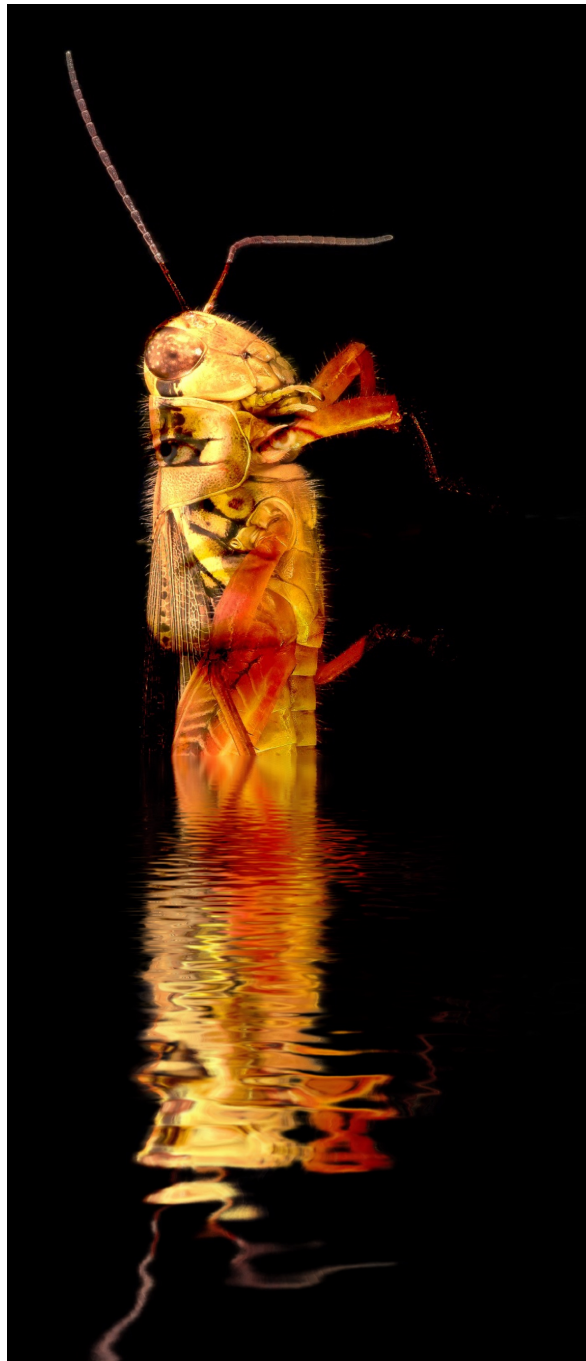


Vítězslav Nezval's *The Absolute Gravedigger*

(translated by Stephan Delbos and Tereza Novická)

an illustrated review by James Knight



False Fable

Once upon no time in Paris, a group of young men and women calling themselves the Surrealists discovered that they could make poems by setting fire to the trees in the Jardin des Tuileries or rubbing their crotches against the Tour Saint Jacques. Their poetic experiments were exhausting and often induced long periods of coma-like sleep, lasting several days. Sometimes, they would bring back to the waking world the strange objects they found in the dreams they had during these prolonged slumbers: diving suits made from coral, hairy staircases, molten sheep, word bombs, suitcases full of blood, etc.

The Surrealists wanted to share their discoveries and thereby increase their sex appeal and cause the bourgeoisie to die of fright. So they set about exhibiting the disquieting oneiric objects in art galleries, books, brothels, prisons, morgues and abandoned churches. Unfortunately, they were the only people to attend the exhibitions, so their objectives proved abortive.

Chief amongst the male Surrealists was a silverback gorilla called André Breton. Despite his fearsome reputation for gnawing the faces off anyone who disagreed with him, he was a delicate ape made of sunflowers, silk and strawberries. Breton's dearest, deepest wish was to inflate himself with air until he burst, releasing millions of his spores into the atmosphere, where, picked up by the obliging winds, they would travel all over the world, settling wherever there was land and growing into new versions of their redoubtable progenitor.

To this noble end, the Surrealists built contraptions resembling gargantuan bellows, which they inserted into every available orifice in Breton's body. A young Spaniard named Salvador Dalí, whose face melted whenever he looked at a beautiful woman, insisted that he should be the one to put a nozzle up the great ape's backside. This action caused Breton to experience a colossal erection, for which he berated Dalí in the strongest terms.

Moments later, the air over Paris was thick with spongy pink spores. André Breton now resembled a burst balloon. The Surrealists stuffed him with paper, stitched him back together with barbed wire and sat him upright at his favourite table at Les Deux Magots. He appeared to be dead; nevertheless, he continued to emit oracular poems and circumlocutious pronouncements.

The spores settled in Spain, England, Belgium (where, on the other side of the mirror, men in bowler hats dissected people, apples and stage sets with their best silverware), Chile, Mexico, Peru, Martinique... Too many destinations to enumerate! One clear night, in the labyrinth of Prague, some spores landed in Franz Kafka's skull, from which, the next day, sprouted several happy monsters. The monsters embraced each other with their waxy tentacles and laughed like dogs. They fed on clockwork shadows and hidden doorways.

One of the monsters was named Vítězslav Nezval. He was born with memories of his beloved papa Dalí and mama Breton, memories that were to force his body into joyful convulsions whenever they surfaced from his unconscious. He undertook a course in experimental genetics

and invented new species of flying insects, notably the Valerie and the Fetishist, both decorated with patterns resembling his parents' faces.

Meanwhile, a hot tar-like substance called Fascism was spreading over Europe. Everything caught in its path either burned to ashes or became coated in it. People from all walks of life tried to carry on with life as normal, but their thick, shiny new skins made movement difficult and sometimes even their noses and mouths got bunged up with the stuff. Those who tried to peel it off their friends, families and comrades were usually incinerated in the attempt. Nezval witnessed these frightening developments from his observation tower at the top of Prague Castle and decided that the best way to fight Fascism was to satirise it by creating the ugliest, most disturbing insect imaginable and then letting it fly across Europe.

The creature he fabricated in his laboratory became known as the Iberian Fly. Its passage scarred the skies of Europe and left a devastating stench of putrefaction that lingers even to this day. The Iberian Fly did not defeat Fascism, but it proved entertaining to connoisseurs of the grotesque.

The Surrealists are all dead now. Rights to their cadavers are owned by Disney. Many of them are preserved in formaldehyde and can be seen when the circus comes to town. Academics simplify their stories to the point of dishonesty, but that's the way of the world. You buy your books, you take your chances. Truth, like life, is elsewhere.



Portrait of a Book

First published in Prague in 1937, Vítězslav Nezval's *Absolutní hrobar* has at last been issued by Twisted Spoon Press as *The Absolute Gravedigger* in a thrilling English translation by Stephan Delbos and Tereza Novická. The book is a multifarious beast, difficult to sum up briefly, and there will be something in it for anyone with an interest in poetry, the European avant-garde, Surrealism, history or politics. The timing of the translation's publication could not have been more appropriate, given the ongoing resurgence of the far right in Europe and the USA; some of the material in the book, notably the long poem "The Iberian Fly", written in response to Fascism, has a renewed resonance now. When I interviewed him about the book, translator Stephan Delbos said, "In interwar poetry it is poetry of witness and revelation, a collection that marks and in a sense forecasts the rise of Fascism in the late 1930s on the eve of World War II. The final poem of the book, "The Iberian Fly" is as important a response to these events as Picasso's *Guernica*." Satire is something that few of the Surrealists excelled at, but in "The Iberian Fly" Nezval pulled off a stunning feat of phantasmagoric socio-political commentary. More of that great poem later.

Many of the poems in *The Absolute Gravedigger* are quietly lyrical. Many have a feverish quality. Nezval adopts a range of styles, techniques and masks, organised into the book's seven sections, each of which deserves to be discussed separately.

A Man Composing a Self-Portrait out of Objects is a long poem that addresses such themes as identify, representation and life's troubles, in a dizzying kaleidoscope of images. All is flux, movement, but nothing is entirely arbitrary: we can see the face and form of the man rotating in the whirl of objects:

Another time on a dusky day
In a street of rain
He bowed his head over a dingy windowsill
His head
A cactus
Covered in spines
Of agonizing thoughts

Anyone familiar with Salvador Dalí's paranoiac-critical technique (whereby the subjectivity of perception is synthesised with the objectivity of the physical universe, so that an object could be more than one thing) will see the same process in Nezval's poem. Like an Arcimboldo portrait, Nezval's man is to be found in the sum total of a multitude of objects. The paranoiac-critical method had a decisive impact on the trajectory of Surrealism in the 1930s, and gave surrealist poetry a new intensity and focus. André Breton's finest poems (published in his 1932 collection, *Le Revolver à cheveux blancs*) are excellent examples, and their accumulation of heterogeneous detail and syntactical complexities were to influence Nezval. Take this example from "Man Composing a Self-Portrait out of Objects":

One day he fixed his gaze on a false window
In a lovely secluded villa
On the coast
Of a country with a name forever terrifying
A funeral processed from the villa
On the black coffin a white stork cowering
An ugly runt mule hitched to the hand-cart
Carrying off the dead body
He who will never know who claimed those last respects
But from that moment
He searched eagerly
For a hat in the shape of a coffin

These lines could have been written by Breton; even Nezval's turn of phrase ("lovely secluded villa", "a name forever terrifying") verges on pastiche, at least in this translation. That is not to say that Nezval's is a poor poem: in fact, I think it is one of his best. But interesting questions come to mind: Is originality of style important? Or is it a symptom of the bourgeois cult of the individual, a thing despised by the Surrealists in their attempts to live and express universal experience? In exploring their unconscious selves, the Surrealists often subverted the whole notion of "self" by bringing back to the surface disquieting verbal and artistic artefacts that had no obvious biographical or psychoanalytical explanation. The Surrealist who wrote about him- or herself almost invariably wrote about the other. So perhaps, in submitting to the paranoiac-critical method, Nezval had achieved what TS Eliot referred to as "an escape from personality", the mark of true poetry. Or perhaps he was too enamoured of Breton's poetry, to the detriment of his own voice. I am undecided.

The Windmill is a rare example of surrealist pastoral. Its ten poems (bearing such titles as "The Reapers", "The Harvest" and "The Wayside Inn") offer rural vignettes in simple language. However, there is nothing cosy or sentimental about the material. Nezval depicts a mysterious, fragile world imbued with a sense of foreboding. People are merely features of the landscape and the tone is subtly elegiac. There are shades, perhaps, of Pierre Reverdy. Here is an example, from "The Courtyard":

On the steps a tin liter mug
Of unfinished beer
The people suddenly gone
The clock chimes
Much will be stolen
It is Monday
Like somewhere in Italy
In the courtyard swallows roost on a set table

By contrast, the next section of the book, **The Absolute Gravedigger**, comprises five poems in a similar vein to that of "A Man Composing a Self-Portrait out of Objects", but now the poet's gaze is directed not inward but outward, into the turbulent political landscape of the 1930s. The

gravedigger is a reference to *The Communist Manifesto*, where we find this striking image: "What the bourgeoisie produces, above all, are its own gravediggers." Nezval's poems in this section are not didactic or propagandist, but amidst their febrile violence are frequent references to conditions of life under capitalism and the revolutionary struggle against the ruling class. A blacksmith creates a percussive anthem:

This anthem
No longer sung
But tapped out
By the savage blows
Dished out by vengeance
Demolishes
The church roof
Held together by gilding
Attached with rot

The symbolism is heavy-handed, but in times of crisis messages need to be strong. William Blake was no less blatant when he wrote of "How the chimney-sweeper's cry / Every black'ning church appalls." Besides, Nezval never allows his political convictions to tyrannise over the poetic process, and the images couple, multiply, shoot off in their own directions. An imagination like his will not be tethered.

Whist most of the poems in the book are guided by surrealist principles, in the **Shadowplays** section Nezval challenges the orthodoxies of the avant-garde by employing received forms. Stephan Delbos comments, "The rhyming poems of "Shadowplays" were difficult (to translate) because unlike the rest of the book they are written in metrical, rhyming quatrains, which showcase Nezval's verbal skills but were also a rejoinder to French Surrealists who thought that free-verse litanies were the best vehicle for surrealist imagery and thought. Nezval here is insisting that you can write surrealist poems in received form, so obviously that is important to render in translation. Anytime you're trying to maintain rhyme, meter, imagery and metaphor at the same time, shifts need to take place." The translations take us back to the rural world of "The Windmill", but there is an underlying nastiness in the rhymes and tight organisation, as if the poet is toying with us, taunting us with images of death and dissolution. The section culminates in the exceedingly disturbing "The Swarm", in which a "writhing larva pile" covers the face of a woman who may be asleep or dead (if such a distinction is important).

Bizarre Town is the urban counterpart to "The Windmill." The forty-three poems in this section are aphoristic and powerful, and there are moments of whimsy, such as this poem, number 24:

Hairdressers
With high bobs
Sit
On the square
In tin bathtubs
And hold to their lips

Delicate forefingers
Tipped with pink nails

In the introduction to his recently published anthology, *Surrealist Poetry*, Willard Bohn discusses the relative obscurity of surrealist poetry, when compared to the popularity of some surrealist paintings: "Unlike printed texts, paintings and films offer the illusion of being immediately accessible... By contrast, the average reader needs all the energy he or she can muster to decipher many surrealist poems." This is not the case in the "Bizarre Town" part of Nezval's book, in which scenes are depicted with potent clarity and simplicity. I recommend the poems to anyone daunted by the thought of trying to follow a surrealist poem.

In the **Decalcomanias** section of the book, we are treated not only to monochrome reproductions of Nezval's decalcomanias, but also the poems he wrote in response to them. A decalcomania is made by pressing a layer of paint between a surface and paper or canvas, and the procedure was often used by the Surrealists, who were enchanted by the fortuitous images that resulted. Nezval's decalcomania-inspired poems offer paranoiac-critical interpretations of the accidental forms he had created. He sees in the splotches and swirls an "owl man", a "monkey man", "the head of a horse", "black lakes" and we are invited to find them too. Inevitably, when we look hard at the pictures we start hallucinating our own iconographies, making up our own narratives, and the division between artist and viewer, creator and spectator, is dissolved. "Poetry should be made by all," announced Isidore Ducasse, a sentiment frequently echoed by the Surrealists, and staring at Nezval's decalcomanias may provide the reader with some starting points. I found this section of the book particularly enjoyable, despite the author's portentous, Dalinian preface and afterword (the most horrible specimens of surrealist purple prose you'll find outside the theoretical writings of André Breton or Louis Aragon).

Finally, then, **The Iberian Fly**. This long poem is described by the translators in their afterword as "a hellish portrait of Europe, the Spanish Civil War, and a brutal sadist with a 'Charlie Chaplin moustache.'" Like the best satire, the piece derives its energy from the extremity of its vision, and here we find Surrealism truly at the service of the revolution:

The left wing of the Iberian fly was adorned
With generals' medals
And a sparkling gilded cross
Crawling with maggots
Grappling naked women
Who used kerosene spurting from small tin cans
To baptize their hairless children
Tied with pink ribbon
To copper crosses suspended from their alabaster necks

Discussing the difficulties of translating the poem, Stephan Delbos remarked, "The telescoping syntax of 'The Iberian Fly' and other long poems was difficult because of the way Nezval allows each line to float free of what came before and after so that a multiplicity of meanings is possible. It was hard to keep that ambiguity in English yet maintain the thread of the narrative. At times it was

tempting to simply smooth everything out and make it more logical, but that wasn't Nezval's intention." I applaud the translators' fidelity to Nezval's intentions; in not eliminating the grammatical ambiguities, they allow the reader to explore multiple possibilities when interpreting each stanza. The poem is a masterpiece that makes a bold political point whilst dazzling with its variety and invention.



13 Disquieting Objects Recovered from a Dream Following a First Reading of *The Absolute Gravedigger*

1. A large white envelope, bulging with soft contents. When I open it: a mass of maggots.
2. The shadow of a hammer, hot to the touch.
3. A naked woman made of volcanic rock. Her voice is like paper being torn.
4. A little key that will unlock the meaning of any dream.
5. A severed human head with butterfly wings, fidgeting and flapping, unable to fly.
6. A burning map of Prague.
7. Some sort of clockwork toy, resembling a horse or perhaps a goat. Its mechanism seems to be broken.
8. A disintegrating kiss.
9. Coagulated blood chess pieces.
10. A jewellery case full of children's fingers.
11. Two mannequins (one male, one female), conjoined at the head. They have been dressed in ripped evening wear.
12. The ghost of a scream.
13. A fibreglass sculpture of James Knight, wearing a Bird King mask. The eyes are real; they follow the viewer around the room.

