

Où en est le surréalisme? Taking Stock of Surrealism

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Où en est le surréalisme?

André Breton



André BRETON à Percé, à l'été de 1944.
(Phot. Élixa Breton)

Il n'y a pas si longtemps, déjà plusieurs années, que, dans une publication canadienne, le surréalisme s'est reconnu comme dans un miroir. Cette publication était inspirée par notre ami Paul-Émile Borduas que je me console mal de ne pas avoir rencontré, durant l'été de 1944, comme je flânaï dans Montréal avant de partir pour la Gaspésie ou en revenant de Sainte-Agathe.

Paul-Émile Borduas, tout en poursuivant son œuvre de peintre, une des mieux situées d'aujourd'hui, s'est révélé un animateur de premier ordre en suscitant autour de lui une pléiade de jeunes poètes et d'artistes dont les aspirations fondamentales se confondent avec celles du surréalisme, quand bien même à l'épreuve se manifesteraient des divergences dues à l'écart des générations. La publication dont il s'agit, *Refus global*, empruntait son titre au très lucide et courageux manifeste qui l'ouvrait, rédigé par Borduas et contresigné par quinze de ses jeunes amis.

La lecture de ce manifeste m'a pleinement convaincu de l'identité des façons de voir et d'appréhender le monde dans les milieux les plus évolués du Canada comme d'ici. De part et d'autre, c'est le même besoin de réagir contre l'étouffement, considérablement accru, ces derniers temps, par la menace d'un nouveau conflit, cette fois exterminateur. Le même souci de s'en prendre, pendant qu'il en est temps encore, aux racines du mal, de forer tout au moins le sol à leur recherche. Il est bien entendu, en effet, que la marche de l'humanité, qui s'avère aujourd'hui démentielle, admet, en deça des contradictions économiques dont le caractère de plus en plus manifestement insoluble fait tenir pour inévitable la catastrophe, d'autres causes résidant, en dernière analyse, dans l'esprit de l'homme. Il est certain que cet esprit, à un moment donné de son histoire, a fait un choix aberrant entre ses facultés, décidant de développer telles d'entre elles à leur extrême limite et laissant délibérément les autres en friche. C'est encore contre ce choix, duquel il fait partir l'actuel processus de perdition qui, bon gré mal gré, nous entraîne tous, que le surréalisme s'est constamment élevé. C'est tout le système de valeurs promu par ce choix que le surréalisme s'est acharné à attaquer, à détruire. Celui qu'il oppose, qu'il n'aura de cesse avant de lui avoir substitué, est ce qui se dégage, et de mieux en mieux se coordonne, à partir d'un sentiment de plus en plus vif de frustration.

Où en est le surréalisme aujourd'hui? Ceci revient à se demander jusqu'à quel point, en 1952, ses thèses et ses revendications initiales sont maintenues. Si les récents événements, les nouvelles conjonctures, en apportant aux données du problème un correctif appréciable, n'ont pas entraîné de sa part certains revirements. Qu'il y ait eu, à l'origine du surréalisme, révolte profonde et même insurrection morale contre les modes conventionnels de penser et de sentir, que la vie même ait pu être jouée sur ce refus, c'est vrai, mais la critique s'en est trop vite laissé imposer par cet aspect et a conclu beaucoup trop vite au pessimisme et à la volonté de destruction. Il ne faut pas oublier que le premier souci du surréalisme a été d'ouvrir toutes grandes des fenêtres qui avant lui étaient fermées ou laissaient tout au plus passer un fil d'air: tels étaient le rêve, le recours à certaines puissances libératrices du langage, le merveilleux sous toutes ses formes, l'amour reconnu d'emblée comme un des pôles de ce merveilleux. Aujourd'hui, nous n'en sommes plus à ouvrir ces fenêtres, nous les tenons pour bel et bien ouvertes et nous en sommes à empêcher seulement qu'elles se referment. Ceci ne réclame sans doute plus tout à fait la même violence ni les qualités convulsives naguère mises en avant et dont certains gardent la nostalgie. Des horizons intérieurs se sont découverts, des lieux de résolution ont été entrevus: l'essentiel est de se porter plus avant à leur rencontre. Si le surréalisme a été souvent expression d'intolérance, de dégoût, voire de haine, il faut bien comprendre que c'est au nom de l'amour qu'il l'a été; je veux dire que ce contre quoi il demeure braqué, c'est contre tout ce qui se conjugue de nos jours pour que l'homme perde le pouvoir d'aimer. On découvrira peut-être un jour que ce pouvoir d'aimer est tout ce qu'il a

cherché, parfois désespérément, à restaurer! Il ne s'agit pas seulement de l'exaltation de l'amour de l'homme et de la femme, mais de la récupération d'une sorte d'innocence perdue, de la reconquête de tout ce qui pourrait faire le prix de la vie. C'est là, me semble-t-il, le côté de son programme sur lequel on saurait trop insister, aujourd'hui; ne fut-ce que pour l'opposer à celui de l'existentialisme, intégralement pessimiste, qui vise à faire saisir le *moi* comme étant devant le *rien*, sans offrir la moindre issue à la conscience qu'il plonge dans le malheur. Au cours de ces dernières années, le surréalisme a eu souvent l'occasion de faire valoir tout ce qui pouvait relier la poésie de ce dernier siècle à la tradition initiatique. Déjà, dans *Arcane 17*, que j'ai écrit au Canada, j'exprime la conviction que le processus de découverte artistique est inféodé à la forme et aux moyens de progression de la haute magie. Il est aujourd'hui bien établi, on en a des preuves, que la pensée ésotérique a puissamment requis ou influencé la plupart de ceux dont le surréalisme se réclame, soit: Hugo, Nerval, Bertrand, Fourier, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Jarry, Roussel, Kafka. Dans la mesure où le surréalisme obéit à des déterminations historiques passant par eux, il est clair qu'il ne pouvait manquer de côtoyer l'ésotérisme à son tour; que même en se cantonnant sur le plan poétique, il serait amené à recouper certaines thèses ésotériques fondamentales. Depuis longtemps, il avait commencé à le pressentir; l'important est qu'il en soit assuré désormais. On sait que le surréalisme est parti du recours systématique à l'inconscient; dans la phase dite raisonnante de son activité, il s'est employé à faire bénéficier la conscience des résultats de son exploration, c'est-à-dire qu'avec ce qu'il ramenait des profondeurs de l'inconscience il a entrepris d'étendre les limites du conscient. Je pense que c'est là l'amorce d'une démarche dialectique qui doit entraîner la fusion de ces deux termes en un troisième qui surmonte leur contradiction. Or ce troisième terme ne peut être que la reconnaissance du précepte qui régit aussi bien la philosophie alchimique que la vieille sagesse chinoise, à savoir que le tout est de passer de l'action consciente à l'action inconsciente. Seule l'action inconsciente est naturelle; seule elle est capable d'accomplir des opérations physiques et chimiques qui ne peuvent se traduire en termes de raison. Les anciens Chinois se résumaient en ces simples mots: «Suivez la nature», entendant par là que «ne pas faire, ce n'est pas ne rien faire, c'est ne pas gêner le cours naturel» et aussi que «tout ce qui coule de source est conforme à la volonté du ciel».

J'ai pu dire, dans *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, qu'une œuvre ne pouvait être tenue pour surréaliste qu'à condition d'atteindre le champ psychophysique total (dont le champ de conscience n'est qu'une faible partie) et je lui donnais pour modèle la construction du nid chez l'oiseau. J'ai beaucoup regardé les oiseaux dans cette île Bonaventure qui est au large de Percé; je ne les ai jamais tant écoutés, et si bien entendus, que dans la forêt canadienne. Au terme actuel de son évolution, je voudrais seulement dire que ce n'est plus seulement en poésie et en art que le surréalisme aspire à retrouver, à remettre en œuvre le principe qui leur confère leur plumage et leur chant, ce *tao* des Chinois qui fait aussi que «les saisons roulent» et que «le phénix plane». Ce principe, c'est encore sur lui que le surréalisme compte et sur lequel il entend se fonder pour rééquilibrer la conduite de l'homme et lui rendre l'intelligence supérieure de la vie.

English Translation, p. 87

Nous tenons à remercier très chaleureusement Mme Éliisa Breton de nous avoir accordé l'autorisation de publier cet inédit d'André Breton. Ses recherches lui ont permis de retrouver une partie du manuscrit qui corrobore l'authenticité du texte et atteste la fidélité de la transcription. Il s'agit d'une brève causerie diffusée sur les ondes de Radio-Canada, le mardi soir 13 janvier 1953, dans le cadre de l'émission *La Revue des Arts et des Lettres*; des extraits furent reproduits dans *La Semaine à Radio-Canada*, 1-7 février 1953 (vol. III, N° 17, p. 5-6).

Les archives des programmes de Radio-Canada n'en conservent aucune trace. Vérification faite, même lacune à l'ORTF où fut réalisé l'enregistrement. Ce texte nous a été transmis sous forme de transcription, et celle que nous utilisons provient des papiers personnels de Paul-Émile Borduas. G.R.



Jean BENOÎT
Lithographie pour illustrer
le poème d'André Breton, *Le La*,
Alès, P. A. Benoit, 1961; 12,5 cm. x 12,5.
Montréal, Coll. Roland Giguère.
(Phot. Gabor Szilasi)

Is it a matter of an inevitable historical process? Or else is it marginal? Breton was right: having perceived early that the distribution of surrealist works would inspire imitations and laxity, he advocated the occultation of Surrealism.

At the present stage, everything leads us to believe that the vocabulary and the syntax of surrealist art form an idiom so widely divided that many will henceforth be able to compose *surrealist variations on a theme*. As witness a work by Rafael Barrios, *I've never met Duchamp*, which pays its respects to this ancestor, model for all of them. What is in question is a simple statement, expressed by an ironic borrowing, devoid of nostalgia: many young artists are wrong and without merit only because they were born too late and too far away to have been the contemporaries of Duchamp in 1913! And now that Duchamp's iconoclastic gesture has been introduced into the temple of art and is venerated, it serves as model for the making of new icons. By its hybrid character this paraphrase of Duchamp emphasizes the ambiguous position of the contemporary artist, thwarted by the striking disrepute of traditional fashions of expression; sought by many avant-gardes who will secure for it the conviction of being in the line of progress, on condition that it can unceasingly come to light!

The imitation and faking of old works can be connected only in an accessory capacity to surrealism. Which characters to-day authenticate a surrealist step? The works of the principal surrealist artists and Breton's commentaries have drawn the profile of surrealism in and for their time. Like a front-line division, surrealism adapts its action to the conditions of a place and a period, moves and adjusts its aim at the will of emergency. The visual evidence left by a surrealist activity bears testimony to this mobility. And if, during the fifty years of its existence, surrealism has gone along with some forms of abstract art, for example, we could not repeat too much that it is bound to no aesthetic and that it is not engaged in the avant-garde race. Consequently, to cling to ways of expression in surrealist art is less important than to find the moral conditions of the manifestations of surrealism in art. Here rests the exemplary value of the old surrealist works. In its forms, the surrealism of to-day will be otherwise or it will not be at all.

Surrealism can be born only in a state of extreme vigilance in the face of the specific situations of a period; it is a permanent rebellion against compromise, conformity and the facilities of which individual and collective existences are woven. A similar lucidity becomes all the more urgent as fundamental revolt tends to take the place of the myth of revolution. This view of the mind to which all may subscribe without danger, and which often serves as alibi for very different enterprises.

The surrealist spirit commands a luminous awareness as much as it sends deep roots into obscure or forbidden areas of the human soil. The opening of the flood-gates of the imaginary, the introduction of dream-like suggestions into the fabric of daily life, the glorifying of great erotic pulsions, the obedience to the demands of chance, these are so many wild inner waves that, restored in all their primordial violence, become surrealism's spear-heads. For whoever believes that the struggles for liberty are not all finally won, it is necessary to count more than ever on these living forces and to set them against the opportunism of the moment, mass pruning and the hypocrisy of the Messiahs who are becoming ever more numerous. And in spite of appearances, per-

haps subjectivity has never been so much feared and belittled as to-day: beyond ventures offering an increase of *personality*, whose commercial bent remains easy to detect, we are witnessing the proliferation of movements and sects busy at squandering artificial reliefs, whose real action consists of dispersing and dissolving the vital energies of man.

In every place where man's dignity is endangered by man a state of emergency is created where surrealism is called upon to show itself. Here as elsewhere.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

TAKING STOCK OF SURREALISM

By André BRETON

It is not so long ago, already several years, that, in a Canadian publication, surrealism recognized itself as in a mirror. This publication was inspired by our friend, Paul-Émile Borduas, whom I greatly regret not having met during the summer of 1944 as I was loafing in Montreal before leaving for the Gaspé or on returning from St. Agathe.

Paul-Émile Borduas, while pursuing his work as a painter, one of the best-defined productions of to-day, revealed himself an animator of the highest degree by gathering around himself a pleiad of young poets and artists whose fundamental aspirations merged with those of surrealism, even though in being tested differences due to the generation gap would appear. The publication involved, *Refus global*, borrowed its title from the very lucid and courageous manifesto that opened it, written by Borduas and countersigned by fifteen of his young friends.

The reading of this declaration convinced me fully of the identity of the ways of seeing and understanding the world in the most advanced spheres in Canada, as here. In both places, there is the same need to react against stifling, considerably increased lately by the threat of a new conflict, this time destructive. The same concern for attacking the roots of the evil, while there is still time, for drilling the earth at the very least in search of them. It is thoroughly understood, in fact, that the progress of humanity that is to-day proving demented, admits, within the economic conditions whose more and more obviously insoluble character points to inevitable catastrophe, other causes lying, in the last analysis, in the mind of man. It is certain that this mind, at a given time in its history, made an abnormal choice between its faculties, deciding to develop some of them to the extreme and deliberately leaving the others to lie fallow. It is still against this choice, from which it starts off the present process of breaking up that, whether we like it or not, involves us all, that surrealism has constantly opposed itself. It is the whole system of values promoted by this choice that surrealism has persisted in attacking, in destroying. The one it opposes, the one it will not stop before replacing, is what is emerging and co-ordinating better and better, from a keener and keener feeling of frustration.

Let us take stock of Surrealism to-day. This is the same as wondering to what degree in 1952 its initial theses and demands are maintained. If recent events, new conjunctures, while bringing an appreciable corrective to the data of the problem, have not produced certain revisions on its part. It is true that there has been, at the origin of surrealism, a profound revolt and even a moral insurrection against conventional manners of thinking and feeling, it is true that life itself was able to be staked on this denial, but criticism allowed itself too quickly to be deceived by this aspect and much too quickly concluded in favour of pessimism and the will to destruction. We must not forget that the first concern of surrealism was to open wide the windows that were closed before it or at most let through a breath of air: such were the dream, the recourse to certain liberating powers of language, the supernatural in all its forms, love directly recognized as one of the poles of this wonder. To-day we no longer have to open these windows, we hold them well and truly open and we have only to prevent their being closed again. Doubtless this no longer requires exactly the same violence nor the convulsive qualities put forth before, which some people remember with nostalgia. Interior horizons were discovered, places of resolution were glimpsed: the important thing is to advance further to meet them. If surrealism has often been the expression of intolerance, of disgust, even of hatred, it must be understood that this was so in the name of love; I mean that what it remains opposed to is everything that combines in our time to bring about man's loss of the power to love. Perhaps we shall discover some day that this power to love is all that surrealism has sought to restore, sometimes desperately!

It is not a matter only of glorifying the love of man and woman, but of the recovery of a kind of lost innocence, of the reconquest of all that could make life worth while. That, it seems to me, is the side of its programme on which one could not insist too much, to-day; were it only to set it against that of existentialism, wholly pessimistic, which aims at apprehending the «I» as being before the «nothing», without offering the least loop-hole to the consciousness that it plunges into misfortune. During these last years, surrealism has often had the occasion of evaluating all that could link the poetry of this last century to initiatory tradition. Previously, in *Arcane 17*, which I wrote in Canada, I expressed the conviction that the process of artistic discovery is enfeoffed in the form and in the means of advancement of high magic. To-day it is well established, we have proof of it, that esoteric thought strongly attracted or influenced most of those who embraced surrealism, such as: Hugo, Nerval, Bertrand, Fourier, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Jarry, Roussel, Kafka. To the degree to which surrealism obeys historical determinations passing through them, it is clear that it could not fail to be close to the esoteric in its turn; that even while withdrawing within the poetic plan, it would be led to absorb certain fundamental esoteric theses. For a long time it had begun to have a presentiment of it; the important thing is that it should be assured of it from now on. We know that surrealism began with the systematic recourse to the unconscious; in the so-called reasoned phase of its activity it occupied itself in applying the benefits of the results of its exploration to consciousness, that is, with what it brought out from the depths of the unconscious it undertook to extend the limits of the conscious. I think that we can find here the beginning of a dialectical

approach which must lead to the fusion of these two terms into a third that rises above their contradiction. So this third term can be only the recognition of the precept that governs alchemic philosophy as well as the old Chinese wisdom, that is, that the whole matter lies in going from conscious to unconscious action. Only unconscious action is natural; only it is capable of accomplishing physical and chemical operations that cannot be translated in terms of reason. The ancient Chinese summed this up in these simple words: «Follow nature», understanding thus that «not to do is not to do nothing, it is not to upset the natural course of nature» and also that «all that comes from the heart is according to the will of heaven».

I was able to say, in *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, that a work could be considered surrealist only on condition that it reach the total psycho-physical field (of which the field of the conscious is only a small part) and I gave as example the building of a bird's nest. I have looked at birds a great deal on Bonaventure Island, which is out at sea off Percé; I have never listened to them so much, nor heard them so well, as in the Canadian forest. At the present time in its evolution, I would like to say only that it is no longer only in poetry and art that surrealism aspires to rediscover, to put to work again the natural principle that bestows on them their plumage and their song, this «Tao» of the Chinese that also brings about that «the seasons roll» and that «the phoenix soars». Surrealism still depends on this principle and intends to found itself on it to bring man's conduct into equilibrium again and to give him back the superior intelligence of life.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

THE TAIL OF THE COMET — ALFRED PELLAN, WITNESS TO SURREALISM

All the interior lamps are in the power of my friend,
Alfred Pellan.

André BRETON, 1955.

Montparnasse, 1930. There was my friend Pellan who dived into painting as if into a swimming pool, and I am still convinced that he is our greatest and most sumptuous painter.

Alain GRANDBOIS (*Visages du monde*).

Vie des Arts — Alfred Pellan, at a time when you considered yourself established in Paris, the swift collapse of 1940 ordered your hasty return to Montreal. As the product of fourteen years of work, research and experiments, you brought back an output as luxuriant as it was abundant, which became the subject of two exhibitions in Quebec and Montreal remembered with amazement by all who saw them: for the first time a painter from here presented a work so eminently modern that it resembled nothing that could be observed on the local scene. By these memorable exhibitions your work opened the first breach in the fortress of our artistic conservatism.

Since at that time Paris enjoyed a prestigious reputation as the centre of modern art, your sojourn there between 1926 and 1940, at the very heart of this now legendary effervescence

in Montparnasse, turns you into a direct and privileged witness of all that was the fine point of contemporary art between the two wars; and among the many artistic trends of the era, all the *isms* that were formed, those that declined, those that dominated, our purpose is to cast with you a retrospective look on this period, from the chosen angle of surrealism.

Alfred Pellan — Before going to Paris I had completed five years of study at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Quebec (1920-1925), where I was particularly happy because I was doing what I loved. I must say that the instruction there was academic, but, as we knew nothing else, we accepted it without saying anything. Twenty years later it would be different. In 1926, I left for Paris, where I discovered contemporary art; I was so impressed that I simply began the whole thing afresh. As holder of a scholarship, I had to enroll in the *École des Beaux-Arts* at Malaquais Quai; I therefore chose the least bad of the professors and made my way to Lucien Simon's studio; he had the insight to leave me to myself, and I took off toward the discovery of modern art, nosing about everywhere in Paris, visiting exhibitions, looking at everything that could interest me. In this way I discovered Bonnard who, far from being a surrealist, is an intimist painter, but what a musician in his colour! Matisse, who painted the most simple subjects, was a great colourist; Van Gogh as well. Those were painters who enthused me. And all of Picasso!

VdA — In this series of discoveries, what place did the surrealists occupy? At this period they were particularly active and were also unruly upon occasion.

A.P. — Surrealist exhibitions were less numerous and unless one was well informed, I am not sure that it was always possible to distinguish them from the whole of the artistic activity. For instance, Giacometti, who kept in touch with the surrealists, also exhibited outside the group; Masson often exhibited at Kahnweiler's, where Picasso and Juan Gris were to be found as well. I knew the painting of those men very well, such people as Léger and Max Ernst and I was good friends with them; we met often in cafés, we greeted each other but we never spoke of painting. Others, like Braque, Matisse or Miró, never came to the café, or very seldom. If I have little to say about the surrealists it is because I was not a member of the group. I saw surrealist painting at the time it was being created, I knew surrealist painters, but I witnessed it all from outside, without taking part in it. Breton had opened a gallery, Gradiva, Rue de Seine, where many things from his personal collection were to be seen. The best I saw was the exhibition at the *Galerie des Beaux-Arts* (1938), where the corridors, the big hall, all was filled with montages, with mannequins, . . . Dali's famous raining taxi, the brazier in the middle of the room, the sacks of coal at the ceiling . . . It was superb as an exhibition!

VdA — In brief, the richness and the profusion of what was to be seen perhaps prevented you from making distinctions and selections, which are conveniences of the art historian and which come about after the fact. Still, some names of authentic surrealists are those of artists whom you knew well and associated with. Ernst, for example.

A.P. — We used to meet occasionally, at a café or elsewhere, but it was never a matter of painting between us. I admired his painting and I regularly followed his exhibitions. The interesting thing about Max Ernst was that he invented unceasingly from very little. When

they began to make decals (1935), Dominguez and Max Ernst were able to develop thoroughly the exploration of what was, at the beginning, only one mechanical process among others. From a chance, a blob, Ernst developed the problem and was able to make use of it in an original way. And the result was always satisfactory on the plastic plan.

Picasso is another matter. He is a giant who swallows everything in his way. I, too, was dazzled by him; but how many others were influenced by Picasso? Picasso is a conjurer able to juggle with all the ways and all the forms of plastic expression because he possesses the faculty of assimilating rapidly and of projecting the idea as swiftly on his canvas. He has produced much "in the manner of . . ." It is still Picasso, and personally very strong. During those years in Paris, this was the effort that I contributed: to try to go through the experience of these masters.

I had seen Picasso in cafés but I had never dared speak to him. Meanwhile, as I was working hard, I became a little more confident and I gradually felt that through my trials I was beginning to find myself. Then one day I decide to go to see Picasso in La Boétie Street. He received me very kindly; we talked, because I had so many things to tell him . . . He invited me to come again. Later he moved to Quai des Grands-Augustins and I went back to see him; he brought out his pictures, lit the projectors and presented his work. For me this was an extraordinary stimulus, a wonderful spring-board, a provocation in the direction of work. The danger of fascination and of influences is resolved in work.

VdA — It is interesting to note that young Pellan, alert to modern art, sensitive to Max Ernst's research, showed his interest in Picasso at the time when a rapprochement was being established between Picasso and Breton.

A.P. — I certainly saw that Breton was engaged in courting Picasso. I do not know if Picasso was ever a surrealist, but he did not lean much toward the surrealist spirit in painting. In sculpture, much more!

VdA — And the nature of your relationship with Breton . . .

A.P. — My relations with Breton have always been friendly. We saw each other occasionally. He was a very dignified person, very noble, and very sincere too, whom I admire greatly because he was able to regroup everything surreal in the world, from cave art and the Middle Ages up to the present. Breton spoke to me and asked me to talk about what I was doing: it was rather abstract pictures, rapidly produced . . . But I did not wish to be regimented in any way whatsoever, by anyone whatsoever. I have always opted for freedom. And in Paris I quickly understood that art is complete liberty. I wish to remain free to work in such or such a way, as I wish and when I wish. I did not want to be looked at askance because I was not enough of a surrealist or not a surrealist at all! Sometimes I had some knowledge of the discussions that were shaking the surrealist milieu, with regard to painting. They could discuss painting among themselves, but I was not with them. Besides, it fizzled out or ended in quarrels. And I was not at all interested in that!

However, there is one thing I was never able to understand. Breton's antimilitaristic feelings were well known to everyone; and one day I saw my Breton in military dress, with his stripes and doctor's badges . . . Well! that's a bit much from the head of the surrealists! This time I didn't go to greet him.