

Georges Hugnet

Georges Hugnet was one of those multitalented personages who seemed to flourish in France between the wars, and are seen no more. A 1978 exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris paid tribute to his multiple activities as artist, poet, critic, collector, and historian. Hugnet published his first volume of collages, *La Septième Face du Dé*, in 1936, and from then on, until his death in 1974, he simultaneously carried on several careers, as an artist, a writer, and a businessman. But his work as an artist has, until now, been practically unknown in the United States.

Hugnet's visual creativity was triggered by his contact with André Breton and the Surrealists in the mid-1930s, but by then he had already been moving in Parisian artistic circles for fifteen years. In 1920, he had met the poet-painter Max Jacob, who, impressed by Hugnet's poetry, had introduced him to his friends, a group which included Jean Cocteau, Picasso, Picabia, Georges Auric, Robert Desnos, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Tristan Tzara, Max Ernst, and Alexander Calder. Hugnet was all of fourteen years old at the time.

The handsome youngster was welcome throughout the Parisian avant-garde. In the winter of 1926-1927, he became close friends with the American composer Virgil Thomson. Mornings at Thomson's apartment on the quai Voltaire, Hugnet wrote poetry while Thomson, at the piano, worked on the music for Gertrude Stein's "Four Saints in Three Acts." From time to time, Thomson broke off his composing and played American blues tunes to please Hugnet. He also set several of Hugnet's poems to music. Through Thomson, Hugnet got to know the American expatriates of Paris – Gertrude Stein (whose books he translated into French), Ernest Hemingway, Aaron Copland. Later he even met Katherine Hepburn.

In 1928 Hugnet's first collection of poetry, *40 Poésies de Stanislas Boutemer*, was published, with illustrations by Max Jacob. Meanwhile, Hugnet was writing the screenplay for a film, *La Perle*, which opened in June 1929. Starring Hugnet himself (along with actress Kissa Kouprine), the film drew on the style of Buster Keaton, but exaggerated the element of the fantastic, prefiguring the Surrealist films of Dali and Bunuel.

Like many others in the period between the wars, Hugnet supported his creative work by a variety of activities. From 1928 onwards he turned out a steady stream of articles on contemporary art and literature. In 1929, he started up a one-man publishing house, "Les Editions de la Montagne," which issued books by Tristan Tzara, Pierrot de Massot, Gertrude Stein, and Hugnet himself. In 1934, Hugnet opened a bookbinding workshop at 13 rue de Buci, from which he operated as a dealer in rare books. The Surrealists often came to him for volumes on magic, the occult, and eroticism. Years later, Hugnet's friend André Thirion commented that, "reacting against his family, (Hugnet) had at first shown

an astonishing lack of business talent, but later he became a businessman straight out of Balzac". Still, the '30s were a difficult period, and Hugnet worked for a while in an insurance company job Thirion had found for him. He was also, at times, an art dealer, as were many of the Surrealists. (Breton and Aragon, for instance, served as advisors to the wealthy couturier and collector Jacques Doucet, the original purchaser of Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*).

Hugnet joined the Surrealist movement surprisingly late, well after the "heroic epoch" of the 1920s. In 1930, the Surrealists staged a notorious attack on a nightclub which had had the audacity to appropriate the name of *Maldoror* (from the *chef d'œuvre* of the Surrealist forbear Lautréamont); to manifest their disdain for the socialite sphere into which so much of the Parisian avant-garde had been absorbed, the Surrealists chose to attack on an evening when a certain princess Paléologue had rented the *Maldoror* for a swank private party. Georges Hugnet was there – but he was dining (in black silk pyjamas) with the princess's party, not bursting in with the Surrealists.

In 1932, however, André Breton found himself quite impressed by the brilliant series of articles on "The Dada Spirit in Painting" which Hugnet had begun to publish in the magazine *Cahiers d'Art*. Via Tristan Tzara, Breton extended a special invitation to Hugnet to visit his apartment on the rue Fontaine. Soon thereafter, Hugnet was soon a full-fledged member of the movement, writing frequently for Surrealist publications and participating in the group's exhibitions and activities.

The Surrealists believed in the value of creating texts or artifacts which would reveal the hidden functioning of the unconscious imagination. But they violently rejected traditional ideas of "painting" or "literature", and they claimed to have no use for skill or craftsmanship. Instead, the "automatic writing" of the Surrealist poets was to provide a model for how to release the unconscious imagination, indeed for every kind of creative activity. The creative unconscious was seen, to some extent, as universal; Surrealism thus implied a devaluation of the idea of *individual* artistic genius. One of the Surrealists' favorite parlor games, when they gathered in the evening at Breton's apartment, was "exquisite corpses", in which several people collaborated in making a picture, each person in turn drawing on one fold of a piece of paper; the page was folded so that the person drawing on the paper at any given moment could see only the edges of the design on the previous fold. The players, on a given evening, might include Juan Miró, Max Ernst, and Yves Tanguy, or Max Morise, Georges Sadoul, Valentine Hugo – and Georges Hugnet.

The epigraph, from Lautréamont, which Hugnet chose for his 1936 volume of collages, *La Septième Face du Dé*, was: "Poetry should be made by everybody – not just by an individual." Hugnet created 80 collages for *La Septième Face du Dé*, although fewer than half of them were used in the volume published by Jeanne Bucher. In the collages, snippets of photographs, advertisements, and old engravings were set against a white background, intermixed with bits of text drawn from newspaper headlines. Despite the use of

realistic elements, the image as a whole rarely evokes a unified, illusionistic space. Reflecting Hugnet's original interest in Dadaism, the collages are closer to the work of Germans such as John Heartfield and Hannah Höch than to the collages of the contemporary Surrealists. They are typically Surrealist, however, in their concentration on sexual themes and imagery. Hugnet compulsively repeats the image of the nude (cut-out from contemporary girlie magazines), interspersed with sexual symbols familiar from the work of Man Ray: scallop shells, and long, divided tresses of hair.

In the printed volume of *La Septième Face du Dé*, a tour-de-force of book-making, the collages incorporate both images and text (from photographs, advertisements, and old engravings). Each collage occupies a right-hand page, while the facing page on the left contains free-form poetry set in a variety of type-styles. Hugnet's creative typography recalls the *Calligrammes* of Apollinaire, and looks back, ultimately, to Mallarmé's unusual use of spacing and different type-sizes in *Un coup de dés n'abolira jamais l'hasard*, the title of which is echoed by Hugnet. (Hugnet also referred to Mallarmé's poem in an essay on Picasso published in *Cahiers d'Art* in the same year).

The cover for *La Septième Face du Dé* was created by Marcel Duchamp, using a photograph of Duchamp's 1921 construction, "Why not sneeze" – a bird-cage filled with dice-like sugarcubes (actually cubes of marble). Duchamp's ironic sculptures had provided the original model of the "Surrealist object", one which would provoke and unsettle the viewer rather than lending itself to mere "esthetic" contemplation. In the 1930s, artists as different as Alberto Giacometti and Joseph Cornell devoted themselves to the creation of such objects. Hugnet's speciality in this branch of creation was the Surrealist book-binding. He created unique covers – rather like mobile versions of Cornell's boxes – for books by Raymond Roussel, Paul Eluard, Hans Bellmer, André Breton, and others. These book-covers extended to three dimensions the combination of text and image found in *La Septième Face du Dé*. But the choice of the book-cover as a creative medium seems, at the same time, to represent the carrying-out of an artistic project proposed by André Breton in his 1924 "Introduction to a Speech on the Lack of Reality", where he recounted: "The other night I dreamed I was at an open-air market in the neighborhood of Saint-Malo, where I came upon a rather unusual book. Its back was a wooden gnome whose white Assyrian beard reached to its feet. Despite the statuette's being of normal thickness, the pages, made of thick black wool, were easy to turn. I hastened to buy the object, and when I woke up, I felt disappointed not to find it beside me. It would be comparatively easy to manufacture".

Breton may have been a splendid source of artistic inspiration, but his dictatorial insistence on running the lives of all those involved with Surrealism made him rather difficult to get along with. In 1938 Eluard left the Surrealists for the Communist party; Breton immediately demanded that all of the remaining Surrealists break off their relations with him. When Hugnet refused to abandon his friend, Breton convened one of his infamous "trials", accusing Hugnet of being a police informer and a Stalinist. Expelled from the movement, banned

from the Surrealist journals, Hugnet (with Eluard) founded a new artistic review, *L'Usage de la Parole*, the first issue of which appeared in 1939.

The outbreak of the Second World War put an end to the new publication after its third issue. In other respects, however, the war changed Hugnet's life surprisingly little. In 1938, Virgil Thomson – and Hugnet – had commenced a series of regular Thursday evening *soirées* at Thomson's apartment, evenings at which the guests usually included figures such as Picasso, Eluard, Arp, and Miró. With the coming of the war, Thomson returned to the United States. But Hugnet carried on the tradition of the Thursday get-togethers, relocating them at the Catalan, a restaurant near Picasso's Grands-Augustins studio. Picasso ate lunch there almost daily, often sharing his table with Hugnet. Their lunch companions included writers such as Pierre Reverdy, Paul Valéry, Henri de Montherlant, Robert Desnos, and Jean Cocteau. The original proprietor of the Catalan had been a Spaniard, but he had sold out to a Frenchman who decided to move the restaurant across the street and expand it. He hired Hugnet to decorate the bar and the facade of the new restaurant, and to arrange its opening party.

The Catalan was soon established as a fashionable spot. One striking innovation was its paper tablecloths, on which the artistic and literary clientele could draw and scribble as they desired. After the war, in April 1947, Hugnet organized an exhibition of these drawings at Paul Morihen's bookstore. (In June 1948, Hugnet's own gouaches inspired by the Catalan were exhibited at the Galerie de l'Orfèvrerie Christofle, along with his Surrealist book-objects). But the decorations and drawings at the Catalan represented only part of Hugnet's wartime activity. In 1940, he had married, and moved with his wife to the Boulevard de Montparnasse, where he opened a bookstore which served as a center for underground book publishing activities during the Occupation. In 1942, he published a significant volume of new poems, *Non Vouloir*, illustrated by Picasso. *Non Vouloir* was only one of several publishing collaborations between the two men, who were quite close at this period.

The immediate post-war years, for Hugnet, were ones of both personal turmoil and creative fertility. For a while, he and his buddy André Thirion roamed the Paris area in Thirion's beat-up jalopy, looking for girls and for excitement. This period came to an end in July 1949, when Hugnet checked into a sanatorium near Versailles to be treated for alcoholism. That August, he met Myrtille Hubert, a beautiful seventeen year-old who became his second wife the following year. This marriage ushered in a quieter, apparently more content period in Hugnet's life. His son Nicolas was born in 1951.

In 1947, Hugnet created the collages and text for a new art book, *Huit Jours à Trébaume* (literally "Eight Days at Trébaume" – but "Trébaume" is a homonym for "très beau mec", or "good-looking-guy"). This volume repeated the format of *La Septième Face du Dé*, with text on the left-hand pages facing images on the right-hand ones. Decisive changes, however, had taken place in both elements. Hugnet's earlier collages had reflected the style of the early Dada artists working in the medium. His new work drew, instead, on the formal

vocabulary established by the Surrealists, a vocabulary deriving from Max Ernst's volumes of collages such as *La Femme 100 Têtes* (1927) and *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934).

Ernst had decisively reformulated the basic techniques of collage invented by the Cubists. As Aragon noted in an early essay, although the Cubists included realistic fragments in their work, the overall tendency of their work was to destroy the illusionistic space that had characterized Western art since the Renaissance. Ernst, on the other hand – as Aragon pointed out – recombined realistic elements (usually figures and scenes cut out from melodramatic 19th century wood engravings) into a new image which deliberately evoked a spatially coherent, illusionistic space – albeit one in which bizarre and impossible events took place. Indeed, the “realism” of the space in Ernst's collages (as in de Chirico's paintings) served precisely to accentuate, by contrast, the strangeness of what was transpiring in it.

Hugnet, in his art criticism, had long ago noted the characteristic qualities of Ernst's work, but it was not until 1947, with the creation of the collages for *Trébaumec*, that he put these ideas to use in his own creative work. Instead of engravings, Hugnet used as his raw material photographs – sometimes original ones that he himself had taken, but most often images found in magazines devoted to travel, high society, or the feminine image. In most of these images, figures drawn from the urban demi-monde appear, with dramatic effect, in rural settings which would otherwise suggest only innocent pleasures. The almost cinematic “realism” of the collages in *Trébaumec* corresponds to the greater coherency of the text, which recounts a clear – though improbable – story.

It is, as the title suggests, a diary of a Surrealist vacation. The narrator abandons a Paris which has been taken over by sports maniacs, and joins a house-party being given by his friend, the noblewoman Nina Varin-Lestaque, at her villa in Brittany. In the course of the narrator's stay, there transpire a series of bizarre and erotic adventures. Hugnet's collages purport to be “snapshots” illustrating these events. Though the choice of locale reflects Hugnet's family history (his mother came from Brittany), the story itself recalls events from the earlier history of Surrealism. In 1929, the Viscountess Marie-Laure de Noailles and her husband Charles had invited Man Ray to visit their villa at Grasse and make a film there. (A year later, they funded Bunuel's and Dali's *L'Âge d'Or*). Man Ray's film, *Le Mystère du Château de Dés*, was acted by the guests at the Noailles' villa, with stockings pulled over their heads. Hugnet's narrative reflects the spirit of the Surrealist happening, but, at the same time, it also reflects the French preoccupation with “les vacances” – the time when the pleasure principle, rigidly repressed in daily life, is finally given full rein.

In 1948, Hugnet created a new series of images, *La Vie Amoureuse des Spumifères* (“The Love-Life of the Spumifères”), whose title alone evoked a rich set of resonances within French artistic tradition. Picasso, for instance, had published a set of illustrations to Buffon's natural histories in 1942. The use of the animal world as a vehicle for moral commentary goes back, of course, to the 17th century fables of La Fontaine, which had been illustrated by countless artists;

and in the 19th century the caricaturist Grandville had created a series of proto-Surrealist masterpieces with his illustrations for works like *Les Animaux*, where images of animals in human costume served to satirize contemporary Parisian mores.

Hugnet's new work in some sense continued this tradition of social satire, for the images in the *Spumifères* series were intended (although he never finished the full series) to correspond to the forty members of the august *Academy Française*. The *Spumifères* also represented a variation on the Surrealist collage, combining the idea of the “found object” with that of imaginative creation. The starting point for each image in the series was a post-card nude of the *belle époque*; Hugnet added to each photograph a delicately drawn and colored fantasy figure, the “spumifère”, a dragon-like creature in regal robes, embracing the “realistic” nude. Each work incorporated a heavy mat with a neatly drawn label identifying the particular specimen depicted: “l'Opamidon des Cavernes” (the Subterranean Opamidon), or “Le Rousselier Volant” (the Flying Rousselier).

Hugnet's artistic production of the 1950s extended the themes of the *Spumifères*. His graphic work evoked the imagery of the microscopic plants and animals found in ponds or in seawater, while a new series of Surrealist objects consisted of stones, driftwood, and other materials found on the beach, and then “completed” by Hugnet in his studio. In 1961, he returned to the medium of the photo-collage, using pictures cut from magazines; his new work in this medium seemed dominated by images of fruits, combined to suggest human figures in a manner reminiscent of Arcimboldo.

In the 1950s, writing for a variety of magazines, Hugnet produced a series of superb historical essays on Surrealism, including artists and poets such as Jean Arp, Alberto Magnelli, and Robert Desnos. In a piece on the Surrealists' 1934 “trial” of Dali's fascist tendencies, Hugnet brilliantly analyzed the intellectual contradictions implicit in the movement's “revolutionary” aspirations. Meanwhile, Hugnet's original series of articles on Dada painting appeared in book form in 1957 under the title *L'Aventure Dada*.

In 1969, *Huit Jours à Trébaumec*, for which he had prepared the original maquette in 1947, finally found a publisher, Henri Mercher. In a sense, the oversized volume in which the 1947 text is preceded by a brief parody of a Guide Michelin represented a gorgeous, late flowering of the kind of deluxe art publishing which had flourished in Paris between the wars. In 1972, Guy Authier published *Pleins et Déliés* (“Full and Nimble”), a collection of Hugnet's selected essays on art, including a long autobiographical post-script in which Hugnet gave his version of key events in his life which had, he said, been misrepresented by his one-time friend André Thirion in Thirion's recently published memoirs. Little more than a year later, on June 26, 1974, Hugnet died of a heart attack.

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