, playing around with the romantic image of the Poet as embodied by Hugo himself. On the other hand, in group portraits, or when they went on 'excursions', or used automatic photo booths, they allowed themselves more freedom, so there were more funny faces and more shouting and gesticulating.

Houses

Victor Hugo bought Hauteville House in 1856. He plundered antique shops for chests, tapestries, ceramic tiles and various pieces of china, and spent the next few years on its interior decoration. Not only did he design furniture and cover ceilings with tapestries, he moulded the entire space of the house in his image – "a three-storey autograph", as Charles Hugo described it, as if he were talking about an indoor theatre.

Breton's studio at 42 rue Fontaine began to take on its well-known shape in the years immediately following the Second World War. But although both houses were lived in, Breton's studio was not created in the same spirit as Hauteville House. Breton did not alter the structure of the place, nor did he transform all the objects by assembling them according to his own designs. He surrounded himself with art and objects that inspired him and fashioned him. Where Hugo had an indoor well; Breton had a shaman cloak.

Bestiary

There is a plethora of diverse creatures in Hugo's bestiary, ranging from the bear encountered in the Forest of Bondy (*Le Rhin*) to the octopus in *Travailleurs de la mer*. In his drawings, too, there are many familiar animals, which he renders with some degree of realism. And sometimes he ascribes animal qualities to the elements. "The water is full of claws. The wind bites, the sea devours, the waves are jaws". This results in troubling metamorphoses: species are hybridized, the elements couple with animals, nature becomes populated by monsters.

The Surrealist bestiary ranges wide, too. The animals are for the most part wild, therefore cruel and dangerous. Elephants, tigers, hippopotami and rhinoceroses come to life under the paintbrushes of Max Ernst and Dali; bulls, Minotaurs, and voracious horses sprang from the brush of Masson, who was equally at home with insects. Toyen was fond of wild cats, wolves, and foxes. Molluscs without number, starfish and 'soluble fish' (*Poisson soluble*) haunted the dreams of Desnos and Tanguy. Birds inhabit and reign over many of the Surrealists – for Max Ernst the fondness extended to mimicry.

Room 3

Mad Love(s)

Les Nouvelles Odes, Ruy Blas, Les Feuilles d'automne ('Autumn Leaves'), *L'homme qui rit* (The Man who Laughs'), *Les Misérables, Toute la lyre* (The Whole Lyre): in all these and many more, Victor Hugo constantly celebrated love. But having experienced it in all its intensity, he also claimed the right to love in defiance of public order and morality, and flouting the proprieties of religion, society or the law. Beyond his celebrations of *madly intense* love, what Hugo was advancing was the *social* dimension of love. In this domain, the Surrealists of *Hands off Love*, the defenders of Germaine Berton and Violette Nozières, knights-errant tilting at hypocrisy and prudery in all their forms, were worthy heirs of Hugo.

One area into which Hugo rarely ventured, however, was the *literary* expression of desire. Eroticism seems in fact to be absent from his writings, whereas it lay at the very heart of the Surrealist idea of a work of art. To the social dimension of free love, the Surrealists clearly added the expression of sexuality and its "limits, not frontiers". Eroticism in Hugo was and remained almost totally veiled.

Room 4

Nature I

Hugo's walks took him into forests and over mountains and moors. He would stride along river banks and seashores and could lose himself, until darkness fell, in contemplation of the sea. To all appearances, this Hugo has little in common with the Surrealist poets, who lived in town and whose contact with the countryside was, at most, sporadic. For Hugo, in the years of his exile, nature was turmoil, excess and cataclysm: "The enormity of nature is overwhelming" (*Philosophical Prose Pieces from the years 1860-1865*). Rain, thunder, storms, tempests, stars, comets, and shipwreck: the elements were untrammelled, both grandiose and threatening. Yet there was no contradiction in this. The marriage of sea and sky, mountain and storm, sets things in motion and creates life. The tree and the rock couple as the wind and the sea couple. And beyond nature, there is God, whom Hugo could never relinquish, "For creation lies ahead, with God behind it. Man lives on the dark side of the black fence, an inquisitive prowler. He need only lift his head and through the gloom of the dismal clerestory, he will see that mysterious eye" ("À la Fenêtre Pendant La Nuit", *Les Contemplations*).

Nature II

Nature is by no means absent from the Surrealist world. Though rarely evoked for its own sake, it is well cast in the role of a disruptive force. Its wrath (manifested in high water, floods, shipwrecks, or glacial action) upsets the normal course of things, triggers incredible effects, causes all kinds of encounters, and reveals impossible landscapes. In the work of Desnos, Péret, or Miró this wild exuberance is rarely dangerous and often joyous. In the hands of Breton, Max Ernst, and Masson, however, its power of penetration and impregnation makes it more disturbing; as if all that vitality and exaltation were joyfully or terrifyingly contagious. Nature is also the disquieting locus of metamorphosis, man's encounter and confrontation with the vegetable or the animal world. It is the sharp, rough, tragic night, of Max Ernst's *Forest* series, where it takes on an aggressive aspect, full of fury, carnivorous plants, spiky trees, fantastical animals, dark caves, and thunderstorms.

Room 4, Small texts

Paris

Baudelaire complained, in 1861, that he no longer ever bumped into Hugo in Paris, he who could "work while he walked" and perhaps "could not walk unless he were working". Hugo in Paris is the dreamer who composed the poems in *Les Orientales* as he watched the sun go down, the close observer of *Les Choses vues*, the writer who provides a detailed description of Gorbeau's hovel in *Les Misérables*. He would walk around, day or night, all over the city. He loved it for what it was, a living and changing organism.

The Surrealists also loved Paris. Although the city of their youth was not very different from that of Victor Hugo, that Paris was disappearing. There were differences in space and in time. The meeting places were no longer the same: Nodier's salon was a far cry from the Café de la Place Blanche, and the cinema had replaced the theatre. They were no longer caught up in the primary reality of the city, but in its mystery and its magic. There was less of a sense of history, but every shop window, every sign, every crossroads, contained the thread of an adventure, which now had to be taken up and lovingly followed.

Honour of the Poets

"At this moment when the unreasonable rhyme once again becomes the sole reason. Reconciled with meaning. Full of meaning like fruit ripe with wine": Louis Aragon in *La rime en 40* ('Rhyme in 1940'). The return of poets to traditional verse was an effective strategy when poetry found itself

associated with the political, moral, and patriotic struggles of wartime. This return to a form that was classical and, above all, belligerent was a throwback to the Hugo of *Châtiments* and *L'Année terrible*. There had long been a debate among Surrealists about occasional poetry and rhyme and metre. It rose to the surface again in the 1930s with the *Front Rouge* (a polemical poem by Aragon) and continued with the publication of Benjamin Péret's pamphlet *Déshonneur des poètes* in 1945. In this, Péret felt it was as important to question the need for "occasional verse", written in thrall to political action and, in his view, written in the service of a "resurrection of God, the fatherland, and the leader", as it was to know whether such verse should be cast in classical forms. "Form and content," he wrote "are necessarily bound so closely together that in such 'lines' their interaction creates a headlong rush towards the worst reaction."

Politics

Although the context, the periods and the circumstances can obviously not be compared, the political commitment of Victor Hugo on the one hand and that of the Surrealists on the other cannot be denied. The "social question" and the "humanitarian question" that Hugo spoke of in defining his political outlook are raised both in his literary work and in his political activity.

For the Surrealists, although there was no doubt as to its existence, commitment could not take the same forms of direct involvement. From the middle of the 1920s, the Surrealists launched repeated public actions by way of tracts, declarations, and by making common cause with others such as the group involved with *Clarté*, a 1920s Communist journal, then in the 1930s with antifascist groups. The question of communist party membership in the late 1920s, of reconciliation with Trotsky in the 1930s, anarchists in the 1950s, revolting students in 1968, and the question of whether or not poetry should be the vassal of any particular occasion (political occasions included) were all hotly debated subjects in successive Surrealist groups.