MARÍA TEGUI’S AVANT-GARDE AND SURREALISM AS DISCIPLINE

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*This essay explains Mariátegui’s critical relationship with Breton in terms of his views on Surrealism. In order to understand this relationship, this essay engages in an analysis of (i) Mariátegui’s notion of the avant-garde as a synthesis of aesthetics and politics and of (ii) the positioning of Mariátegui’s avant-garde in relation to post First World War European bourgeoisie and fascism. This interpretation of Mariátegui’s reveals a determination of Surrealism as discipline that preserves this movement’s revolutionary task in different geo-historical sites. With attention to the difficult, non-systematic character of Mariátegui’s writings, this essay also provides a series of concepts that could assist further interpretations of Mariátegui’s aesthetics and politics.*

The following statement reveals both Mariátegui’s deep engagement with Surrealism and the basis for his critique of Breton:

The human spirit is indivisible and I do not regret this fate. Rather, on the contrary, I recognize this fate as a need for plenitude and coherence. I declare...that I bring to literary exegesis all my political passions and ideas.... I must add that within me politics is philosophy and religion.... This does not mean, however, that I consider the literary or artistic phenomenon from extra-aesthetic points of view. It means, rather, that my aesthetic concept, in the intimacy of my conscience, becomes the same as [se unísimas] my moral, political and religious conceptions, and that, without ceasing to be a strictly aesthetic concept, it cannot operate independently or diversely.¹

¹ José Carlos Mariátegui, *7 Ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana* (Lima: Orbis Ventures, 2005), 204. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as 7EI. Translations are my own.
In “A Balance Sheet of Surrealism,” first published in 1930, Mariátegui does not hold back from strongly criticizing some of the ways in which Breton describes surrealism in the Second Surrealist Manifesto. Mariátegui directs the reader to passages and phrases in which “the spirit and program of surrealism are not expressed” (HCMS, 185), citing “high-minded phrases of shocking and extremist intent” (ibid.), as well as sentences that convey “an infantile tone...that is no longer possible to excuse, considering the point this movement [surrealism] has reached historically as experiment and inquiry.” (HCMS, 186) Earlier in the essay, Mariátegui prepares the reader for its polemical nature by noting the careful study that he had devoted to surrealism with an attention that was nourished, he says, “in sympathy and hope.” (HCMS, 184) The polemic with Breton, then, is not gratuitous. It grows out of a deep concern for the proper understanding of surrealism, a movement that, according to Mariátegui, surpasses all others in “historical significance and content.” (HCMS, 182) Why is Mariátegui so protective of surrealism? How does he conceive of its historical significance?

This essay addresses these questions by working out as precisely as possible Mariátegui’s conception of surrealism as a form of “discipline.” In view of the indivisibility of the human spirit indicated by Mariátegui (7EL, 204), this analysis cannot study Mariátegui’s conception of surrealism independently of his religious and political conceptions. The study of Mariátegui’s avant-garde in the first part of this essay will help us to grasp his conception of surrealism within this broader context. Mariátegui’s understanding of the avant-garde will be explicated by introducing a cluster of interdependent concepts that constitute some of his most original insights. In the

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3 These concepts are not Mariátegui’s.

4 These insights span the totality of Mariátegui’s thought. This paper shows that there is no such thing as “Mariátegui’s aesthetics” independent of the rest of his thought. Rather, what may appear as mere aesthetic ideas are really fundamental to understanding Mariátegui’s revolutionary thinking. Unfortunately, even some of the best commentators of Mariátegui are not aware of this point. Aníbal Quijano, for example, dedicates two pages of his otherwise thorough book to Mariátegui’s “literary criticism” but fails to see the unity of Mariátegui’s avant-garde, which we will describe later. See Reencuentro y debate: Una introducción a Mariáteguí (Lima: Mosca Azul Editores, 1981), esp. 114–16. Jesús Chavarria focusses on Mariátegui’s essay on Peruvian literature in terms of the “relation of Peruvian letters to the overall social process of national development” (José Carlos Mariátegui and the Rise of Modern Peru, 1890–1930 [Albuquerque: Univer-
second part, those concepts will be used to work out the meaning of Mariátegui’s surrealism as discipline. In this respect, Mariátegui’s surrealism will be addressed in relation to fascism and the bourgeoisie such that the need to protect its integrity becomes explicit. The conclusion of the second part returns briefly to Mariátegui’s polemic with Breton.

I. Elucidation of Mariátegui’s Avant-Garde

Mariátegui sees the avant-garde as a consequence of the crisis of the European “mentality and spirit” that followed World War I. In contrast to the economic crisis in the aftermath of the war, the crisis of “sentiment” (IVH, 235) could not be dealt with in theory or in practice, forcing European statesmen to “adapt their programs to the pressure of the spiritual atmosphere”. The following concepts show that Mariátegui’s avant-garde is an adaptive response to the spiritual consequences of the war that sustains the possibility of revolutionary praxis, a praxis that is a manifestation of the indivisible human spirit in its “plenitude and coherence.” (7EI, 204)

(1) Rationalist Apraxia

Mariátegui quotes Adriano Tilgher to describe the sentiment of pre-war Europeans:

[T]his pre-war generation lived in a world that appeared consolidated forever and insured against any possibility of change. And this generation adapted to this world without effort. (IVH, 236)

According to Mariátegui, this sentiment was essentially trust in progress: “Humanity seemed to have found a definitive path.” (IVH, 235) The world seemed “consolidated forever” because the path of progress appeared to be definite and it seemed insured against change because there could be no deviation from progress. Mariátegui calls this position “evolutionist, historicist, rationalist.”

sity of New Mexico Press, 1979], 124) but does not see how this is a constitutive relation.


Mariátegui, “Two Conceptions of Life,” in HCMS, 139–42, here 139.
(Ibid.) This trust in progress understood the world as unfolding historically according to a rational project that was necessary and, thus, always actualized, “consolidated.”

The pre-war, rationalist sentiment implied the meaninglessness of human intervention in history, which was the basis for rejecting any effort to bring about political change. Revolutionary violence, in particular, was abhorred because Europeans (both revolutionaries and conservatives) saw it as senseless. They “coincided in the same adherence to the idea of progress and in the same aversion to violence.” (Ibid.) We will call this disposition against revolutionary praxis, this withdrawal from political action based on the pre-war “rationalist” sentiment and trust in progress, this adaptation to the world “without effort,” rationalist apraxia.7

(2) Pragmatic Potency and Revolutionary Praxis

The war brought rationalist apraxia to a crisis. The trust in progress at the basis of it was shattered. Bolsheviks and Fascists, in particular,

were witnesses, consciously or unconsciously, of the fact that the war had demonstrated to humanity that events beyond the presence of science, as well as contrary to the interests of civilization, could still come to pass. (IVH, 237)

The European spirit was transformed as a result: “All the romantic energies of the Western man...were reborn tempestuous and arrogant. The cult of violence was resurrected.” (Ibid.) After the war, violence, which used to appear meaningless, became the expression of the power of Europeans to determine their own history, to constitute fundamental changes in the world. The notion of a lawful rational development of history ceased to be definitive of the European spirit and instead, the unfolding of history was seen as the expression of the power of violent action. The progressive actualization of a

7 This critique of rationalism as “apraxia” complements the more common ones assigned to Mariátegui: rationalism as scepticism, as erudition and as systematization. It is to be noted that “rationalist apraxia” does not imply a rejection of reason as such. See Nicola Miller, Reinventing Modernity in Latin America: Intellectuals Imagine the Future, 1900–1930 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 158–65.

8 For a discussion of Mariátegui’s relation to Romanticism in general and in the context of the polemic with Breton, see Michael Löwy, Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), esp. 56–57.
rational project was replaced by the potency of violent revolutionary praxis.

For rationalist apraxia, every configuration of the world appeared consolidated in a development toward a rational actualization that was indifferent to human praxis. For the post-war spirit, on the contrary, the configurations of the world are nothing but actions, human deeds. They are not even the result of deeds; they are deeds. This notion recalls the Ancient Greek sense of pragmata, a term that takes human praxis to be constitutive of all “things” (pragmata and praxis share the same root). Borrowing this term, we could say that the post-war potency of revolutionary praxis is a pragmatic potency, implying that the configurations of the world do not exist outside of this potency. The world is not even an independent “material” for revolutionary praxis to work on. Pragmatic potency means that the potency of praxis is the potency of the world. This concept has implications with respect to the following notions:

(i) **Existence.** The world loses its objectivity and becomes a subjective task. This subjectivity is not the individual, detached and self-conscious one proposed by Descartes. It is a combative subjectivity that finds “plenitude and coherence” (7E1, 204) through revolutionary deeds that become the world rather than residing speculatively in a mental sphere. Mariátegui quotes Luis Bello: “It would be convenient to correct Descartes: I struggle therefore I am.” (IVH, 236) Revolutionary praxis is determined by pragmatic potency rather than by thought implies the existence of both revolutionary and world.

(ii) **Hermeneutics.** Having thus relinquished a Cartesian ego, the revolutionary finds the attestation of her being as pragmatic potency not in a mental idea but in the very configuration of the world. Revolutionaries do not encounter the world as consolidated but as potency. To put it simply, revolutionaries do not find in the world a determined meaning that they then attempt to change. Instead, they encounter the world as always indeterminately potential. Their praxis takes up potencies that do not counter a formed world but

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9 See Heidegger’s complementary analysis: “The Greeks had an appropriate term for ‘things’: pragmata, that is, that with which one has to do in taking care in dealings (praxis). But the specifically ‘pragmatic’ character of the pragmata is just what was left in obscurity and ‘initially’ determined as ‘mere things.’” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (tr.) J. Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York, 2010), 68.

10 This idea sheds light on Mariátegui’s account of materialism in “Materialist Idealism,” in *HCMS*, 158–63.
that are always already inscribed as open potencies in the world itself. There is a hermeneutic aspect to Mariátegui’s revolutionary praxis: for the revolutionary, the world is always open for interpretation.

(iii) **Facticity.** This hermeneutic aspect, however, does not immerse the revolutionary in an abstract stance in which “everything is possible” that would negate the commitment of revolutionary praxis to the re-constitution of the world. Such an abstract stance corresponds to the abstract subjectivism and relativism of philosophers: “Modern philosophy has swept away the mediocre positivist edifice.... According to these theories...[w]e should content ourselves with a relative truth.” The revolutionary also rejects the positivist edifice but, unlike the philosopher, she remains committed to the truth of her task. The reason for doing so is that—without refuge in a mental space and in contrast to the philosopher—she is always concretely in the present, given to it as the possibility for the unfolding of her praxis that is also the unfolding of the world and she finds plenitude in this communion constituted via praxis rather than speculation. “Today” is most important for the revolutionary; it is the site for the attestation of her truth: “Today’s goal is surely not going to be tomorrow’s goal; but, for effective human theory, it is the final goal”. For the revolutionary, her task appears in the compelling potency of the present world, a world that does not appear as a completed fact but still as “factual”—and, thus, not as abstractly relative.

(iv) **Creative revolutionary praxis.** As was just argued, through the concept of pragmatic potency, we can characterize revolutionary praxis as the plenitude of a combative—rather than speculative—subjectivity that is hermeneutic and factual. This determination sheds light on Mariátegui’s relationship to violence. As we have seen, the violence of the genuine revolutionary does not counter a determined world; it is not an oppositional violence (which negates the

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11 The concept of “facticity” here is similar to Heidegger’s notion in the sense that the revolutionary always already finds herself in her present world in a way that the world is not a “fact” but a possibility to be taken on or “projected.” In Heidegger’s terminology “Facticity is not the factuality of the factum brutum of something objectively present, but is a characteristic of the being of Dasein taken on in existence.” (Being and Time, 132)

12 Mariátegui, “Man and Myth,” in HCMS, 142–45, here 144.

13 Mariátegui, “La Lucha Final,” in IVH, 239–43, here 240. We are emphasizing here that the potencies of the world are necessarily “read” from the present and not from a speculative stance. In “The Final Struggle,” Mariátegui calls such a stance abstract and sceptic.
hermeneutic character of revolutionary praxis laid out above and restricts the way the revolutionary takes on the potency of the world and her praxis). Instead, the revolutionary encounters a world that is trapped within dominant (institutional, economic, moral, political) interpretations and that needs to be released from them on the basis of untapped potencies within it. These potencies are carried out through a hermeneutically creative violence rather than through an oppositional one, even if the violence effectively counters a dominant interpretation. In this respect, Mariátegui’s departure from Sorel’s violence is obvious. In fact, Mariátegui understands Marx rather than Sorel as a paradigm of this revolutionary creativity. He quotes Tilgher once again:

Marx stands before history as the discoverer, one could almost say the inventor, of the working class...he has created, one could say, the very idea, and besides the idea, the reality of the working class.15

(3) Surreal Release and Surrealism

We have come to understand revolutionary praxis in its pragmatic potency as a fundamentally creative enterprise, as the expression of a creative will. In this regard, the relationship between pragmatic potency and art becomes apparent. Mariátegui sheds light on this relationship in “Man and Myth,” first published in 1925. In this text, the World War is, again, essential to Mariátegui’s explication: “An exasperating and at times impotent ‘will to create,’ so acute in post-war humanity, was already intense and categorical in ‘pre-war’ humanity.” (HCMS, 143) Now we can understand, on the basis of a meditation on the fictive creativity of art, how the war modified the expression, the potency, of the “creative will” in a way that complements our analysis of pragmatic potency.

Mariátegui reads the poem “The Dance Behind the Ark” by Henri Frank as a self-diagnosis of pre-war art. In the poem, art appears to have reached the point of facing the creative will that nourishes it and of realizing its failure to carry it out. The poet relinquishes faith and reason and, embracing art as the last resort, the poet relinquish-

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es hope: “truth is enthusiasm without hope.” (Ibid.) Without hope, the “will to create” is not fulfilled and daily life appears as an “illusion.” (Ibid.) Mariátegui gleans from this poem that the poet finds herself without hope when the realm of fiction has become her total world (faith and reason having been given up) and that the “will to create” that informs art is fulfilled when released from the oppositional schema of fiction/reality—a release that we will call surreal release—when the poet’s creative will takes her to a new sense of realism. We can anticipate that this new realism is intimately linked to pragmatic potency and suggest that the hopelessness of the pre-war poet is a critical manifestation of rationalist apraxia.

Mariátegui states that the “sensuous, elegant, and hyperesthetic” (HCMS, 140) generation of pre-war Europeans did not see war as “a tragedy, a cataclysm” but as “a sport, a stimulant, a spectacle.” (Ibid.) The fictionalized totality of the poet above corresponds to the sensibility of the pre-war Europeans with rationalist apraxia. Unable to see the formative impact of human praxis on history, they fictionalized their praxis—they were hyperaesthetic—to the extent that they anticipated the violence of war as a fiction. However, “[w]ar did not wish to be so mediocre. Paris felt the claw of this martial drama in its gut. Europe, burned and lacerated, shed its mentality and psychology.” (Ibid.) War, again, appears as a turning point but now in aesthetic terms: The advent of pragmatic potency coincided with the surreal release, the destruction of the schema of fiction/reality toward a new realism is structurally linked to the revolutionary’s “pragmatic” fulfilment of her will to create (which can be identified as the same creative will whose lack of fulfilment is lamented in “The Dance Behind the Ark”).

Mariátegui’s essay “Reality and Fiction,” first published in 1926, can help us to understand the relationship between pragmatic potency and the surreal release further, as well as to develop a preliminary determination of surrealism. Mariátegui refers to Oscar Wilde, whose expertise “depends...on his conception of reality.... Wilde claimed that the London fog was created by painting. It isn’t true, he said, that art copies nature; it is nature that copies art.” (HCMS, 177) The surreal release from the schema of fiction/reality involves a reversal in which fiction becomes primary and reality is derivative of it. This reversal has the consequence that creation through imagination, like a painting of the London fog, brings about the real—the “actual”—London fog. The fictive inventiveness of the artist, then, corresponds to the stance of pragmatic potency, and the reversal

implicit in the surreal release can inform the sensibility of both artists and revolutionaries for whom the world is the result of their creative will. The surreal release, as intimately linked to pragmatic potency, has two interrelated moments: the release from the oppositional schema of fiction/reality and the fulfilment of the creative will in the formation of the world rather than in a “fictional” space.

For Mariátegui, it is evident that the artist can form the world. Pi-randello “in a novel as bare of ornamentation and simple in form as the Late Maria Pascal, presented a case study which the critics immediately censured as odd and implausible, but which life beautifully reproduced years later.” (Ibid.) The surreal release involves a transformation in the effectiveness of fiction: from being a fantastical adornment of reality to being the source of the potential unfolding of the world. It releases us from the tie so eloquently described by Pirandello: “Life’s absurdities need to seem lifelike because they are true, unlike art, which needs to be lifelike to seem true.” (HCMS, 178) Mariátegui adds, “Freed of this tie, artists can engage in the conquest of new horizons.” (Ibid)

These new horizons are the potential horizons of the world itself. From the shared creative perspective of the surreal release and of pragmatic potency, “we can only encounter reality along the path of fantasy” (HCMS, 177), and doing so yields a new practice of realism: surrealism, whose creative task synthesizes aesthetics and praxis. Surrealist artists are revolutionaries and revolutionaries act out of a surreal disposition. The convergence of the aesthetic and the revolutionary in surrealism conditioned by the War suggests that we should find in surrealism aspects that correspond to revolutionary praxis as described in section b.iv above. With this in mind, we can approach how André Breton explains the surrealist disposition toward a rose as an example of the surreal release:

[W]e had to set “the rose” in a profitable movement...in which the rose is successively the rose out of the garden, the rose which holds a singular place in a dream,...the rose which may completely change its properties by passing into automatic writing, the rose which retains only what the painter has allowed it to retain of a rose in a surrealist painting, and finally the rose, quite different from itself, which goes back into the garden.17

17 André Breton, What is Surrealism? Selected Writings, (ed.) F. Rosemont (New York: Path Finder, 2002), 175.
The rose is interpreted in potentialities that the surrealist finds in it, potentialities that are already constitutive of it rather than opposed to a constituted meaning that determines it, but through this interpretation the rose is nevertheless created—through this "profitable movement" the rose is back in the garden "different from itself." In conformity with the account of the two moments of the surrealist release above, this surrealist "profitable movement" does not fit within the oppositional schema of fiction/reality and does not remain in a fictional space abstracted from the world but becomes formative of it (the "created" rose goes "back" into the garden). Moreover, this surrealist "profitable movement" also reveals with precision the hermeneutic (see 2.ii above) that is operative in revolutionary praxis as determined by pragmatic potency. It is worth noting that, for the surrealist, the rose in the garden is as real as the "rose in a surrealist painting," which, once again, is an expression of pragmatic potency. This preliminary account of surrealism shows that it is historically and structurally linked to revolutionary praxis as determined by pragmatic potency.

(4) Mythic Comportment

In this analysis thus far, the surrealist release and surrealism have made explicit the hermeneutic aspect of revolutionary praxis. However, we have seen that there is also a factual aspect to this praxis, in which the revolutionary is committed to a truth, situated in the present and oriented toward a goal. This latter aspect has been implicit in the account of surrealism: The surrealist release involves a new, creative engagement with the world in which human praxis is not fictionalized. Surrealism on its own, however, at least in Mariátegui’s thought, cannot make explicit this factual aspect of revolutionary praxis. To grasp this aspect, we need to understand surrealism and pragmatic potency as having a "myth and guiding star." (HCMS, 178) How are we to understand this "myth"?

The first hint, once again, is the World War: “[T]he war authentically and tragically proved the value of myth once more. The people capable of victory were those capable of a mass myth.” (HCMS, 143) With these words, Mariátegui draws a contrast between the rationalist apraxia of pre-war Europeans and the "mythic comportment" of those who were victorious in the war. The war showed the lack “of myth, of faith, of hope.” (HCMS, 142) In the context of war, myth appeared in a particular way. Myth is constituted by a religious
sensibility that sustains faith and hope for a fulfilled state of humanity\textsuperscript{18}, but it does so immanently rather than transcendently: “Religious motives have been displaced from the heavens to the earth. They are not divine: they are human, social.” (HCMS, 145)\textsuperscript{19} According to Mariátegui, revolutionary praxis is determined by the immanence of myth: “The revolutionaries’ power is not in their science; it is in their faith, their passion, their will.... It is the power of myth.” (HCMS, 144) Furthermore, this mythical comportment commits revolutionaries not to transcendental ideas but to their present, factically in relation to potencies of social change to be worked out hermeneutically. Myth gives ultimate factual sense to pragmatic potency and its surrealist creative will: The world needs to be created not in any sense, but in its “social” aspect—both surrealism and revolutionary praxis are to be fulfilled through social change.

The analysis of factual revolutionary praxis (see 2.iii above) emphasizes the revolutionaries’ commitment to the present expressed in the truth of their goals. This praxis is determined by the mythic comportment that orients revolutionaries toward an overarching myth that gives them guidance, immanently directing the surrealist hermeneutic disposition of the revolutionary toward social change. The question is how to understand revolutionaries carrying out potencies of the world immanently if they are guided by a myth. Would not such a myth, rather, operate as a guiding ideal? Such is not necessarily the case in Mariátegui’s terms. Three points are essential to understand the kind of truth at stake in this myth. First, the myth at issue here is “the social revolution.” (HCMS, 145) It is not an ideal and it cannot be abstractly represented because it is nothing but a movement of change in social conditions. This myth, rather, motivates revolutionaries to relinquish ideals and plunge into their present hermeneutically, optimizing the possibilities of social change. Second, this myth appears as a “final struggle.” (IVH, 239-43) This statement does not suggest that the myth appears as the cessation of revolutionary praxis, as its end. On the contrary, the finality here is one that reveals a horizon in which all possibilities of social change are kept open but also in view. This horizonal operation is the truth operative here and concretely situates revolutionaries in

\textsuperscript{18} For the ethical implications of Mariátegui’s religiosity, see Francis Guibal and Alfonso Ibáñez, \textit{Mariátegui Hoy} (Lima: Tarea, 1987), 115–24.

\textsuperscript{19} Mariátegui’s understanding of religion is heavily influenced by Gobetti. In “Materialist Idealism,” Mariátegui quotes him: “Having abandoned Christian dogma, we have found richer, more conscious, more actionable spiritual values.” (HCMS, 160)
their present and in relation to goals, sustaining their creative praxis concretely, rather than within fictionalized spaces. Finally, this interpretation suggests that pragmatic potency is engaged with immanent, final and open potencies that do not imply the end of revolutionary praxis. As Mariátegui writes, “[H]umanity always feels the need to feel near to a goal” (IVH, 240), a nearness that ties revolutionaries factically to their present, a nearness that is never resolved but constitutes, rather, a concrete “human process” (ibid.) within the horizon of the myth of social revolution.

(5) The Avant-Garde

Our analysis of pragmatic potency defined revolutionary praxis as the plenitude of a combative—rather than speculative—subjectivity that is hermeneutic and factual (2.i). Pragmatic potency made explicit the existential meaning of combative subjectivity, the surreal release made explicit the hermeneutic aspect of this subjectivity and mythic comportment made explicit the factual aspect. These three concepts are fundamentally interrelated. They reveal a dynamic structural reciprocity that enables and sustains revolutionary praxis in Mariátegui’s sense: the avant-garde. The avant-garde, in this perspective, is not a way of engaging the political sphere. It is, rather, Mariátegui’s original determination of the political as such, and he explains, “[F]or those of us who raise it to the category of a religion, politics is the very plot of History.” In terms of our opening quote (7EL, 204), the avant-garde expresses the “indivisibility” of the human spirit (joining praxis, aesthetics and faith) and fulfils its need for “plenitude and coherence.”

This determination of the avant-garde is an important step toward our final objective of understanding Mariátegui’s drive to protect the integrity of surrealism, an objective that necessarily requires us to make explicit Mariátegui’s interpretation of surrealism as “discipline.” At this point, we have a preliminary understanding of

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20 See Heidegger’s complementary discussion of “nearness” and “anticipation” in Being and Time, 249–55.

21 Again, in Gobetti’s words quoted by Mariátegui: “It is not a matter of reaching a goal or denying oneself through an ascetic renunciation it is a matter of always more intensely and consciously being oneself, of overcoming the chains of our weakness in a perpetual superhuman effort.” (HCMS, 160)

22 We have not touched on Mariátegui’s myth in relation to the masses. For such a discussion, see Quijano, Reencuentro y debate, 78.

23 José Carlos Mariátegui, “Art, Revolution and Decadence,” in HCMS, 170–72, here 171.
surrealism in terms of the surreal release, of the new realism that it implies and of its structural link to the creative hermeneutic disposition of revolutionary praxis. A more precise understanding of it can be reached by situating it not only in terms of the dynamic reciprocity of the avant-garde laid out above but also in its historical juncture. Surrealism is more than an “artistic” trend. It is a discipline that preserves the proper configuration of the avant-garde and thus ensures the possibility of revolutionary praxis. Before we pursue this line of enquiry, the analysis of Mariátegui’s avant-garde can be concluded with the following points:

(i) This account of the avant-garde explains part of the opening quote (7El, 204): Mariátegui understands aesthetics in its intrinsic belonging to politics and religion, but that does not mean that he approaches art from an extra-aesthetic point of view. The aftermath of the World War demanded that art be considered from the point of view of the total phenomenon of the avant-garde; otherwise, the aesthetic phenomenon would be effectively missed. More precisely, post-war art must be understood on the basis of the surreal release in its involvement with pragmatic potency and the mythic comportment. This is the fundamental principle that governs all of Mariátegui’s writings on art, including those dedicated to Latin American (specifically Peruvian) art.

(ii) One may think that, given the central role of the World War in the foregoing analysis, Mariátegui’s grasp of the avant-garde comes from a strictly European point of view. It is quite the opposite. Mariátegui assumes a perspective informed by a peripheral and explicitly postcolonial sensibility24, for which the creation of a “nation” was the driving goal: “While in no way denying any of its principles, socialism acquires a nationalist attitude among these peoples [colonized peoples] by force of circumstance,” this being a “completely logical aspect of revolutionary praxis.”25 This perspective makes Mariátegui emphasize the creative, hermeneutic aspect of the

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24 Aboul-Ela has a remarkable grasp of Mariátegui’s post-colonial stance: “I know of no other scholarship using the phrase ‘Mariátegui tradition’ but I believe it is important to invent such a phrase to account for the profound influences that travel across space and time in regions whose cultures have been affected by colonialism and imperialism because such non-European linkages are regularly overlooked by North American discourses of critical theory.” Hosam Aboul-Ela, *Other South: Faulkner, Coloniality, and the Mariategui Tradition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), 2.

avant-garde and of the revolutionary praxis that it sustains, rather than taking it to be a negative or strictly critical endeavour (see 2.ii and c above).26 This perspective, therefore, also makes Mariátegui particularly perceptive of the aesthetic element within revolutionary praxis. Of course, especially given the analysis of mythic comportment above, the “nation” at issue here is not a static notion but one that is constantly re-created. Mariátegui points to indigenismo in Peru as an example of the avant-garde in this respect.

II. Surrealism as Discipline

The avant-garde is not the only form of the human spirit in the post-war generation, and it must be actively protected from other non-revolutionary forms lacking in “plenitude” and “coherence,” forms that fracture the dynamic reciprocity of the elements of the avant-garde made explicit above (see I.5). According to Mariátegui, surrealism as discipline is an essential modality of this protection, but one that itself needs to be protected. The avant-garde must be protected from “nihilist apraxia.”

(1) Nihilist Apraxia

(i) The Bourgeoisie and Its Aesthetics. We have seen that the avant-garde developed out of the collapse of the rationalist apraxia in pre-war Europeans. In the post-war juncture, a form of apraxia returned, threatening the integrity of the avant-garde. This new form grew out of “nostalgia”: “[L]ittle by little, nostalgia for the crass pre-war tranquility soon appeared in its [the bourgeoisie’s] psyche.” (HCMS, 140) Mariátegui tells us that this nostalgia is determined by fear: the fear of the revolutionary violence implicit in pragmatic potency. Due to this fear, the bourgeoisie attempts to disengage from the stance of pragmatic potency and takes an abstract stance that Mariátegui calls normalization: “Normalization would mean the return to the tranquil life, the dismissal and burial of all the romanticism, heroism, and quixotism of the right and the left.” (HCMS, 141) However, such a return is impossible because normalization in its

26 In this sense, Mariátegui’s avant-garde is different from Bürger’s influential and Eurocentric one. Unruh explains, “For Peter Bürger...the most radical feature of European historical avant-gardes was the assault of art as an institution of bourgeois society.” Vicky Unruh, Latin American Vanguard: The Art of Contentious Encounter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 7.
fear attests pragmatic potency and, hence, cannot be rationalist apraxia. Normalization looks backwards toward an “ideal” but relinquishes the creative will needed to forge its path toward it, so it is also alien to mythic comportment (see I.4 above). Its truth is to be a withdrawal from action, but in distinction from rationalist apraxia, it cannot find meaning in “progress,” so ends up without the possibility of a coherent self-affirmation. It can be called a nihilist apraxia that fractures the avant-garde through an estrangement from pragmatic potency and mythic comportment.

One can read Mariátegui’s “Art, Revolution and Decadence,” first published in 1926, as an attempt to show the perverted operation of the surreal release in the context of the bourgeois’ estrangement from pragmatic potency and the mythic comportment. This text suggests that, for Mariátegui, aesthetics is the site where the fracture of the avant-garde is most apparent. The surreal release has been explained as (i) the reversal of the schema of fiction/reality so that (ii) fiction was generative of reality in view of social change. This reversal, in the avant-garde, was linked to the hermeneutic creative will at work in the pragmatic potency of revolutionary praxis and to the facticity of its mythic comportment. In the context of the bourgeois, we find a perverted surreal release that finds its site of operation in a subjectivized, abstract space: the space of art for its own sake that is constituted by a fictive inventiveness expressing its “power” over “reality” while disengaged from effective revolutionary praxis.

The fundamental operation of this “decadent” art is the constitution of its own realm as an independent one apart from the world. This operation is different from the fictionalization that was an aspect of rational apraxia, in which fiction was still derivative from reality (see I.3 above). The perverted surreal release in bourgeois, decadent art is manifested in three main ways. First, it emphasizes the nonsensical and absurd as an expression of power over “reality” but only in a fictionalized abstraction from it. Second, it emphasizes “technique” over content because attention to content could contextualize art in terms of interests foreign to it that would threaten its “independent” character. Third, the multiplication of schools and their claims to being “art” is a dissemination of art that attests to the obsession for grasping a definite, independent sphere of art as such. Mariátegui thinks that bourgeois art and each of these specific tendencies within it do not correspond to surrealism but can contaminate it and thus threaten the integrity of the avant-garde and foster “nihilist apraxia.”
(ii) **Fascism and its Aesthetics.** In “Two Conceptions of Life,” first published in 1925, fascism appears as the kind of revolutionary praxis that Mariátegui supports. It embraces violence and scares the bourgeoisie:

Fascism speaks a belligerent and violent language that alarms those whose only ambition is normalization.... Fascism does not imagine the counterrevolution as a vulgar police affair, but as an epic and heroic enterprise.... The revolutionaries...like the fascists, propose to live dangerously. (HCMS, 141)

If we read these words carefully, however, what is at issue here is the way fascists *speak* about themselves, how they *present* themselves. This reading leaves open the possibility that fascism only *appears* as revolutionary praxis. This reading is supported by the almost concurrent essay “Man and Myth,” in which Mariátegui writes:

Fascism, in its theoreticians’ own words, assumes a medieval and Catholic sensibility; they imagine themselves representing the Spirit of the Counterreformation, but on the other hand claim to incarnate the idea of a nation, a typically liberal concept. Such theorizing seems to delight in the invention of the most affected sophisms. But all attempts to revive olden myths are destined to immediate failure. Every era wishes its own sense of the world. Nothing is more sterile than to try to revive an extinct myth. (HCMS, 144)

Fascism was the attempt to create a nation by a return to a static past ideal. It was a contradictory project in that such a return precisely undermines the creative potency that Mariátegui finds in the genuine nation-forming avant-garde revolutionary praxis. This contradiction traps fascists in a stasis that is concealed beneath their violence. This stasis forecloses the possibility of plenitude and coherence in the fascist disposition, leading them to a form of nihilist apraxia.27 In this respect, fascism is not determined by the mythic

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27 *Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem* can be read as a description of this apraxia. An example is Eichmann’s apraxia in the following description: “His conscience was indeed set at rest when he saw the zeal and eagerness with which ‘good society’ everywhere reacted as he did. He did not need to ‘close his ears to the voice of conscience,’ as the judgement has it, not because he had none, but because his conscience spoke with a ‘respectable voice,’ with the voice of respectable society around him.” Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 126.
comportment that maintains revolutionaries factically in their present in the nearness of goals (see I.2.iii above). In contrast, fascism is oriented toward an abstraction that, in fact, disconnects them from their present. Having such an ideal also shows that fascism is not determined by pragmatic potency in its creative, hermeneutic violence. Fascism, as a counter-reform movement, expresses a violence that is, rather, a negation (see I.2.iv above). For Mariátegui, fascism was as alien to the avant-garde as the normalized bourgeoisie was. The difference between them lies in that fascism appeared as a mode of the avant-garde revolutionary praxis due to its rhetoric and theatricality.

Fascism appeared as what it was not. Its aesthetics show this deception. Mariátegui’s study of Italian Futurism and fascism sheds light on this phenomenon. Futurism had a promising beginning as an avant-garde movement; its iconoclastic character was driven by the creative vision of a new Italy, and it “represented a moment in Italian consciousness, not as a literary and artistic mode, but as a spiritual attitude.” (HCMS, 72) In its development, futurism shows a complex relationship with fascism. Mariátegui maintains that fascism “was in part prepared by this [the futurist] emotional state.” (Ibid.) In other words, fascism grew out of the early avant-garde sensibility of futurism—a sensibility determined by the surreal release, which explains the easy alignment between futurism and revolutionary praxis in Russia. (HCMS, 73) In fascist Italy, however, futurism had a different fate. Mariátegui states:

Futurism became fascist because art does not rule politics and, in particular, because it was the fascists who conquered Rome.... Fascism, after having exploited its [futurism’s] motivation and spirit, has obliged futurism to accept its reactionary principles, that is, to repudiate itself theoretically and practically. (Ibid.)

The issue is how futurism became fascist, that is, how it lost its avant-garde character and was submitted to reactionary principles. Understanding this change would shed light on what the avant-garde needs to be protected from. At first, this submission might seem to be due to futurism’s political involvement. However, Mariátegui’s conception of the avant-garde offers a more sophisticated account. We know that the term avant-garde means that art forms determined by the surreal release find proper fulfilment in political praxis, even constituting the hermeneutic disposition that characterizes it. Early Italian futurism was no different; thus, fascism grew out of it. The failure of Italian futurism, then, was its inability to remain productively formative of fascist praxis. We could say, then, contrary to
what might seem to be the case at first, that futurism repudiated
itself when it ceased to be involved properly with revolutionary
praxis. In the quote above, Mariátegui suggests that the Italian futur-
ists may have had the impression that art was beyond the purview of
politics, which means, in this context, that the Italian futurists may
not have been attentive to the subtle way in which the surreal re-
lease fits within the larger structure of avant-garde revolutionary
praxis. They lacked a self-critical disposition. In Mariátegui’s words,
Italian futurism’s “histrionic megalomania” (HCMS, 182) may have
blinded futurists to the larger structure that could have given futur-
ism meaning and preserved its integrity.

However, the question is precisely how the megalomaniac Italian
futurism ended up submitted to fascism. Having relinquished its
involvement in revolutionary praxis, Italian futurism had a similar
fate to bourgeois art. It became self-involved, decorative, technical
and without content:

The wig, the makeup, the tricks could not keep us from noting the
broken voice and mechanical gestures.... [F]uturism was corrupt-
ed primarily by its taste for the spectacular...which condemned it
to a life on the proscenium, to an artificial, false, declamatory role.
(HCMS, 182)

Italian futurism became a play of appearances without substance, a
technique that fascism exploited for its deceptive self-aggrandizing
as a revolutionary movement. The nihilist apraxia of fascism, when
transported to the spectacular stage of Italian futurism, appears
heroic and deceivingly revolutionary. If one shares Mariátegui’s
aesthetic perceptiveness, however, fascist Italian futurism, in fact,
reveals the contradiction between fascist revolutionary rhetoric and
its reactionary, regressive principles, between its histrionics and its
nihilist apraxia, a contradiction that defines its aesthetics in contrast
to that of the avant-garde, surrealism in particular.

(2) Surrealism and the “Autonomy” of Art

Our analysis of the genuine surreal release as an element of the
avant-garde has showed (i) that it released fiction from its derivative
status in the schema of fiction/reality so that it became constitutive
of a creative will at work in pragmatic potency through which the
world itself is created and (ii) that this creation of the world was
determined by the possibility of social revolution in terms of a con-
crete present and the nearness of goals, a possibility sustained by a
mythic comportment toward social change. Furthermore, the surreal
release as a creative operation coincides with Breton’s “profitable movement” that objects undergo in surrealism, a movement in which objects are released to their open, indeterminate possibilities and return to their concrete present different from themselves, a movement that finds its fulfilment when it is formative of revolutionary praxis as a hermeneutic disposition. Surrealism is an expression of the genuine surreal release and, thus, cannot be reduced to categories such as art, politics or religion. As stated previously, surrealism is the “practice of the new realism” of avant-garde politics.

We have also shown that the surreal release can be perverted by nihilist apraxia as expressed by the bourgeoisie and in fascism. These two perversions can pass as surrealist, which is something Mariátegui wants to prevent because, for him, the avant-garde and the revolutionary praxis that it supports are necessarily at stake in the preservation of the integrity of surrealism as the proper practice of the surreal release. Hence, Mariátegui attempts to clear our understanding of surrealism of any confusion, which explains the determination behind his polemic with Breton noted at the beginning of our analysis. These two perversions have in common that they imply a distortion of the surreal release in which it withdraws from its involvement with revolutionary praxis. Surrealism, then, must be understood apart from such a withdrawal. Mariátegui seeks to accomplish this through an analysis of the “autonomy of surrealism as art.”

It is important to note that, historically, surrealism does not involve a withdrawal from revolutionary praxis. In fact, surrealism’s historical development as a movement reveals that, in its early Dada phase, it elaborates a challenge to the fiction/reality schema that it gradually explores as a mode of political praxis. Concerning surrealism, Mariátegui notes: “Reaching adulthood, it has sensed its political responsibilities, its civic duty, and has joined a party and a doctrine.” (HCMS, 183) In other words, surrealism reveals a different, even contrary, development to that of Italian futurism. The surrealists gave much thought to their involvement with revolutionary praxis without compromising their integrity and were aware that establishing an independent artistic realm violated the true sense of their movement. Mariátegui states, “[T]he surrealists reject nothing as much as voluntarily confining themselves to pure artistic speculation.” (Ibid.)

That statement does not mean, however, that surrealists relinquish the autonomy of art: “The autonomy of art, yes, but not the confinement of art.” (Ibid.) On the basis of Mariátegui’s analyses, we can identify two ways of understanding this autonomy. First,
Mariátegui supports the exploration of the surreal release as a playful, subjectivized and absurd form of practice of “pure art” only when the artist understands that this exploration is not the fulfilment of surrealism but the cultivation of a sensibility that will have a definitive presence in the creation of the world through revolutionary praxis. Here, autonomy means giving oneself the space to cultivate this sensibility. Second, surrealism is involved with revolutionary praxis as the practice of the proper operation of the surreal release. In this case, the autonomy of surrealism as art means the preservation of the surreal release as an autonomous aesthetic structure in light of nihilist apraxia and the appreciation of the surreal release in its distinctive and fundamental contribution to avant-garde politics. In both these aspects, the “autonomy of surrealism as art” does not imply withdrawal from politics but its opposite. According to Mariátegui, these insights should inform our critical appreciation of surrealism, dissipate any confusion about its involvement with revolutionary praxis and thus enable us to protect its practice from nihilist apraxia.

The kind of autonomy of surrealism just described is manifest when we consider surrealism as an uncompromising disposition that happens in art but is not confined to it. As Mariátegui indicates, “The artist who, at a given moment, does not fulfill its duty to throw one of Mr. Tardieu’s flics [policemen] into the Seine, or to interrupt a speech of Briand with an interjection, is a poor devil.” (HCMS, 183) In these actions, the surrealist artist as revolutionary does not say “things could be otherwise.” Rather, she reveals that a situation, in its potency, in its factual specificity and rootedness in the present, is always already otherwise. These actions are hermeneutic creative acts through which the revolutionary shows that “things are otherwise,” revealing the revolutionary potency as immanent to them rather than as a possibility added to them—much like Breton’s rose undergoing the surrealist “profitable movement.” Such revolutionary actions are conditioned by the avant-garde as described above and reveal the genuine operation of surreal release that is practiced in surrealism.

(3) Surrealism as Discipline and the Polemic with Breton

Mariátegui not only points out the threats to surrealism coming from the bourgeoisie and fascism but also notes the endurance of surrealism:
Surrealism has another sort of endurance. It is truly a *movement*, an *experience*. It is no longer, for example, where it was left two years ago by those who were observing it with the hope that it would disintegrate or be pacified. (HCMS, 182)

Surrealism is not just the synthesis of aesthetics and revolutionary praxis. Surrealism as a *practice*, as just discussed, *preserves* and even *protects* this synthesis. The “autonomy” of surrealism as practice implies a constant self-critique that prevents surrealism from becoming lost in an abstract subjectivity and that keeps the surreal release properly engaged in revolutionary praxis. (These two aspects correspond to the twofold meaning of *autonomy* above.) This self-critical practice shelters the surreal release and gives surrealism the enduring character of a “movement” or “experience” that develops historically. Surrealism is both the carrying out of the surreal release and the sustained experience of it throughout different historical junctures. This sustained experience is only possible through self-awareness, that is, as a *discipline* that ensures the continuance of the genuine surreal release and, for that matter, of the avant-garde: “[Surrealism] is a difficult, laborious discipline. I could temper and moderate this with a more scrupulous definition—that it is the difficult, laborious search for a discipline.” (HCMS, 183)

Why a *search* for a discipline and not just a discipline? Mariátegui does not want to deny surrealism its character as discipline. With these words, rather, he acknowledges the geo-historical specificity of surrealism and the impossibility of reducing it to a methodology. Surrealists have the task to search for—and not just sustain—the possibility of the avant-garde in their particular contexts, possibilities that manifest themselves differently. In Peru, for example, the surrealist-disciplined self-critique does not see itself emerging in opposition to the nihilist apraxia of the European bourgeoisie and fascism. Rather, it positions itself in opposition to the apraxia of a criollo aristocratic class in a post-colonial context. ²⁸ Mariátegui’s conception of surrealism in Peru (engaging the immanent potencies of its present) yields the poetry of Vallejo rather than Breton’s *Nadja*, for example, which calls for different modalities of surrealist discipline, of the avant-garde, and of revolutionary praxis.

At this point, we can understand Mariátegui’s deep appreciation of surrealism and his determination to understand it with precision to avoid any confusions: (i) surrealism is a genuine *practice* of the

²⁸ One could argue that, in light of the 7 *Ensayos*, aristocratic criollo apraxia is linked to the invisibility of the “indigenous problem.”
surreal release as an essential element of the avant-garde and of the revolutionary praxis sustained by it; (ii) surrealism as a discipline preserves and protects the integrity of the surreal release and, hence, of the avant-garde; and (iii) surrealism as a search for a discipline looks for the possibility of the avant-garde, that is, of social revolution, in particular geo-historical sites, with attention to the singularities that condition them. At the same time, Mariátegui acknowledges that the self-critical discipline of surrealism attests to surrealism’s need for protection, thus explaining his polemic with Breton.

Finally, in his sometimes harsh critique of Breton, quoted at the beginning of this paper, Mariátegui particularly objects to the following:

> Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, ceased to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of surrealists than the hope of finding this point. (HCMS, 185)

To understand his objection, we need to recall that Italian futurism and bourgeois art resulted from the withdrawal of the surreal release from revolutionary praxis into an artistic sphere without content, in which art is subjectivized and becomes strictly technical. Mariátegui senses in Breton’s experimental surrealism a tendency toward this same withdrawal. The “point” that the surrealists search for in this account is in the “mind,” and the experiment empties categories through abstraction29 rather than seeking a new realism. Mariátegui’s detection of this tendency in one of the most influential surrealists revealed to him that surrealism needed to make explicit—in conformity with its disciplined, self-critical attitude—the

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29 Bataille has a complementary analysis of the possible absurd abstraction in surrealism. He points out, for example, surrealism’s mutism: “[I]f it spoke it would cease to be what it wanted to be, but if it failed to speak it could only lend itself to misunderstanding.” Georges Bataille, The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism, (tr. and ed.) M. Richardson (New York: Verso, 1994), 56. The interesting aspect of Bataille’s observation in the context of this present analysis is that surrealism can withdraw precisely as the result of an obsessive self-awareness. However, it can be noted here that the self-awareness is not the problem, but the withdrawal is. Mariátegui’s sense of discipline is mythically driven always to work itself out in the world.
intimate relation between surrealism and revolutionary praxis. As a disciplined surrealist, Mariátegui undertook this challenge rigorously.

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