Mike Wood

Capítulo del libro y artículo sobre mis pulms surrealistas.

para Don Luis,
con el afecto y
la admiración
de siempre

Luis Buñuel

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Introduction

This is not quite the book I had in mind. I began to write about Luis Bunuel because I had long been drawn to certain aspects of his films - their careless, brittle flavour, their offhand jokes, their unfailing lucidity - and because certain aspects of his career - his long silence, his longer exile - posed haunting questions. But I was also looking for a particular case, a set of examples against which to test some general queries about the cinema: about the authorship of films, about art and industry, about the ways in which the world of a film is constructed by a director and reconstructed by its viewers; about a number of other matters. It was to be a book with a theoretical edge, but not a work of pure theory; a book about the movies, centred on Bunuel.

What I have written, it seems, is a book about Bunuel, reaching out into politics, psychology, religion, history. I don't mean to apologise for this. I haven't written the book I planned, but I have written the book I wanted to write. And I don't think I have sold the cinema short. The queries mentioned above do surface here, as they would

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in a consideration of the work of any talented moviemaker, and Bunuel is more than talented. But they are no longer as central as I expected them to be. In order to maintain their domination I would have had to cut Bunuel to my pattern or choose another director, one who doesn't rob these queries of so much of their weight: Orson Welles, say, or Hitchcock, who are men of the cinema in a way that Bunuel is not.

This is a delicate subject, and it is impprtant to get the emphasis right. I am not suggesting that Bunuel is not a moviemaker, that he is some sort of literary man who has strayed into films. Quite the opposite. There are literary moments in Bunuel's work, but those are usually flawed moments. His medium is the movies; he does not speak a borrowed or transplanted language. But the cinema itslef is not the most interesting or powerful aspect of this work. It is not what Bunuel does with film that counts most. It is what he gets on to it.

I appear to be creeping here towards a distinction between formand content, and towards an insistence on what Bunuel has to say. This is the last thing I want. The content of Bunuel's films is not something that exists apart from their film form; and their form in any case is part of their content. We may as well lay this bogey right away: form and content are not separable in any work

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that matters, but neither are they, as a modern orthodoxy holds, identical. They are inseparable but not indistinguishable: like close friends and Siamese twins. Further, as I shall suggest more fully later, Bunuel is alarmingly reticent in his films, seems to have nothing to say at all.

Nevertheless, Bunuel's films do engage questions which tend to tug us away from our interest in the medium. They ask us, in the most provocative, sometimes insulting way, to think about cruelty and suicide and madness and despair and a whole deck of civilisation's favourtie discontents. They don't tell us what to think (they don't even tell us what Bunuel thinks), but they cry out to be answered, quarrelled with, prolonged, made to talk. They are looking for an argument, and I have tried to give them one.

So this is and is not a movie book. I don't mean it's something better; something weightier or classier, as if writing about large human questions were more important (or more human) than writing about the cinema. What's important is to get things right, however large or small they look. "I guess it's your father under that oak, isn't it?" Nabokov's Van Veen says to Ada. "No," she says, "it's an elm." This is a book about

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movies, and does not pretend they are (or might have been) something else. But it does not confine its interest to the cinema. I would call it a book about Bunuel's mind, if that claim didn't sound too pompous and too spurious. I can call it a book about the reflections of that mind on film. We can learn a lot about the cinema from Bunuel. We can learn even more about ourselves and about the world.

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He is a man without vanity. I don't mean he is not touched by affection or admiration, or that he doesn't quite often prefer the elegance and purity of an intellectual pose to the tangle of the truth. He will insist, for example, the he doesn't like any of his films, never goes to the cinema, hates actors, doesn't care about film technique or the meaning of any of his movies. None of these propositions is entirely false, but all of them are simplifications, aspects of a mask. He doesn't like interviews, he tells a friend, because he doesn't have a personality. The friend, who on this occasion is also an interviewer, the Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska, gapes a little, unsure

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which leg is being pulled. Bunuel laughs. "I have a secret personality. Secret."

But the mask is not a lure, is not worn to win our applause. On the contrary, its purpose is to keep us, courteously, at a distance. He does not seek congratulations, seems immune to the almost universal temptation to think slightly better of ourselves and our doings than we should.

He laughs. He laughs a lot, and this is the first corrective that an actual sight of the man offers to the accumulation of photographs and appearances in films. He is himself a sort of movie that cannot be evoked in a still, or a glimpse. Mischievous, amiable grin, crooked teeth, large intelligent eyes behind his glasses. Very deaf. Never at a loss for a wisecrack. Impeccable manners. A boyish figure, eighty-one years old. Don Luis.

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In spite of his current citizenship and residence, Luis Bunuel is not really a Mexican. He remains remote from his adopted country, as most foreigners do in Mexico,

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even if they have lived there a lifetime. Spanish children born in Mexico speak with a Spanish accent - one cannot begin to imagine the same phenomenon with regard to English children in America. Mexico is a closed, secret place, and even the persistent, eloquent diagnoses of its quirks and ills by gifted natives like Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes tend to deepen the mystery rather than abolish it. For this reason it is essential to avoid all bland conclusions on the subject. One can know Mexico, learn the rules of living there, and many people, foreigners and natives, develop extraordinary skills at the game. Mexican politics make Machiavelli look like an anxious graduate student. But this is practical knowledge, experience. Discursive, analytic, penetrating knowledge is another matter, and claims to possess it always ring hollow. No Toqueville has yet arrived, or been born, in Mexico.

But if Bunuel is not a Mexican, what is he? A Spaniard? Yes, in all kinds of unmistakable ways: marked by a provincial childhood, a Jesuit education, years as a student in an extraordinarily lively Madrid, the heart of a tremendous explosion of culture and learning. How tremendous is now rather hard to see, because Franco's rebellion broke and dispersed its energies, scattered its proponents to exile and death. Bunuel's moral and intellectual kinship with Goya and Qeuvedo is so obvious as to have become a cliche.

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There can be no question of denying Bunuel's Spanishness - or to be more precise, his Aragonese origins. Spaniards rarely talk about their nation, they talk about their country, meaning their province: Aragon, Asturias. Dali xxxxxx is Catalan, Bunuel is Aragonese, and Lorca was an Andalusian dog.

And yet Bunuel's films, physically, are less Spanish than he is. They are always somewhere, a particular place has posed fro the camera, in Spain, in France, in Mexico. But they usually look as if they were nowhere. There are exceptions to this proposition - Tristana seems to catch the very odours of Toledo, a night scene in La Ilusion Viaja en Tranvia, colonial facade and the xhix bo'sun's whistle of a vendor of fried bananas, evokes a thoroughly identifiable Mexico - but ordinarily Bunuel's world is drained of ~~local~~ national colour. Everything is individual, almost nothing is local. The visit to Guanajuato made by the newly married couple in El is not really an exception, because these people are touring there, photographing their own versions of the postcards which are found so obscene in Le Fantome de la liberte: Guanajuato's answer to the Arc de Triomphe and the Sacre-Coeur. This is not Bunuel's Mexico, or his Paris. He is not a tourist, but he is not at home either - even in Spain, especially in Spain. He is the flaneur defined by Walter Benjamin, a modern wanderer. He sees what wanderers see.

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This perspective is most clearly confessed in Los Olvidados, which Bunuel says he arrived at through walking the city, day after day, out of work, at home and not at home.. The film opens with stock shots of New York, London and Paris, familiar, famous places, Big Ben, New York Bay, the Eiffel Tower, the tourist's city, but also the sign of the city. We then see two or three particularly anonymous-looking bits of Mexico City. The soundtrack burbles on for a moment about the secret miseries of the modern city, and the whole sequence would be terribly banal, were it not for the drabness of those Mexican shots, and for what Bunuel is about to show us of the city where he lives.

The city of Los Olvidados has only three faces. It is a place of shanties and hovels, rickety structures that seem to be waiting for the wolf to blow them down; of waste lots, empty patches of dust and grass; and of new constructions going up, large, ambitious modern buildings - like Godard's Paris, Bunuel's Mexico is permanently being built. It is the waste land, in a sense far less figurative than Eliot's, and this film, which seems a little dated in other ways (slow motion for dream sequences, significant music at excessively apprpriate moments, "artistic" elaboration of patterns of imagry) is extraordinarily contemporary in this respect. The half-finished buildings seen in Los Olvidados are finished now; they are even old. But their descendants are still going up everywhere,

scaffolding and reinforced concrete promising newer, better things. New waste lots spring up as the result of clearances and demolitions; and the shanties and hovels migrate from zone to zone, but remain what they always were. It is still possible, any day in Mexico City, to turn a corner, to step off a fashionable street, and find yourself in the setting of Los Olvidados, complete with ragged children playing ancient games. The fact that this experience is available in other cities too - is available in all large cities, perhaps, if not as easily as in Mexico - reinforces underscores the point, started by the nondescript shots I mentioned a moment ago.

This is the Mexico City which appears more often than any other in Bunuel's work - more often than any other place at all, perhaps. A world of dull, spacious, impersonal modern streets. In film after film, in shots which are unimportant for the narrative or the mood but essential for the establishment of Bunuel's very special sense of place, we are offered these anonymous avenues, squares, intersections. They are obviously urban and obviously modern - according to the forties and fifties idea of the modestly modern - but they are otherwise entirely without interest, architectural or otherwise. These streets are nowhere, nameless, faceless. But they are nowhere not because they could be anywhere, but because they are everywhere. Their very facelessness reflects their

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ubiquity. They are the streets of a certain time in the world, the streets of the century.

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> Studio Vingt-Huit - high up a winding street of Montmartre, in the full blasphemy of a freezing Sunday; taxis arriving, friends greeting each other, an excitable afternoon audience...

The description is Cyril Connolly's, the occasion a showing of Un Chien andalou. The audience seemed baffled at the end, some of its members were angry; unprepared no doubt for what Connolly calls the "destructive reverence" of the film.

> With the impression of having witnessed some infinitely ancient horror, Saturn swallowing his sons, we made our way out into the cold of February 1929, that unique and dazzling cold.

The date can't be right, since the film opened, at another cinema, in April 1929. It then moved to Studio Vingt-Huit for a run of nine months. Connolly's sense of the horror of the film, and of its romance ("Un Chien andalou brought out the grandeur of the conflict inherent in romantic love, the truth that the heart is made to be broken,

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and after it has mended, to be broken again") leads him to ignore its farcial aspects, its echoes of Buster Keaton and its complementary truth that romantic love is as often as not a matter of violent grabs and dashes, a pantomime of lust wagging its human puppets. But his experience anticipates that of thousands of others. The first film we see by any major director usually bakes a mark, but we don't always feel we have seen Saturn swallowing his sons.

There is a song by Richie Havens which insists, with droning and undeniable logic, that younger men get older every day. It is also true that older men, in some cases, get older very slowly, and in some senses, may not get older at all. Bunuel is a youngster who was born in the second month of the century. His career is so long and has been so intermittent that different generations have picked it up at very different points: with Un Chien andalou or L'Age d'or in 1929 Or 1930; with Los Olvidados in 1950; with Viridiana in 1961; with Tristana in 1970 or Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie in 1973. People remember the cinemas in question: Studio Vingt-Huit; Cine Mexico, in Mexico City; the Curzon in London; the Little Carnegie in New York.

My own acquaintance with this career began in a small cinema in Cambridge, England, one damp fenland evening in *

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autumn. I had seen a good deal of Bergman and Fellini by then, was a devotee of Hitchcock and Welles, loved Hollywood musicals, had followed the beginnings of the French New Wave, and had slept through a reasonable number of classics of cinema history, but I had never seen anything like Viridiana. I remember the audience's gasp when a small crucific opened to convert itself into a menacing knife. These objects, I later learned, are used in Spain for peeling apples, but the knife in the film seemed much less innocent. I remember too that audience's nervous laughter when a company of riotous beggars, helped out by one or two extras, composed themselves into a parody Leonardo's Last Supper, while a snatch of the Hallelujah Chorus blared out in the soundtrack. And I remember my own anxious fascination with a scene in which a dog appears trotting along a Spanish road, cruelly tied to the axle of a moving cart. A character in the film compassionately buys the dog in order to free it from this variant of a treadmill, but as he stands there with the beneficiary of his kindness (the dog is called Canelo), another cart goes by in the opposite direction, another trotting dog tied to its axle. All charity which is less than infinite leaves the world unchanged, and what charity is not less than infinite?

All this mattered to me especially in 1961, because I was writing a (very bad) novel in which charity served

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to cover a fear of feeling, and caused a lot of damage as well. Yet the most memorable feature of Viridiana was not its imagery or its argument, but the harsh, almost reckless intelligence behind it, its manifest intention to disturb. I don't mean the work was out to provoke a literal disturbance, although Bunuel's films have set off a number of those. Conolly recounts the beginnings of one; L'Age d'or was closed by the police after the patriotic youth of France had smashed up the cinema where it was showing; Viridiana itself has been banned all over the place, and has only recently been screned in Spain. I mean the film chiefly wants to trouble us, wants to send us home rattled and uncomfortable in a way that even the darkest of dramas or documentaries don't. We are not to be concerned or saddened; we are to feel irritated and helpless.

Bunuel himself has said more than once that his films are designed to show us that we don't live in the best of worlds. They certainly do that, but the formulation is not strong enough, or flexible enough. It suggests for one thing that those of us who know we don't live in the best of worlds have nothing to learn from Bunuel, which is not true. It also implies that those who think we do live in such a world can be persuaded to think otherwise by a movie, which is unlikely. Bunuel's films display a world which must be changed, which is intolerable. But they offer

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no indication of how this world can be changed, indeed they usually intimate that it can't. They have all the horror Connolly describes, and all the wit he misses, and they face us, finally, with a flat and maddening contradiction, a social and historical version of Beckett's compulsive impossibility. "I can't go on, I'll go on," Beckett's unnamable character says. And Bunuel's films, insofar as they say anything at all, seem to mutter, "This can't go on, how could it end?"

A few months after seeing Viridiana for the first time, I took myself to Spain to continue wrestling with my ailing novel, and met a charming man in Madrid, a doctor, who claimed to know Bunuel intimately, and to have helped him recruit the beggars for Viridiana. I can't remember whether I believed him or not. Probably I did. Bunuel for me was as distant as Cervantes or Saint Theresa, and I didn't even know where he lived. Then I forgot about the encounter, except for thinking kindly of the doctor and Madrid whenever I saw Viridiana again, or when my thoughts turned to Spain. And with time I certainly ceased to believe in my own old innocence. All this weary sophistication vanished when I saw Le Fantome de la liberte. Right at the beginning of the film a group of Spanish prisoners is led out to be shot by Napoleon's soldiers. They include Bunuel himself (as a monk), Serge Silberman, Bunuel's producer, and the poet Jose Bergamin, an old friend of Bunuel's. They also include,

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handsome, amiable and to me uncannily familiar, my acquaintance the doctor, Bunuel's friend Jose-Luis Barros. It took me a while to place the recognised face, but when I had located it I had caught a piece of lost time: not only Madrid and Dr Barros and an earlier self, but Viridiana as it felt the first time round: blasphemous, brilliant, ragged, indifferent to the preoccupations of unity and coherence which most aesthetics demand.

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The Shadow of Sade

"We must always return to Sade," Baudelaire remarked, "in order to explain evil." We may also return to Sade in order to scrutinize the very idea of evil, or of crime, or of blasphemy. Sade for Bunuel represents not vice but a form of principled pathology, a refusal of all illusions about the ruthless propensities of humankind. Sade is a philosopher, not a pornographer - in pornography, Bunuel says, Pierre Louys, for example, in Trois Filles de leur mere, leaves Sade standing, or panting perhaps.

Sade is the perfect atheist, close enough to belief to be enraged by it, and the sickening antics of his characters celebrate the death of a God whomay be reborn at any minute. The repetitive cruelties in Sade's work, all the remorseless mounting and coupling and grabbing and piercing and drenching and worse, are signs of an immense licence, declare the freedom of a world which will not be judged. It has been plausibly argued that Sade must believe in the God he so persistently outrages. But it is more likely that he is afraid the rest of us will feebly return to our faith. Certainly he seeks to remind

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himself, and his presumably backsliding readers, that he does not believe; does not need to, for there is nothing to believe in. His authentic passion, as Maurice Blanchot says, is not lust or pain but a furious hatred for this abolished God. Or as Sade himself put it, "The notion of God is the one fault I cannot forgive in man."

It is in this frame of mind that Sade, played by Michel Piccoli, appears in Bunuel's La Voie lactee, reciting assorted lines culled from Justine and Les 120 Journees de Sodome. A pious maitre d'hotel in contemporary France asserts that atheists are all either crazy or imposters, and the film instantly transports us to an eighteenth century dungeon, where Sade, elegant and authoritative, refutes and returns the charges:

> Is there a single religion which does not bear the ~~th~~ emblem of imposture and stupidity?... This God which you forge for yourself is only a stupid dream found only in the heads of madmen... He is a phantom invented by the wickedness of men... No, Therese, no. There is no God. Nature is sufficient unto herself... Ah, if your God exists, how I hate him!

Therese, however, in chains on a bed of straw, and still bleeding from the marquis' ministrations, is the camera's answer to Sade, a seen, suffering creature rather than an abstract body made of words. She lifts her head defiantly and cries, "Yes, God exists!" Sade turns and advances menacingly towards her and us, and the scene ends. In a

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further shot, scripted but not filmed, Sade closes the door and begins to undress, inflamed by the girl's courage and virtue. The shot would only have shown us what we now imagine, and in any event we have seen what we were supposed to see: Sade's tempting philosophy and a victim of what that philosophy permits. The implication, I think, is not that Therese is right, that God exists after all, but that philosophy is not everything, and that the Inquisition, which appears elsewhere in the same film, indeed appears in the same dungeon where Sade has strutted and spoken, did not have a monopoly on cruelty and torture.

In spite of the quotation from Les 120 Journees de Sodome in La Voie lactee, and the overt, joking allusion to the same book in L'Age d'or, Bunuel's Sade is not really the tireless inventor of excesses represented by that work. There is a difference between the Sade who claims that no prompting of Nature's can be a crime, and the Sade who scours his mind and heart for tastes and fantasies that will exhaust the very concept of Nature. "There is no extravagance which is not in Nature," we read in La Philosophie dans le boudoir, but the Sade of Les 120 Journees does what he can to find some.

Bunuel is closer to the humanism of the Dialogue d'un pretre et d'un moribond. The dying man repents,not of his errors and vices, but of not having yielded often enough to the passions Nature placed in him. He spends his last hours

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in the arms of "six women lovelier than the light of day". The priest too find the arms of these women more appealing than his own argument, and becomes "one whom Nature has corrupted, all because he had not succeeded in explaining what a corrupt nature is." This text, Freddy Buache suggests, is to Bunuel what the Pensees of Pascal are to Robert Bresson.

There are many other traces of Sade in Bunuel's films. The police lecturer in Le Fantome de la liberte cites Margaret Mead - "I repeat: Mead. M,E,A,D" - but appears rather to be paraphrasing Sade on the relativity of customs. "On est toujours le barbare de quelqu'un," he says, an echo of Dolmance's claim, in La Philosophie dans le boudoir, that virtue and vice are merely "local ideas." "All is relative to our manners and the climate we inhabit: what is crime here is often a virtue several hundred leagues hence, and the virtues of another hemisphere might well reverse themsevles into crimes in our own." Bunuel's playful extension of this thought is a world where shame is attached to eating, and where people get together socially to go to the bathroom.

There is a duke in Belle de jour who likes to have girls clad only in a flimsy veil climb into a coffin and play dead: live represenatives of his daughter's now presumably rotting corpse. The duke mumbles a few choice phrases - "Only yesterday, we played together.

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We laughed and sang... I hope you hav e forgiven me... It was not my fault... I loved you too much" - and disappears beneath the coffin. There may be a faint memory here of a story told in Les 120 Journees about a certain duke who likes to have girls pretend to be dead while he manipulates what he imagines is their freshly executed body, dreaming of the pleasure the killer of such beauty must have had. Among the listeners to this story is a character who immediately penetrates his (live) daughter, picturing her dead.

But this memory, if it is a memory, finally serves to illustrate the differences between Sade and Bunuel, which are many. I mean to suggest, that is, not only that Bunuel has made certain aspects of Sade's thought his own, incorporating them into a consistent personal view, but that other feature of Bunuel's thinking are virtually the reverse of Sade's.

Although the duke of Belle de jour appears to combine, like the characters in Sade, incest with necrophilia, there is really only passionate, imaginary incest in that scene - doubly imaginary, because it doesn't take place, and because the girl is not his daughter. Bunuel's necrophiliacs are interested not in death and murder, but in the reverse: in the deletion of death, secular resurrection. The duke presumably loved his daughter while she was alive, unless the daughter herself is a fantasy. In any case, he does not love her because she is dead. There is thus, strictly speaking,

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as Bunuel himself once said to me, no necrophilia in his films. There are only repeated attempts, often grotesque or pathetic, to cheat the finality of death.

Death is not only irresistible, it is also unimaginable. The people we care about cannot die, at least not immediately. Our affection rejects the evidence, refutes the fact. And yet they do die, and our attempts to deny their absence result in buffoonery and further pain. Heathcliff climbs into Cathy's coffin in Wuthering Heights; Don Jaime, in Viridiana, gets his startled neice to pick up the threads of his broken wedding. And yet these charades, like the gloomy games of the duke in Belle de jour, are far more comprehensible, far more human, than ~~genuine~~ necrophilia in any of its forms. Death is what baffles life; what must and cannot be resisted.

But Bunuel's departure from Sade is clearest, I think, in the most insidious and haunting of his allusions to the marquis. The protagonist of El, exhausted by the thought of the infidelities he quite mistakenly attributes to his wife, decides to close the subject - literally. The camera frames for us a large needle - "l'aiguille courbe chere aux heros de Bunuel", as Jacques Lacan says - a length of thick thread, a ball of cotton wool. The man has laid out this eloquent assembly on a tray and now sets off for his wife's bedroom. He ties her to the bed but she

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wakes up and screams before he can get any further with his plan. Mercifully for us (to say nothing of the wife), since the close-up of the needle and thread was ~~xxxxxxxxxxx~~ already more than enough - more excruciating in its horrible promise than the slashed eye in Un Chien andalou. "Metonymy," Roland Barthes writes, "is the ~~sure~~ certain road to horror: the instrument is more terrible than the torture." I'm not so sure about that, but the instrument is terrible enough, a moment of horror in the movies which makes Dracula look lovable and Frankenstein something like man's best friend.

(to be continued....)

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"The Newyork Reviews" Marzo 19, 1981

In the Museum of Strangeness

The Autobiography of Surrealism
edited by Marcel Jean.
Viking, 472 pp., $30.00

From Enchantment to Rage: The Story of Surrealist Cinema
by Steven Kovács.
Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 297 pp., $22.50

Michael Wood

André Breton thought that the historical success or failure of surrealism could be judged only by its efficacy in provoking a grave and generalized *crise de conscience*. Undoubtedly it failed in this respect, but the criterion is odd, since the vast *crise de conscience* known as modernity was well under way by the time of the first surrealist manifesto (1924), and in any case the surrealists could hardly provoke something of which they themselves were so plainly a symptom.

The world they wished to shake had already half crumbled, and it is because they don't appear to have realized this that many surrealists seem provincial. John Berger memorably says of Magritte that "he hated the familiar and the ordinary too much to turn his back on them." The surrealists could not turn their backs on the bourgeoisie. They were masters of insult and invective, always arraigning public men and addressing open letters to figures of authority. They wanted the prisons opened and the army disbanded. "All that is doddering, suspicious, infamous, sullying, and grotesque," Breton wrote, "is contained for me in that single word: God." Paul Eluard called Cocteau a swine and a stinking beast, and remarked, "Being careful never prevented anyone from being vile."

Walter Benjamin, in an early article, pointed to the elements of bluff and provocation in all this, but he also thought the surrealists were the first people since Bakunin to have a radical conception of freedom. They perceived the world as caught up in an ecstatic conspiracy of respectability, and according to Benjamin they saw through the "unholy coupling" of idealistic moralizing and fierce political practice. There was nothing philosophical about their skepticism; it flared up with the sense of betrayal which was so large a legacy of the Great War. Like many others, of quite different ages and temperaments, the surrealists felt they had been fed on deception, that the very notion of truth was a casualty of the war. Ezra Pound spoke of "old men's lies" and "disillusions as never told in the old days." "Surely it must be realized," Louis Aragon wrote, "that the face of error and the face of truth cannot fail to have identical features."

There is an element of naïveté in this outrage, of course, particularly in France, where artists had been railing against the supposed ideals of the bourgeoisie for nearly a century. But a certain naïveté is inseparable from the surrealists' energy. "Nothing is revolutionary except candor," Robert Desnos wrote. When they were no longer shocked by the hypocrisy and fatuousness of their comfortable contemporaries, they were no longer surrealists.

Marcel Jean's *Autobiography of Surrealism* lays out the brilliant literary and painterly pedigree the movement claimed for itself: Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Jarry, Apollinaire, Reverdy, Chirico are all rounded up and nicely quoted, along with Breton's friend Jacques Vaché, a soldier-dandy and nihilist who said he objected to being killed in time of war and died from an overdose of opium in 1919. Jean traces surrealism mainly through the magazines where it blossomed and quarreled and flirted with communism and fell—*Littérature*, *La Révolution surréaliste*, *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, *Minotaure*, *VVV*—and allows the writers and painters to speak for themselves.

He had originally planned, he says, "an anthology of writings by surrealist painters," but the book gradually turned into "an anthological history of written surrealism," a complement to Jean's own *History of Surrealist Painting*, published in French in 1959 and in English in 1960. There are texts by Breton, Eluard, Aragon, Soupault, Ernst, Desnos, Péret, Artaud, Leiris, Queneau, Magritte, Buñuel, Dali, Duchamp, Tzara, Crevel, Picasso, Arp, Motherwell, Leonora Carrington, and a number of others. The last word is given to Breton, but the next-to-last word belongs to the rebelling Paris students of 1968, who brought surrealism to the walls of the Sorbonne, where they quoted Breton and scribbled assertions like "Dream is truth" and "Any view of things that is not strange is false."

The last phrase makes a fine echo to Chirico's suggestion, quoted early in the book, that we should "live in the world as if in an immense museum of strangeness," but the implied vindication of what Jean calls "timeless surrealism" doesn't quite come off. It was not surrealism that drove the students to the barricades in 1968. Surrealism, along with many other sources, offered an attractive rhetoric, and we may feel, with the sweep of hindsight, that surrealism was above all a rhetoric. It was not exactly an aesthetics that yearned to a politics, as Susan Sontag shrewdly guessed. It was an overreaching politics that could not leave the realm of romance.

And yet. There is a good deal to be said for rhetoric and romance if they are all you have. If liberty is a phantom, as the title of a Buñuel film suggests, it is essential to talk about it. Its return to reality may depend upon our familiarity with the idea. "The very word *liberty*," Breton wrote, "is exalting. I think it is capable of preserving, indefinitely, the old human fanaticism." And again, prophetically enough: "It would be wrong for man to allow himself to be intimidated by a few monstrous historical failures: he is still free to *believe* in his freedom."

There is a certain negligence, even callousness, in such remarks ("a few monstrous historical failures"), but there is also a fine fidelity to a battered belief. Breton saw the imagination as the only index of possibility; wanted the "already thought" to make way for the "thinkable"; waged pitiless war on the shabby reality he found all too many of his contemporaries settling for. He could be vague and superstitious on this subject, but it is usually clear that he wants more reality, not less, or even a different one. "The admirable thing about the fantastic," he said, "is that it is no longer fantastic: there is only the real." The fantastic is not an escape from the world. It is a promise, a hint of what a larger, less constricting world might be like, since a life that can be imagined can also be desired. It is in this sense that we should understand the surrealists' insistence on dreams and automatic writing, their quest for the marvelous in everyday life, their canonization of chance and love. *Il a peut-être des secrets pour changer la vie?* a timid voice says in Rimbaud's *Une Saison en enfer*. The surrealists thought they had the secrets.

They didn't. But surrealism was not only a program, it was also a set of practices, notably a fund of disruptive techniques like collage or willed hallucination. Max Ernst spoke of "forcing inspiration," and Dali's notion of critical paranoia meant frankly reading the world in the light of an obsession, "tangibly transferring the world of the delirium on to the plane of reality." When Picasso, in *Seated Bather*, paints a woman's head as a pair of vertical jaws mounted on a sort of anvil, it doesn't much matter whether we call the result a piece of surrealism or not. Picasso's relations with the movement were casual, and Breton pictured him as "hunting in the neighborhood," not as a member of the surrealist house-party. But it is clear that in this painting, as in others of the same period and even some time later, a creature of the mind has invaded the seen shapes and spaces of cubism.

Equal rights for mental realities was a consistent feature of surrealist practice: fantasies and nightmares were painted or photographed or written about as if they had the status of objects or landscapes. Some very thin painting resulted, and some vacuous poetry. But the practice also gave us Miró, Eluard, Buñuel, Magritte. And the striking thing about the work of these men is not its escape into some realm of the arbitrary and magical but on the contrary its constant, embattled engagement with things as they are, its pursuit of an intricate human truth. Respecting Breton's dream of freedom, they managed to stand it on its head. It is because freedom finally is impossible that it is indispensable to dream of it. "Surrealism," Buñuel told Carlos Fuentes, "taught me that man is never free yet fights for what he can never be." This strikes me as rather too absolute in its abandonment of hope, but Buñuel, to paraphrase John Berger, hates captivity too much to think of living anywhere else.

It is true that the cinema offers particularly obvious hindrances to imaginative freedom. The surrealists talked a lot about film, admired *Dr. Caligari* and early serials like *Fantomas* and *Les Vampires*, and beat the comparison between movies and dreams to death. But the *production* of a dream, however complex and ancient its causes or content, is a simple affair: one goes to sleep. A film takes time, money, calculation, technique, and the surrealists, with the exception of Buñuel, only played at cinema, wrote scripts and criticism, and liked the *idea*. The cinema for them, as Steven Kovács writes, was "an exquisite toy and nothing more."

Kovács's *From Enchantment to Rage* is not a sophisticated book ("Dali's fixation on the womb is a rather pronounced one." "Being so close to death, members of the Dada-Surrealist circle had to indulge in black humor as a safety valve"), but it is substantial

A photograph by Man Ray from Minotaure, *edited by Albert Skira and E. Teriade. This is the first in a series of three volumes published by Skira/Rizzoli, reprinting in facsimile the famous art and literary magazine that Skira and Teriade edited in Paris from 1933 to 1939.* Minotaure *published many of the important artists and writers associated with the surrealist movement—Breton, Picasso, Miro, Dali, Eluard, and Ernst, among many others. Volume Two will be published in June.*

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and it is historical, does not go questing for timeless surrealism. Kovács gives an account of the surrealists' attitudes to film; examines Robert Desnos's scenarios and criticism; writes at some length about Picabia's and René Clair's *Entr'acte*; closely studies Man Ray's four films; discusses Artaud's scripts and pronouncements; and looks at Buñuel's and Dali's *Un Chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or* in detail.

It has become customary to attribute the excellences of these last two films to Buñuel, and the failed jokes to Dali. Kovács bravely tries to set the record straight, rather schematically crediting flair and image to Dali and structure and morality to Buñuel. In fact, as Kovács himself comes to see, there are only two things to be said about this collaboration: Dali and Buñuel were close friends at the time of writing, each eagerly accepting the other's suggestions, and many of the images in the films (donkeys, ants, orchestras, priests, paintings) can be seen to belong to the repertoire of both; and Buñuel *directed* the films, converted whatever there was in the scripts into movies.

L'Age d'or was first shown at Studio 28 in Paris, in 1930. It shared the bill with a short comedy and an animated cartoon, and it was described as a *film parlant surréaliste*, a surrealist talkie. But it was also a film which spoke surrealist, as one speaks French or jabberwocky, and members of the Anti-Semitic League and the League of Patriots didn't like its style. They bombarded the screen, smashed some furniture, and wrecked an exhibition of surrealist paintings in the foyer of the cinema. Showings of the film were then suspended by the police because it "caused disorder."

The film has since become standard fare in film courses, at film clubs and festivals, but was shown commercially for the first time last year. The Public Theater in New York screened a handsomely restored print, along with a scratchier, fainter copy of *Un Chien andalou*. If the program had been stretched for half an hour, it could have included the film Buñuel made two years after *L'Age d'or*: *Las Hurdes*, called *Land without Bread* in English, a bleak documentary about a barren and backward Spanish community. It was also the last film Buñuel was to direct until he found a home in Mexico some fourteen years later. Taken together, the three films give us Buñuel's picture of civilization as something like the torture of Tantalus, an arrangement which separates us, by a few inches or a few miles, but irremediably, from everything we need.

Buñuel said later that he had excluded "all narrative sense," "all logical association" from *Un Chien andalou*, but the film in fact *attacks* narrative sense quite systematically and replaces logical association with chains of almost too legible metaphors. It begins quietly, like a fairy tale with the pace of a realistic novel. A title card says, "Once upon a time," and a burly fellow, who happens to be Buñuel, appears in his shirtsleeves, smoking, sharpening a razor, testing it against his thumbnail. He steps out onto a balcony and takes a look at the moon. We see a young woman's face in close-up. A hand holds her left eye open, while another hand approaches the eye with a razor. A cloud passes across the moon, as though slicing through it. In a very large close-up, the razor cuts into an eye, which leaks matter immediately. A new title card says, "Eight years later."

People still gasp when this scene is shown. There is no way of reducing the intimacy of its violence. The fact that the same young woman appears soon after in the film, both eyes happily intact, and the fact that the sliced eye, on inspection, can be seen to be that of an animal—of one of the two dead donkeys, I take it, which later appear draped over two grand pianos—are not as consoling as we might hope. I don't gasp any more, but I do have to sit tight in the cinema, energetically reminding myself that the eye being sliced is *not* the woman's, that it is neither human nor alive.

Much nonsense has been written about this eye, but it is clear that however Buñuel and Dali arrived at the image, there is nothing accidental about its place in the film. It assaults the very organ we are viewing with, blinds us by proxy, and our physical disgust is complicated by an obscure sense that some sort of ugly justice has been done, that we've got what we deserve. The casual narrative adds to the effect. We didn't think he was sharpening the razor *for that*, and the cards suggest an idiotic storyteller who just doesn't know what is in his tale. In later films, I should add, Buñuel rarely finds actual violence necessary. He gets quite terrifying results by the equivalent of simply showing the razor in the vicinity of the eye. Our own fears do the rest.

And so the film continues, constantly setting up narrative movements only to knock them down. The woman leaves a room and finds herself in exactly the same place. Later in the film she leaves the same room through the same door and finds herself on a beach. A man is shot indoors, and the scene changes around him, as in Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* By the time he hits the ground he is in a meadow. Meanwhile the title cards, at intervals, continue their placid, crazy commentary: "Toward three in the morning"; "Sixteen years before"; "In the spring."

On the other hand, the film cannot resist the coherence of its imagery and gives in, with comic helplessness, to the associations which suggest themselves. Ants crawling in a hand make way for a close-up of a woman's armpit, which in turn is followed by a close-up of a sea-urchin's spine, which dissolves to a head seen from directly above. Later the hair from a woman's armpit appears magically on a man's face. Even more strikingly, love and death (or perhaps love and damage) are consistently connected, in a travesty of *Tristan*. A man watches a girl get run over and becomes panicky with lust. He chases the woman who is with him round the room and over the bed, and as he fondles her breasts his head tilts back, his eyes roll up, showing their whites, and blood trickles from the corner of his mouth.

There is a similar image in *L'Age d'or*, where the lover, blood all over his face, mutters rabidly, "*Mon amour, mon amour, mon amour, mon amour, mon amour.*" In 1960 Buñuel added a sound track to *Un Chien andalou* which alternates between Wagner and a splendid old tango and emphasizes this effect. At times the couple chasing round the furniture actually appears to be dancing to the music.

But in the end, in spite of its assaults on narrative and time and space, the film does have a story. It is the story of countless other films, including *L'Age d'or*. A couple meet, are separated, meet again, the woman goes off with another man. *L'Age d'or*, like the earlier work, has plenty of random events and narrative disturbance. A large cow sits on a bed and is casually

shooed away as if it were a dog; a well-dressed man walks thoughtfully down a street, kicking a violin as he goes. A minister commits suicide and falls upward out of his shoes to lie on the ceiling. And again there is the wonderfully disconnected use of title cards. A card says, "Sometimes on Sunday," for example, and the following shot shows a whole side of a street being blown up. Another card announces the founding of imperial Rome (in 1930, on a rocky island), and we see shots of St. Peter's, a Vatican balcony, and what purports to be a French window in the same building with a note stuck to it: "I've spoken to the landlord; he's letting us have the lease on very favorable terms...."

But the narrative line here, finally, is stronger than in *Un Chien andalou*; the same story more firmly told. Two lovers interrupt the founding of Rome with their squeals of pleasure as they grovel together in the mud, and are separated. Sex literally has to be stopped so that social life can start. It is as if Buster Keaton, who Buñuel once said could give lessons to reality, had decided to make a film of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Later in the film, when the couple get together again, they are disturbed by a concert, and the woman goes off with the conductor of the orchestra. Culture strikes again, and the film at last abandons all pretense of randomness and concludes with a powerfully concentrated set of associations. The man, alone, in a rage, tears up a pair of pillows and finds his hands full of feathers which he seems to have borrowed from Breton's *Nadja*. He pitches various objects out of a window—a plough, a burning fir tree, a large wooden giraffe, a live archbishop (who gets up and scurries away), and more and more feathers. A card then tells us:

> At the precise moment when these feathers, torn out by his furious hands, covered the ground below the window, at this moment, we said, but very far away, the survivors of the Chateau de Selliny were coming out, to go back to Paris....

Selliny, called Seligny on another card, is a misspelling of Silling, the high castle in the Black Forest where the orgies of Sade's *Les 120 Journées de Sodome* take place. Another card tells us more about the gruesome heroes of Sade's story, and a door on a drawbridge opens to reveal the evil Duc de Blangis, who looks exactly like the Christ of conventional representations. Three other rogues come out, followed by a girl in a bloodstained gown. Blangis goes back, takes the girl in, and closes the door. We hear a scream. Blangis reappears, looking as saintly as ever, but mysteriously lacking his beard and mustache. The image changes to that of a snow-covered cross decorated with scalps, and a jolly *paso doble* brings the film to an end.

It is true that all this resists logical organization, and there is much clumsiness, both in the conception and in the execution of these images. But the clustering of thoughts is eloquent enough: rage, betrayal, sadism, Christianity, murder, sex, saintliness. This is precisely the world of Benjamin's "unholy coupling," the domain of deception and displacement the surrealists sought to explode.

The point becomes clearer if we recall that the film is framed by Sade at the end and what seems to be a fragment of a documentary about scorpions at the beginning. The cold of the cross answers the dry heat of the kingdom of the scorpions, and Buñuel apparently thought at one point of calling the film, from a phrase by Marx, *In the Icy Waters of Egoist Calculation*. The scorpion, we learn, is a friend of darkness, and "*peu sociable*." Sade and the scorpions, as Stendhal might have said, are at least not hypocrites.

The documentary note is a clue, not a joke. Buñuel's style is so modestly *descriptive* as to be disconcerting in its own right, quite apart from any upsets or aggressions the images of the films may offer. Most people fill in his silences with projections of their own, and what is remarkable about the projections of the first viewers of these early films is their insistence on romance. Cyril Connolly asked himself why *Un Chien andalou* made such a strong impression on him. Because, he said, it "brought out the grandeur of the conflict inherent in romantic love, the truth that the heart is made to be broken, and after it has mended, to be broken again."

It is hard to reconcile this lofty tone with all the knockabout slapstick in the movie, and it is even harder to see why Breton would call *L'Age d'or* "a unique exaltation of total love." But then Dali himself said that his intention in writing the film with Buñuel was to present the pure pursuit of love "amid ignoble patriotic and humanitarian ideals, and other miserable mechanisms of reality."

Buñuel has a colder and more complicated mind than Dali or Breton or Connolly, and he is a romantic only in the sense that he thinks the heart is made to be broken, not in the sense that he thinks there is any glory in it. He subscribes, like a good surrealist, to the doctrine of all-consuming passion, sees love as "the great irresistible summons," as an early surrealist text put it. But he cannot present love as a pure unworldly force in a grubby universe. He can present the grubby universe all right, and does so with relish. *L'Age d'or* seems to anticipate W.C. Fields in its trampling on pieties about dogs, children, and the infirm. Have you kicked over a blind man lately? But Buñuel does not see the self as innocent, separate from the world, happy if left alone. His lovers sacrifice everything to love, the man abandons a diplomatic mission, causing untold suffering and death, evoked in a quick series of shots of desperate crowds which appear to have galloped out of Griffith's *Intolerance* or Gance's *Napoleon*, and is outraged when the minister calls him to tell him about the catastrophe. "*C'est pour ca que tu me déranges?*" he shouts in the funniest and most memorable line in the movie. "You're bothering me for a thing like that?"

And yet this love is an endlessly interrupted obsession. When the lovers are not divided by society, they manage to distract themselves, crack their heads together, fall off chairs, become frightened, lose the track of their passion. At one point the man, consumed with desire, suddenly becomes interested in the foot of a nearby statue. He hushes the woman with a gesture of impatience, as if she were a child getting in his way, and stares fixedly at the stone foot, which at this moment is more important than his love, which in turn is more important than the world.

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A surrealist questionnaire, sent out at the end of 1929, asked, "Do you believe in the victory of admirable love over sordid life or of sordid life over admirable love?" Hardly a neutral question. Most of the respondents tried to fiddle with the terms a bit but came down clearly on the side of admirable love. Buñuel, who had answered a series of other questions scrupulously and in detail, simply said, "I don't know." He doesn't know who wins the battle, but he knows what the battle is about, and he refuses to simplify it. He saw surrealism as a schooling in reality rather than a retreat from it, and Jean Mirò, perhaps the greatest of surrealist painters, saw it in the same way: as the promise of an exploration of reality which would include the imaginary. This was precisely Buñuel's complaint against Italian neo-realism: it gave us generous social concern, but without any sense of the material world's magic or the relation of desire to the way we see the objects around us.

There is thus a real sadness and a real defeat in the current, tepid meanings of the words *surreal, surrealist*. Freakish, dreamlike, whimsical, unexpected—all these connotations testify impressively to the complacency and narrowness of our sense of reality. We are so sure of what's what that we can recognize deviations immediately, and we have consigned surrealism to the domain of advertising: beds on beaches and deodorants perched in mountain gorges. It is worth remembering that surrealism's original aim was exactly the opposite: to enlarge and multiply reality by an onslaught on the tired habits of perception which allow us to believe that our daily blindness is sight. □

The End of Philosophy?

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature
by Richard Rorty.
Princeton University Press,
401 pp., $20.00; $6.95 (paper)

Quentin Skinner

Ever since Aristotle declared that philosophy is "the first and last of the sciences," philosophers have tended to take a very exalted view of the importance of their subject. They will find it much harder to do so after reading Professor Richard Rorty's disturbing and brilliantly argued book. He opens his attack on the traditional pretensions of philosophers by considering the reasons for their longstanding confidence. The explanation for this confidence is said to lie in their continuing acceptance of the seventeenth-century idea that a philosopher is someone who knows "something about knowing which nobody else knows so well." This image is in turn said to owe its plausibility to the work of Descartes, who introduced the key concept of the mind as a species of inner space, a consciousness in search of indubitable knowledge about the external world. He thereby suggested the central task of modern philosophy: the attempt to determine, by analyzing the concept of mind itself, what forms of knowledge are susceptible to being acquired with certainty.

As a result, his successors readily came to see themselves as exponents of the pivotal cultural discipline. Since culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and since philosophy is pictured as the arbiter of such claims, the philosopher appears as a kind of "cultural overseer" with the job of "keeping the other disciplines honest, limiting their claims to what can be properly 'grounded.'"

This image of philosophy, Rorty roundly asserts, is not only absurd but has already been decisively overthrown by "the three most important philosophers of our century—Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey." As Rorty puts it,

> These writers have kept alive the suggestion that, even when we have justified true belief about everything we want to know, we may have no more than conformity to the norms of the day. They have kept alive the historicist sense that this century's "superstition" was the last century's triumph of reason, as well as the relativist sense that the latest vocabulary, borrowed from the latest scientific achievement, may not express privileged representations of essences, but be just another of the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described.

These are Rorty's heroes, and in his own work he is largely content to present himself—though with excessive modesty—as a historian of the movement toward the "deconstruction" of philosophy which, he maintains, they successfully initiated.

The singling out and yoking together of this improbable troika is of course intended as a shock tactic, but it produces the one structural weakness of Rorty's book. No interpretations are put

forward in justification of the claim that these are the leading philosophers of the age, and the fact that Bertrand Russell's name is not mentioned leaves Rorty open to the suspicion that he has covertly defined philosophical genius as an ability to undermine central traditions of philosophy. Moreover, even if we concede that the project of deconstruction has given rise to the finest philosophical work of recent times, there is surely one other name that ought to appear on Rorty's list—that of R. G. Collingwood.

As early as 1924, in *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood mocked the idea of the philosopher as an "international boundary commissioner," officiously mapping out the permitted limits of the empirical sciences. And in his *Essay on Metaphysics*, published in 1940, he went on to repudiate the entire Cartesian program of uncovering the indubitable foundations of thought. Every science, he contended, proceeds by asking and answering questions, and every set of questions eventually leads us back to the "ultimate presuppositions" of the science concerned. Such presuppositions are not themselves questioned, and cannot be assessed as either true or false; they simply furnish the frame within which the given science happens to be conducted at a given historical period. There are thus no ultimate categories of thought for the metaphysician to lay bare. There are only shifting paradigms, changing questions, new sets of answers, all inevitably limited by the scope of the prevailing disciplines. These are precisely the arguments that Rorty's heroes mount, so it is surprising that he never mentions Collingwood's work.

As well as introducing us to his heroes, Rorty's opening chapters contain a much more sophisticated form of intellectual history. History, he proposes, may be capable of serving as therapy: by returning to the historical moments at which our current epistemological delusions arose, we may be able to liberate ourselves from their grasp. The main point at which Rorty employs this strategy is in examining what he takes to be the principal delusion of post-Cartesian philosophy—the belief that a certain range of ideas about the mind and its powers of understanding is conceptually indispensable. Liberation is said to come when we recover the questions to which these ideas were originally propounded as answers, and in consequence recognize that the distinctions involved, far from mirroring the essential nature of things, are merely reflections of various parochial and thoroughly unfortunate linguistic developments.

The first victim of this approach is the seemingly inescapable distinction between states of consciousness and events in the external world. As Rorty argues in his opening chapter, the drawing of such a distinction was so foreign to ancient Greek philosophy that there was simply no vocabulary for expressing it, and hence no temptation to divide the world up in a fashion which, in modern epistemology, has often been represented as essential to any system of thought.

A similar strategy is employed in chapter three, which surveys the epistemological tradition that has dominated philosophy since Descartes. Rorty turns first to Locke's contention that when we speak of knowing something, we must be pointing to some relationship between ourselves and the object we claim to know. If there is to be any certainty about our knowledge, it follows that this must be a product of the way in which certain objects come to be apprehended. The suggestion Locke went on to make was that, if an object is presented to our senses, we cannot doubt its existence and we can thus claim to know it with absolute assurance.

Rorty's first comment on this argument is that it confuses explanation with justification. Locke needs to show why we are justified in holding certain beliefs with particular tenacity; but all he succeeds in showing is how certain of our beliefs arise. Rorty's main point, however, is again about the liberating power of history. By recovering the question Locke was trying to answer, we can see how his confusion arose; and by distancing ourselves from his assumptions in this way, we can avoid any temptation to accept his conclusions.

Rorty next turns to Kant, who shared Locke's dilemma and proposed a new solution to it. Kant conceded that we cannot hope to acquire indubitable knowledge from mere sensory acquaintance with objects, and argued that this leaves us with only one possibility. If we are capable of knowing anything with complete assurance, this must be due to the process of interpretation that goes on in our own minds when we examine the raw data we receive from the outside world. It is because our minds in effect constitute the world that we can claim to know it with certainty.

Rorty again insists that an understanding of history serves to free us from the grip of such arguments. Once we see that Kant is responding to a confused question inherited from Locke, we