

REVIEWS

PHILOSOPHY OF ART

WHAT IS SURREALISM? By André Breton. Criterion Miscellany, No. 43. (Faber & Faber; 2/-.)

THORNS OF THUNDER. Selected Poems by Paul Eluard, translated, edited by George Reavey. (Europa Press & Stanley Nott; 10/6.)

Why do revolutionaries tend so invariably—the Christian revolution is perhaps the only exception—to empty out the baby with the bath-water? It is not that the surrealists have nothing to set up in place of that which they destroy; the “express aim of surrealism,” we are told by M. Breton, is “the liberation of the mind” (and if to make the liberation of man a means to this is something of a hysteron proteron we need not here labour the point); its desire is to “deepen the foundations of the real, to bring about an ever clearer and at the same time ever more passionate consciousness of the world perceived by the senses”; it attempts to “present interior reality and exterior reality as two elements in process of unification, of finally becoming *one*.” M. Breton finds many surrealists from Heraclitus onwards; he could have many more to agree with the validity of this objective; difficulty lies with the method. There is no limit to surrealist refusal, as there is no limit to surrealist indignation—witness M. Breton’s footnote (there is congruity in its being a footnote) on God, like a child in the tantrums; right certainly to destroy the ugly artefact, unwise to destroy material and tools. Surrealism “tends definitely to do away with all other psychic mechanisms” than the oneiric and the paranoiac: you do not reach the unification of x and y by reducing x or y to a fraction of itself. The subconscious is except by chance chaotic; Kubla Khan oneiric not in the surrealist manner; automatic writing is such only to the writer, not the dictator. The mind is liberated by liberation of the subconscious only if this is recognized as material; but Eluard with right analysis tells us that of these subjective elements “the poet, until the new order, is not the master but the slave”—and how the method is to produce the new order we are not told. Curious, in view of this admission, how the obvious criticism that surrealism returns to academism, subject matter without attention to form, arouses surrealist anger. For the fact that this is not so always in practice is irrelevant: the theory, not the artists who accept the theory, is in question. And though the theory is indeed not yet at the exinanition-level of academism, it is difficult to see in it a means to life for this country, to which it has so tardily come: subject-

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matter and form; psychic material and creative moulding; appearance and reality (or reality and surreality); the pairs are parallel; and the re-affirmation with all great art of the second term in the last pair is invalidated, as a gospel, by the contradictorily exclusive affirmation of the first in the others.

In practice, the surrealist product is often interesting, sometimes beautiful. There is much in *Thorns of Thunder* to make the unattuned reader despair; there is much to divert in the Lautréamont manner; there are flashes that repay long search. Beckett, Devlin, Gascoyne, Jolas, Man Ray, Reavey, Ruthven Todd translate.
GERALD VANN, O.P.

LE PHENOMENE DE L'ART. By Georges Mottier. (Boivin et Cie, Paris; 20 frs.)

"Is it not possible that the God who has disappeared out of the Heavens will one day return to us out of the earth?" Perhaps it is too dramatic to see that return heralded in this treatise of M. Mottier. At any rate, throughout his book he reveals a sense of reality that takes him beyond the limitations of his background and shows him to have affinity with ways of thought that have long since ceased to be understood in the circles in which he moves.

He sets out to write a philosophy of art. In setting his stage he goes no farther back than Kant, which is in itself discouraging. "After Kant aestheticians swarmed." He himself says: ". . . car aucune autre doctrine n'a contribué plus que la sienne de nos idées modernes sur l'art et sur la beauté." All the first half of the book is devoted to an exposition of the aesthetic doctrines of the German idealists and of certain French philosophers in the same tradition.

With this background M. Mottier, in the more interesting second half, gives his own opinion. He defines art as: "Le produit d'une faculté qui oeuvre la réalité et l'enferme dans des symboles où elle devient pour l'esprit un objet de vision." And, as one would expect, although not identifying himself with any of the opinions which he quotes, he gives to the definition a thorough idealistic interpretation. The things known by the mind are not objectively real (at times objective reality seems to mean no more for him than the world of sensible phenomena) but are constructed by the mind on a foundation of sense data, the only extra-mental element: "Le monde vu par Dieu n'est pas plus réel que le monde vu par moi; s'il est différent, c'est que les consciences sont différentes: la réalité est irréductiblement relative à une conscience." "Le monde réel. . . . Qu'est-il, en effet? Il consiste en un mer d'impressions de toute nature (olfactives, tactiles, auditives, visuelles, affectives, etc.)."