

Titolo: David Hare
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Born Again Surrealist
by Milton Gendel

In the New York art world of the nineteen-forties, still very small as it did not offer big cash rewards or much glory, David Hare stood out. When I met him I was struck by his surreal appearance. With his cavernous features and hair that shot out in all directions he came on like Shockhead Peter, and tempted comparisons with the Mad Hatter if not with the homonymous *March Hare*.

At the time he was known more as a photographer than as a sculptor, but even in photography he was not content to record what the lens took in. He would use flame to alter his negatives so that the forms portrayed would become mysteriously indeterminate, with the blacks and whites dissolving and melting into each other.

Most likely he was then unaware that this aleatory device, known to the surrealists as *fumage*, was used in different form as part of their battery of automatic effects, such as dripping, *frottage* and the game of *cadavre exquis*.

In many respects a spontaneous natural-born surrealist, Hare at once became a member in good standing of the historic surrealist movement when its leader, André Breton, and his group fled Nazi-occupied France and arrived in New York. Hare was indirectly involved, as well, in arranging their migration to the United States. His first wife, Suzy, was the daughter of Madame Perkins, Secretary of Labor in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt government, and at that time immigration came under her department. A cousin of David Hare, Kay Sage, living in Europe, had left her Italian husband, the Prince di San Faustino, to set up as a painter in Paris, and had become the mate of Yves Tanguy, charter member of Breton's group. She appealed to Hare, successfully, to get his mother-in-law to issue visas for Tanguy, Breton and company.

When the group, joined by other artists and writers, settled in New York, mainly in Greenwich Village where the atmosphere was congenial and rents were low, one of their principal meeting places was the Atelier 17. Created in Paris by the English painter and engraver, Stanley William Hayter, because of the war he had transferred this printing studio to New York, and there it quickly became a center where European artists met American artists and often worked together.

At this time, while studying at Columbia under the inspiring Meyer Schapiro, I made friends with Robert Motherwell, fellow graduate student, who had spent a year in Paris thinking to become a painter, before turning to philosophy and art history. Schapiro, not only a highly creative medievalist but also deeply involved in contemporary art, advised him to return to painting and sent him for tutelage to Kurt Seligmann, the surrealist painter and authority on magic and its history. His studio off Bryant Square was attended by another disciple, the seductive Barbara Reis, daughter of Bernard and Becky Reis, who were patrons of the arts.

Through Seligmann and other connections, since the social fabric of the art world by then was interwoven with sessions at the Bretons' alternating with evenings at the Reises' or at Peggy Guggenheim's, as well as at Hayter's studio, Motherwell, Barbara and I found ourselves included,

as young recruits - we were in our early twenties - in the ambit of the surrealists. At the various gatherings Breton, of course, was the most vocal, seconded by the irrepressible Matta and the more judicious Lionel Abel and Nicolas Calas. Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp and Hare were generally silent or reserved presences, as were the young newcomers.

Breton as poet, theorist and spokesman of surrealism had published his ideas and creations in books and in periodicals like *Minotaure*. On the New York scene surrealism found a voice particularly in Charles Henri Ford's *View* and occasionally in *New Directions*, published by James Laughlin. Although Breton appeared in *View* he was diffident about a publication he did not control and censorious about Ford's homosexuality. In fact Ford's lover, the notable surrealist painter, Pavel Tchelitchev, was never included in Breton's coterie. Besides homophobia Breton's approach to sexuality included salacious questions in the game of truth he often played with his followers, and a professed ideal woman, armless and legless, mounted on a pedestal: *La femme tronc*. His wife, Jacqueline Lamba, who certainly did not correspond to this curious daydream mate, had been an underwater acrobatic dancer. She became a painter and claimed late in life that she might have had more success as an artist if she hadn't been beautiful.

Breton's desire to have his own house organ became reality thanks to Bernard Reis, lawyer and certified public accountant, who combined his interest in the arts with a generous acumen and practicality. He raised the money to launch Breton's *VVV*, whose title stood for Victory, Victory, Victory though the attitude of Breton's group toward the war was seemingly detached, as if it were other people's business. As the nominal editors of the magazine had to be United States citizens, and as most of the surrealists were "aliens", Breton and Reis decided that Motherwell and I should lend our names for the required window dressing.

We were not displeased to enter the history of surrealism, if only as convenient ciphers. To celebrate we did surrealist engravings at the Atelier 17 and printed them as Christmas cards the winter of 1941. When we took them around to Breton one evening, instead of complimenting us he turned red and with his eyes bulging screamed that he had fought the bourgeoisie all his life and now, like serpents in his bosom, we had brought him Christmas cards! There was nothing more bourgeois than a Christmas card, he shrilled, and flung our engravings on the floor. Motherwell's French was not up to this tirade, and he kept saying, What did he say? It was all too clear when Breton opened the door and pushed us out.

We were readmitted to the presence some time later, when Reis intervened on our behalf, but Breton would no longer have us even as straw editors of *VVV*. Although David Hare when writing spelled by ear and was indifferent to grammatical rules, he was a citizen, an agreeable member of the group, and his photography was eminently surreal. His name accordingly went on the masthead of *VVV* as editor, below; André Breton and Max Ernst, though completely in charge of editorial, figured as advisory editors.

Hare was not particularly interested in this literary effort, so his contributions to the three numbers of the magazine that appeared between 1942 and 1944 were two black and white photographs. The first, in issue number one, showed a seated female figure dissolving around the edges, with a sunburst head, half of which has been propelled aloft. The melted effect was reminiscent of some of Dali's paintings; the burst head resembled the head of a Kachina doll on the full page opposite. While there was nothing by Hare in the double issue of 1943, in the fourth and last issue, of 1944, he had a full-page black and white with a schematic three-dimensional figure, very much in the vein of the sculptures he was then producing. It may represent the Golem, as that name figures in the caption, along with "The Frog Is a Hart". Whether the hart stands for the male deer or is random

spelling for heart remains obscure. Slanting across the background a long mechanical contrivance curiously anticipates the space vehicles invented decades later.

As I parted company with the surrealists to go into the Army when the war was still raging, David Hare and I did not meet again until 1945, when he was living in Connecticut with Jacqueline Lamba, who had left her husband. Breton commemorated this rupture by titling a book of his poems, *Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares*, a phrase he found in an agricultural tract that seemed to him to refer - somewhat obscurely one would think - to his wife's affair with Hare.

When I moved to Rome, Hare and I kept in touch desultorily by letter and one that he wrote me in 1952 after a visit to Italy, in stream of consciousness verve, reported that he was sending a book of Faulkner's short stories to John Rudge, an English painter he met with me, and had been to dinner with one Tamara, an actress I knew, and her friends in Genoa. At the party he thought he was talking to a friend of "Linal Abel" - meaning Lionel Abel, the *littérateur* associated with the surrealists in New York - but there was no connection, and the man turned out to be an actor. The table talk was about movie contracts and money. Hare wrote me: "First of all I plugged for art but the faces were all blank... and I swiftly switched to the written word... I threw in names like Huxly and gradually... Eliot and Pound at wich point the company abandoned Nowel Coward in favor of Waugh. I dropped Joyce into the stew to be followed quickly by Kafka, Neruda and Falkner. They all bounced back like ping pong balls."

A few weeks later he wrote again, concerned that I was offended by his description of Tamara and company. "...if you got my letter and were angry it isn't necessary to be angry for so long a time and if you got my letter and were not angry and still didn't answer then you are a bastard. And if you did not get my letter I shall write it again but I don't want to write it again if you did get it and are just being a bastard which of course is the most likely. This is naturally not to be considered a letter, it is merely to be considered a thorn in the side." Our correspondence did not often provoke such Old-Testament-style rolling periods, but Hare's letters were always immediately alive.

We met again four decades later, when he came to Italy in July 1990, a year before his death, to attend the exhibition at Matera of "*Sculpture in America*", which included seven of his works. Still very much the old March Hare, though more wintry, as his hair had turned white. He spoke about Merlin, his son by Jacqueline Lamba who was living with him and his amiable fourth mate, Therry, on their ranch in Idaho, and flew about tracking bears and wolves that had been fitted with collars that transmitted their movements. Then there was another son, Morgan, by Denise, his third mate or wife. Of course we reminisced about Breton, Tanguy, Matta and the suicide of Gorky, found by his friends Peter Grippe and Noguchi, hanged in his barn. Motherwell, he said, had blanked out his surrealist beginnings and never mentioned Seligmann in his curriculum. "A vindictive bastard he is, and he has kept me out of several galleries that wanted to show me."

After that visit he wrote me from Idaho, announcing that he was writing and illustrating a picture book to be called *Pornography for Children/ a sentimental fairy story*. In attenuation of the impact of the title, he described the work as "...a small book for grownup children". The characters he was portraying in "living color" were a Texas rancher, Carter Pillar, his wife Mauvaise Fly, and their twin children, the son called Cattle and the daughter, Abetter Fly.

Presently I received in the mail the manuscript with hilariously obscene watercolor illustrations of these personages that matched the extravagance of the surreal punning names and the preposterous text. As far as I know this is the only copy of the work in existence. Hare did not imagine he was producing a best seller. He wrote: "In no way do I expect it to be wildly popular, in fact I rather think you might be the only person who would find it funny. That is you are the only person whom

I know that still understands the simplicities and delitfull vagueries of the english language. New York is bad enough but here in Idaho they only speak Texicana".

The fond encomium, which still brings on waves of nostalgia, was accompanied by a dedication on the manuscript signed with a capital D sporting a pair of long ears, to stand for Hare. There was also a line in his headlong disregard for canonical spelling that dates the message: "Here we seem to be at war with some Arib". The reference is to the first Gulf War and the "Arib" was Saddam Hussein. Of all the American manifestations stimulated by the surrealist movement, the most engaging for me was embodied in David Hare, whose natural aura, in his life and work, was spontaneously surreal.