



André Breton, Paul Eluard, Tristan Tzara, and Benjamin Péret (LEFT TO RIGHT) at the time of *Littérature*, edited by Breton, Eluard, and Philippe Soupault, 1922.

Anna Balakian

SURREALISM

*the
road
to the
absolute*

with a new introduction



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contents

Introduction to the third edition 1

Introduction 13

Preface to First Edition 30

THE SIGNAL LIGHTS

1

Out of the Forest of Symbols 37

2

Lautréamont's Battle with God 50

3

Saint-Pol-Roux and the Apocalypse 67

viii contents

4

Apollinaire and l'Esprit Nouveau 80

5

Pierre Reverdy and the Materio-Mysticism of Our Age 100

THE ROAD

6

Breton and the Surrealist Mind—The Influences of Freud and Hegel 123

7

The Surrealist Image 140

8

The Surrealist Object 170

THE BEND IN THE ROAD

9

The Post-Surrealism of Aragon and Eluard 213

10

To Transform the World 231

11

The World Transformed 245

Epilogue 251

Index 253

illustrations

ANDRÉ BRETON, PAUL ELUARD, TRISTAN TZARA, and BENJAMIN PÉRET *Frontispiece*

GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE 79

ANDRÉ BRETON 141

PICASSO: *Bird on the Branch* 178

SALVADOR DALI: *The Persistence of Memory* 179

MAX ERNST: *The Elephant of Célèbes* 180

JOAN MIRÓ: *Head of a Woman* 181

MAX ERNST: *Portrait Voilé* 182

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO: *The Seer* 183

SALVADOR DALI: *Le Grand Masturbateur* 184

7

*the
surrealist
image*

In his first manifesto, published in 1924, André Breton, who remained all his life the principal generator of the surrealist movement, declared that surrealism was a new mode of expression, which he and his colleagues had discovered and wished to put at the disposal of others. When in the following year he took over the direction of the periodical, *La Révolution Surréaliste*, he stated that the principal aim of its founders was to raise the French language from the abject insignificance and stagnation to which it had been reduced under the influence of successful but mediocre authors like Anatole France. Six years later, in his second manifesto, he once more contended that the chief activity of surrealism was in the field of verbal reconstruction, and that social and political questions were of secondary concern. In



André Breton photographed in front of *The Enigma of a Day* by Giorgio de Chirico.

Entretiens (1952), considering surrealist activities in retrospect, Breton again asserted that their purpose was "essentially and before all else" to put language in "a state of effervescence."

Now linguistic innovations are an essential function of the *ars poetica*, whether we look back on the enrichments of vocabulary achieved by the Renaissance poets, the discriminate choice of words of the classicists, the emotional flexibility of language discovered by the romanticists, or the elasticity of connotation cultivated by the symbolists. As Shelley pointed out in his *Defense of Poetry*, the poet, through his use of language, establishes the analogies among life's realities, but every so often when these associations have grown stale and lost their power of conveying integral thought, it is up to him to refresh his imagery and thereby preserve the vitality of language.

Breton, together with Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Tristan Tzara, and some fifty other poets and artists (all under thirty), well versed in the history of literature, aesthetics, and philosophy, and possessed of a very strong capacity for convictions, felt that they had arrived at a crucial moment in the development of the French language. They considered literature at an *impasse* and called the manner of writing of their elders degrading and cowardly. But instead of confining themselves to a local renovation of the poetic form, they welcomed all poets of any nationality who wished to participate in their systematic cult of the latent possibilities of language. They believed that their linguistic revolution could not only revive literature but lead to a new understanding of the objects designated by language and thereby situate them at the center of a new *mystique*.

A number of works are available which mark a consensus of opinion and establish the bases of surrealist composition: Breton's two manifestoes, Aragon's *Traité du Style*, and a series of articles to be found in the annals of *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1924-29) and *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution* (1931-33), among them the significant "Essai sur la Situation de la Poésie" by Tristan Tzara.

The creative role of language was strongly stressed in the surrealists' concept of poetry. Poetry was no longer to be an expression of ideas or emotions but the creation of a series of images, which would not necessarily owe their existence to an a priori subject. "Images think for me," said Paul Eluard in "Défense de Savoir." And Aragon explained in the *Traité du Style*: "In our time there are no longer any ideas; they are as rare as smallpox, but it goes without saying that there are images caught, and for once well caught, real slaps in the face of any kind of good sense."¹ Breton called ideas vain and ineffective compared to the force of the sudden, unexpected image. In his famous article, "Misère de la Poésie," he tried to come to the rescue of Aragon, accused of subversion in his poem, "Front Rouge." But as far as its aesthetic value was concerned, he dismissed the controversial poem as being a hundred years behind the times despite its so-called modern subject. The fact that it had a definite subject matter to develop belied the contemporary state of poetic evolution, which according to Breton banishes unity of subject matter from the poem. It is Breton's belief that the speed of thinking is not superior to that of linguistic expression, which, therefore, should not be subservient to logical thought. Words brought together by creative intuition could explode in a dynamic image which would be more provocative than are abortive thoughts seeking words to give them a countenance,² he explains in his second manifesto. Images, then, are not to be *directed* by thoughts but should be conducive to them, and the function of the poem in regard to the reader is what Eluard called "donner à voir," *to give sight*. It is up to the reader to participate in the creative act of the author by deriving from his own pool of personal associations his particular stream of thought. And in order to allow the reader freedom of mental association there must be a compression of language and a minimum denominator of self-evident meaning.

¹ Aragon, *Traité du Style* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928), p. 48.

² Breton, *Manifestes du Surréalisme* (Editions du Sagittaire, 1946), pp. 60-61.

Now the surrealists did not have in mind the type of imagery put into the French language by Verlaine and Mallarmé, i.e., terminology abstract in meaning and so undefined in connotation, in Verlaine's poetry, that it suggests moods rather than visions, or, in the case of Mallarmé, so hermetic as to remain in the Closed Book of one man's mind. On the contrary, their vocabulary is concrete in shape and color, in texture and intent, sometimes so precise as to be exclusive in use and technical in meaning. The words serving as stimuli or irritants to the senses were to produce their own images. Language was to be endowed with a hallucinogenic quality, and if expertly used, could grant pleasures beyond those induced by narcotics. Breton compares the spontaneity with which these images offer themselves and their habit-forming character to the stupefying state of mind produced by artificial paradises. In this state of subconscious stimulation the poet is alerted to the sensations that words can produce much in the manner that the painter is attracted to objects, which mean a different thing to each artist and speak a different language to each spectator. The surrealist poet in his use of words was approaching the painter's technique, and that is how a closer bond was established between poetry and art than ever before, and a greater gap between poetry and the literary forms that continued to have as their aim the expression of ideas.

A serious study of the quality and range of words was then, the *sine qua non* of poetry. As we have seen, a generation before the surrealists, Guillaume Apollinaire had envisaged the possibility of experiments and investigations in this field. Breton and his colleagues went so far as to establish a Central Bureau of Surrealist Research to experiment with writing and to accept communications relative to their research from outside their ranks. In a chapter of *Les Pas Perdus*, characteristically called "Words without Wrinkles," Breton stated that the greatest poetic act was the understanding of the full destiny of words. He suggested ways of doing this: by studying the words themselves, the reaction of words to each other, the appearance of words and the effect of the

figurative meaning on the literal. To such considerations could be attributed provocative surrealist titles as "Le Revolver à Cheveux Blancs" (The Whitehaired Revolver), "Clair de Terre" (Earthshine), "Les Yeux Fertiles" (Fertile Eyes), "L'Homme Approximatif" (Approximative Man), "Le Poisson Soluble" (Soluble Fish), "Le Paysan de Paris" (The Peasant of Paris).

Breton explained that it took him six months to write his poem, "Forêt-noire" (of which the actual word count is *thirty*), for he virtually "coddled" the words to determine the space they permitted between each other, their tangency with innumerable other words which would not appear in the poem, but with which the written words came in contact in the author's mind during the process of composition. The most evident demonstration of the spontaneous suggestive power of words was the glossary composed by the surrealist poet, Michel Leiris, which consisted of basic words and the images they evoke, as for example: "humain—la main humide, moite. L'as-tu connue, cette main? ingénu—le génie nu; langage—bagage lent de l'esprit; révolution—solution de tout rêve; rumeur—brume des bruits qui meurent au fond des rues; suicide—idée sûre de sursis."³ Although seemingly playful, Leiris' verbal associations have as their basis a keen phonemic character and reveal his sensitivity to linguistic structures.

The poet's tolerance to words had to be increased; he could help himself by dismissing the wrong words from his mind. Which are the wrong words? Those that have wandered too far afield from their concrete specifications, those that have served too often to form rhymes, those that have received the tag "poetic" through excessive usage in poetry. Abused words can gain a new value if their primitive meaning is sought out. Sometimes it is even advisable to give a word the wrong meaning, for words do not really tell a lie, and if they come to the poet's mind at a given moment it is because they fulfill a poetic necessity. Breton discovered that he sometimes unwittingly used a

³ Michel Leiris, "Glossaire," *Révolution Surréaliste*, Vol. III, pp. 6-7.

word whose true meaning he had forgotten; looking it up later he would find that his use of the word was not etymologically incorrect.

For a more drastic interpretation of the meaning of words we can refer to Aragon's *Traité du Style*, in which he claims that dictionaries do not cover the full connotation of words; there is meaning contained in each syllable, according to him, and inherent in the very spelling of the words. Words are what another surrealist, Arpad Mezei, called "multidimensional,"⁴ in an evaluation of surrealist accomplishments in *Le Surréalisme en 1947*. Etymology, which is only one of its dimensions, has unfortunately been overstressed and has become its dead weight, according to Breton. Michel Leiris considers it a perfectly useless science; the poet must look for the secret ramifications of words in the entire domain of language, the canals created by the association of sounds, of forms, and ideas. When this inner working of words is understood, language becomes prophetic and supplies a thread with which to guide us in the labyrinth of the mind, he explained in connection with his "Glossary."

To discover, then, what one might call the high voltage of words was to be the key to surrealist poetry. But in the composition of the poem, what is even more important than the right word is the happy marriage of words into illuminating (not elucidating) associations, which become the basic structure of the poetic image. The surrealists found in automatic writing a rich hunting ground for the capture of word associations. It assumed the same importance in the technical equipment of the surrealist as the practice of scales to the musician. In this quasi-hypnotic state the hand writes or draws (for the same thing can be done in art) almost alone, and the pen or pencil transcribes spontaneously the subconscious affiliations we feel between the words. These "Surrealist texts," as they are called, must not be taken for poems. They are just a means of developing or enriching poetic

⁴ Arpad Mezei, *Le Surréalisme en 1947* (Edition Pierre à Feu, 1947), p. 59.

consciousness; they also break down traditional word associations which are too deep-set to be warded off consciously, and which are not only ineffective in imagery but even detrimental to the component words involved in the tedious alliance. Words should be drawn together not by emotional kinship but by what Baudelaire called "sorcellerie évocatoire" (incantatory bewitchment), or in the more recent terminology of Aragon, "puissance incantatoire" (power of incantation). Sometimes it is nothing more than assonance or alliteration, sometimes symmetry of appearance, sometimes antithesis. Of such nature are expressions like "femmes fugaces" (fugaceous females), "le très coquet caméléon de l'entendement" (the very flirtatious chameleon of understanding), "le désert vertical" (the vertical desert), "l'aigle sexuel" (the sexual eagle), "l'adorable déshabillé de l'eau" (the adorable deshabelle of the water), "les arêtes des buissons et des navires" (the fishbones of the bushes and the boats), images taken at random from the poetry of Eluard and Breton, the effectiveness of which is entirely dependent on the rhythmic attunement, generally impossible to carry over into direct translation.

To go one step further, this unexpected linking of words became the foundation of the new metaphor, which, instead of being based on analogy, is derived from divergence and contradiction. A more recent surrealist, Jean Brun, has put it somewhat emphatically in saying in "Le Problème de la Sensation et le Surréalisme": "The capital fact of the entire history of the mind lies perhaps in this discovery of surrealism: the word 'comme' is a *verb* which does not signify 'tel que.'"⁵ The surrealist associates what we normally dissociate and the word "like" is inappropriate because the connections are nonsequential or psychic rather than rational. It is a principle to be remembered in reading almost any poem of Breton, Eluard, and most of the other surrealists; it is the trademark of authenticity. It renovates the entire notion of the metaphor, when for instance André Breton can say in "Le Revolver à Cheveux Blancs":

⁵ Jean Brun, "Le Problème de la Sensation et le Surréalisme," *ibid.*, p. 90.

148 the road

*The seasons like the interior of an apple from which
a slice has been cut out.*

[*Les saisons lumineuses comme l'intérieur d'une pomme dont
on a détaché un quartier.*]

Or in Péret's "Et les seins mouraient":

*He showed the north horizon
and the horizon opened up like the door of a god
stretched itself like the tentacles of an octopus*

[*Il montra l'horizon du nord
et l'horizon s'ouvrit comme la porte d'un dieu
s'étendit comme les tentacules d'une pieuvre*]⁶

A number of years later the technique still persists in René Char's *Le Poème Pulvérisé* (1947) when he envisages that the soot of the poker and the crimson of the cloud are but one: "L'encre du tisonnier et la rouge du nuage ne font qu'un."

The metaphor used to be considered the most effective means of representing the *image*—which was preconceived in the writer's mind. Now the cart is placed before the horse, and it is the unusual metaphor that creates the even more extraordinary image, which is composed of two or more elements having no logical relationship with each other. One of the first to state the principle clearly was, as we have seen, the so-called cubist poet, Pierre Reverdy, whom the surrealists revered as their master. Breton quoted him in his first manifesto and praises him again in his 1952 review of surrealist outlook, *Entretiens*, for his "magie verbale." Reminiscing about Reverdy's discussions of the nature of the poetic image, Breton esteems him as an even more important theoretician than Guillaume Apollinaire. In *Le Gant de Crin* Reverdy had defined the image as the spontaneous meeting of two very distant realities whose relationship is grasped solely by the mind. Reverdy, moreover, observed that the more remote the relationship was between the two realities, the stronger became

⁶ Benjamin Péret, *Main Forte* (Editions de la Revue Fontaine, 1946), p. 72.

149 the surrealist image

the resulting image. On the other hand, the power or even the life of the image was threatened if it were to be totally acceptable to the senses. Following this line of thinking, Breton finds that comparison is therefore a poor axis for the image, and that a radical modification is necessary in the very structure of the analogy. The surrealist image has to be a far-fetched—or rather deep-fetched—chance encounter of two realities whose effect is likened to the light produced by the contact of two electrical conductors. In the ordinary image, the terms of which are chosen on the basis of similarity, the difference in potential between them is negligible and no spark results. The value of the surrealist image, therefore, consists not in an equivalence but in the subtraction of one set of associations from the other. The greater the disparity, the more powerful the light, just as in electricity the greater the difference in potential of the two live wires the greater the voltage. The resulting spark of imagery is first dazzling to the mind, which subsequently accepts and appreciates its reality. Thus by their inadvertent function the metaphors and resulting images increase the poet's scope of understanding of himself, and of the subtle relationships in the world about him. Says René Crevel: "The writer makes his metaphor, but his metaphor unveils, throws light on its author."

Images constructed according to this notion contain a dose of absurdity and that element of surprise, which, in the opinion of Guillaume Apollinaire, was to be one of the fundamental resources of the modern mind. This type of poetic imagery rises on the same foundation as the "fortuitous meeting," in the words of Max Ernst, of two objects in a surrealist painting as we shall note in detail in the following chapter. The effect that Dali created by placing a telephone and an omelette on the same range of vision in his painting, *Sublime Moment*, is a result of the same technique as the juxtaposition in a verbal image such as "un couvert d'argent sur une toile d'araignée" (a silver plate on a cobweb) in Breton's poem "Sur la Route qui monte et descend." Benjamin Péret's poetry is the constant locale of strange encounters. More

150 the road

than anyone else among the surrealists he has practiced the rule of juxtaposition of distant realities, beginning with Lautréamont's famous formula: "beau comme." Describing the nudity of his mistress:

*Beautiful like a hole in a windowpane
beautiful like the unexpected encounter of a cataract and a bottle*

*The cataract looks at you, beauty of bottle
the cataract scolds because you are beautiful
bottle
because you smile at her and she regrets being a cataract
because the sky is shabbily dressed
because of you whose nudity is the reflection of mirrors.*

[*Belle comme un trou dans une vitre
belle comme la rencontre imprévue d'une cataracte et d'une bouteille*

*La cataracte vous regarde belle de bouteille
la cataracte gronde parce que vous êtes belle
bouteille
parce que vous lui souriez et qu'elle regrette d'être cataracte
parce que le ciel est vêtu pauvrement
à cause de vous dont la nudité reflète des miroirs]*⁷

If there is something that particularly characterizes his object matings, it is the frenzied movement that seizes them. The gravitation is a rapid one; in fact often it results in abrupt collisions. Instead of one image being absorbed into another, as is often the case with André Breton, Péret's chase each other:

*The wind rises like a woman after a night of love.
it adjusts its binoculars and looks at
the world with the eyes of a child. The world
this morning is like a green apple, which will never
ripen, the world is acid and gay*

⁷ From "Dormir Dormir dans les Pierres" (1927), collected in *Poètes d'Aujourd'hui*, Pierre Seghers, 1961, p. 85.

151 the surrealist image

[*Le vent se lève comme une femme après une nuit d'amour. Il
ajuste son binocle et regarde le monde, avec ses yeux d'enfant.
le monde, ce matin est semblable à une pomme verte qui ne sera
jamais mure, le monde est acide et gai.*]⁸

His central image is that of a traveler, whether it is a human one or an object that we would generally consider stationary. His generous use of adverbs contributes to the creation of his totally mobile universe, in which the commodities and comestibles of modern man, the food for his eyes and for his mouth, mingle freely with the primary, prehuman phenomena of nature such as star, sea, bird, and river. As if a prestidigitator he makes things appear and disappear, abruptly replace each other, and he succeeds perhaps to a greater extent than any other surrealist in introducing that element of surprise:

*And the stars that frighten the red fish
are neither for sale nor for rent
for to tell the truth they are not really stars but apricot pies
that have left the bakery
and wander like a traveler who missed his train at midnight
in a deserted city whose streetlamps groan because of
their shattered shades*

[*Et les étoiles qui effraient les poissons rouges
ne sont ni à vendre ni à louer
car à vrai dire ce ne sont pas des étoiles mais des tartes aux abricots
qui ont quitté la boutique du pâtissier
et errent comme un voyageur qui a perdu son train à minuit dans une
ville déserte aux becs de gaz geignant à cause de leurs vitres
cassées]*⁹

In his poem, "L'Union Libre," Breton employs what would on the surface appear to be the hackneyed procedure of describing

⁸ From *La Brebis Galante* (1924), Terrain Vague, 1959, p. 41.

⁹ From "Quatre à Quarte," *De Derrière les Fagots* (1934), collected in *Poètes d'Aujourd'hui*, p. 93.

152 *the road*

the beauty of the beloved through a series of analogies. Yet the associations of the physical characteristics of the woman are with such unexpected objects as footprints of mice, a forest fire, the brim of a swallow's nest, the slate roof of a hothouse, mist on window panes, cut hay, quicksilver, wet chalk, gladiola, sea foam, eyes like wood always under the axe, or whose water level is the sky and the fire, to mention but a few, that the reader is left without the slightest photographic image of the woman but with the spark suggesting her overwhelming power upon the poet.

Breton gave classifications for the surrealist image, for which examples can readily be found in his works and in those of other surrealists.¹⁰

1. *Contradictions*. For instance in one of his earlier surrealist texts Breton plays on the linguistic contradiction caused by the simultaneous use of the past, present, and future tenses to create the impossible phenomenon of the movement of nonexistent curtains on the windows of future houses:

*Les rideaux qui n'ont jamais été levés
Flottent aux fenêtres des maisons qu'on construira*¹¹

In the much later poem, "Tiki" from the group called *Xénophiles*, the same sense of contradiction is conveyed by the combination of two adjectives incompatible in their original concrete meanings though having a junction in their extended connotation:

*I love you on the surface of seas
Red like the egg when it is green*
[*Je t'aime à la face des mers
Rouge comme l'oeuf quand il est vert*]

¹⁰ Breton, *Les Manifestes du Surréalisme* (Sagittaire, 1946), p. 63.

¹¹ Breton, "Textes Surréalistes," *Révolution Surréaliste*, VI, p. 6.

153 *the surrealist image*

2. *One of the terms of the image is hidden*. This can be noticed in a section of Eluard's "La Rose Publique," consisting of a series of incomplete images:

*All along the walls furnished with decrepit orchestras
Darting their leaden ears toward the light
On guard for a caress mingled with the thunderbolt*

[*Le long des murailles meublées d'orchestres décrépits
Dardant leurs oreilles de plomb vers le jour
À l'affût d'une caresse corps avec la foudre*]

3. *The image starts out sensationally, then abruptly closes the angle of its compass*. Witness the following line from Breton's "La Mort Rose," in which he juxtaposes his dreams with the sound of the eyelids of water and suddenly finishes the image with an unsatisfactory "dans l'ombre":

*Mes rêves seront formels et vains comme le bruit
de paupières de l'eau dans l'ombre.*

Under this heading would come all the unsuccessful images which do not measure up to the expectations aroused by the beginning of the metaphor.

4. *The image possesses the character of a hallucination*. Typical of this is the entire poem, "L'Homme Approximatif," of Tristan Tzara with its agglomeration of animal, vegetable, and mineral words, coming every so often to a head in this strange refrain:

*For stony in my garments of schist I have dedicated my awaiting
to the torment of the oxydized desert
and to the robust advent of the fire*

[*Car rocailleux dans mes vêtements de schiste j'ai voué mon
attente
au tourment du désert oxydé
au robuste avènement du feu*]

154 *the road*

Or Michel Leiris' vision of the sun in his "Marécage du Sommeil":

*When the sun is but a drop of sweat
a sound of bell
the red pearl falling down a vertical needle*

[*Quand le soleil n'est plus qu'une goutte de sueur
un son de cloche
la perle rouge qui tombe le long d'une aiguille verticale*]

In an early prose writing of Benjamin Péret, *La Brebis Galante*, 1924, we appear to be witnessing the vision of a man in a barn watching the cows eat hay when suddenly the hallucination begins:

the roof of the barn cracked from top to bottom. A white sheet appeared through the opening and was torn away by a wind that I could not feel. Then, slowly, it descended to the ground. Then the earth opened up. And I saw, along a strictly perpendicular line, a little red fish descend from the roof slipping down the sheet and sinking into the ground. It was followed by a second and a third. Finally their number grew as quickly as their dimension and the rarefaction of the air in the high atmospheric strata permitted it. The wind swelled and the barn slipped under the ground. When I say slipped . . . it sank or they flew away, for the barn had divided into two. One half left with the straw and the other half with the cows and each in a different direction, arriving at the same spot: the mountain of squirrel skin.¹²

With the last dazzling image in which the mountain is compared with the skin of the squirrel Péret combines the most immovable entity with the most agile and mobile of creatures.

5. *The image lends to the abstract the mask of the concrete.* In this category would fall at least half of the surrealist images. They are numerous in Breton's poetry. Take for example simple trans-

¹² Péret, *La Brebis Galante* (new edition; Le Terrain Vague, 1959), p. 23.

155 *the surrealist image*

fers such as the following: eternity incorporated in a wrist watch, life in a virgin passport, thought becoming a white curve on a dark background, lightness shaking upon our roofs her angel's hair. Or there are double-deckers such as in *Clair de Terre*:

*And in my handbag was my dream this smelling salt
That had only been used by the godmother of God.
[Et dans le sac à main il y avait mon rêve ce flacon de sels
Que seule a respirés la marraine de Dieu.]*

or his definition of life in *Fata Morgana*:

*Life might be the drop of poison
Of non-sense injected into the song of the lark
over the poppies.*

[*La vie serait la goutte de poison
Du non-sens introduite dans le chant de l'alouette
au-dessus des coquelicots.*]

Philippe Soupault in his image of sleep defines the natural junction of the tangible and the oneiric:

*Sound of slumber
bee and night
the beauteous familiar things in the corner
said goodbye
for ever and until tomorrow
with the despair of the finite and the infinite
which touch each other
like hands unaware of each other*

[*Son du sommeil
abeille et nuit
les belles familières qui sont au coin
ont dit adieu
c'est pour toujours et demain
avec le désespoir du fini et de l'infini
qui se touchent
comme les mains qui s'ignorent*]¹³

¹³ Philippe Soupault, "Aller Là," *Poésies Complètes*, GLM (1937), p. 163.

156 the road

6. *The image implies the negation of some elementary physical property.* Eluard will startle his reader by telling him that the earth is blue like an orange; and in Breton's poetry you might hear the sound of wet street lamps or of a bell made of straw, or find him wishing for the sun to come out at night, or be assured that the tree he has chopped down will forever remain green.

7. Finally there is the broad classification which would include all images that provoke laughter; such as in Benjamin Péret's "Au Bout du Monde":

Stupid like sausages whose sauerkraut has already been eaten away.

[*Bêtes comme des saucisses dont la choucroute a déjà été mangée.*]

The master of the "gay and acid" is of course Benjamin Péret. Drawing from the daily images their absurd and humoristic ingredients, Péret never reaches the pitch of black humor of Lautréamont. There is in him too much of what the French call "bonhomie," the healthy, exuberant sense of life, the inner sunshine of his own disposition:

*There would be in the hollow of my hand
a little lantern
golden like a fried egg
and so light that the soles of my shoes would fly like a
fake nose
so that the bottom of the sea would be a telephone booth
and the phone would be forever out of order*

[*Il y aurait dans le creux de ma main
un petit lampion froid
doré comme un oeuf sur le plat
et si léger que la semelle de mes chaussures s'envolerait comme
un faux nez*

157 the surrealist image

en sorte que le fond de la mer serait une cabine téléphonique d'où personne n'obtiendrait jamais aucune communication]¹⁴

or in "Vive la Révolution:"

*He was beautiful like fresh glass
Beautiful like the smoke from his pipe
Beautiful like the ears of a donkey that brays
Beautiful like a chimney
Which falls on the head of a policeman*

[*Il était beau comme une vitre fraîche
Beau comme la fumée de sa pipe
Beau comme les oreilles d'un âne qui braie
Beau comme une cheminée
Qui tombe sur la tête d'un agent*]¹⁵

The composition of a poem is like an upside-down pyramid, beginning with a word or metaphor, leading to an image and through conscious or unconscious associations to a series of images. Some of these poems consist of simple series, one image provoking the next one. René Char's *Artine* begins in this manner—in the bed prepared for him there were:

an animal wounded and blood-tinged, the size of a *brioche*, a lead pipe, a blasting wind, a frozen shell, a fired bullet, two fingers of a glove, an oil spot, there was no prison door, there was a taste of bitterness, a glassmaker's diamond, a hair, a day, a broken chair, a silkworm, a stolen object, a line of overcoats, a green tamed fly, a coral branch, a shoemaker's nail, a wheel of a bus.

In other cases the images are integrated although their connections are not logical. Breton's "Au Regard des Divinités" is an image-poem that completes a full circle of interwoven, mystifying

¹⁴ From "Mille Fois," *De Derrière les Fagots* (1934), collected in *Poètes d'Aujourd'hui*, p. 90.

¹⁵ Péret, *Main forte*, p. 72.

158 the road

metaphors, where darkness longs for light and the dream figures cling to physical form.

"A little before midnight by the waterfront

*"If you see a woman all disheveled following your steps
pay no heed*

"It is the azure. You need have no fear of the azure.

"There will be a tall fair vase in a tree

"The steeple of the village with colors mixed

"Will be your rallying point. Take your time

*"And remember. The brown geyser that darts into the skies its
spray of fern*

"Salutes you."

The letter sealed at three corners with a fish

Passed now into the suburban light,

Like a defier's sign

The while

The beauty, the victim, locally called

The little pyramid of mignonette

Unstitched for herself a cloud like

A sachet of pity

Later the white armor

Used for household tasks and other things

The unhatched child, the one that was to be

But silence

A fire has already kindled

In her heart a wild novel of cloaks

And daggers

On the dock, at the same hour,

Just so the dew balanced its pussy head

The night,—and the illusions would get lost.

Here come the White Fathers from the vespers' mass

The great key hanging over their heads

Here come the grey heralds; and last her letter

Or her lip: my heart is a cuckoo for God

But while she speaks, only the wall is left

Beating in a tomb like a festered veil

Eternity is looking for a wrist watch

A little before midnight by the waterfront.

159 the surrealist image

[*"Un peu avant minuit près du débarcadère.*

"Si une femme échevelée te suit n'y prend pas garde.

"C'est l'azur. Tu n'as rien à craindre de l'azur.

"Il y aura un grand vase blond dans un arbre.

"Le clocher du village des couleurs fondues

"Te servira de point de repère. Prends ton temps,

*"Souviens-toi. Le geyser brun qui lance au ciel les pousses de
fougère*

"Te salue."

La lettre cachétée aux trois coins d'un poisson

Passait maintenant dans la lumière des faubourgs

Comme une enseigne de dompteur.

Au demeurant

La belle, la victime, celle qu'on appelait

Dans le quartier la petite pyramide de réséda

Décousait pour elle seule un nuage pareil

A un sachet de pitié.

Plus tard l'armure blanche

Qui vaquait aux soins domestiques et autres

En prenant plus fort à son aise que jamais,

L'enfant à la coquille, celui qui devait être . . .

Mais silence.

Un brasier déjà donnait prise

En son sein à un ravissant roman de cape

Et d'épée.

Sur le pont, à la même heure,

Ainsi la rosée à tête de chatte se berçait.

La nuit,—et les illusions seraient perdues.

Voici les Pères blancs qui reviennent de vêpres

Avec l'immense clé pendue au-dessus d'eux.

Voici les hérauts gris; enfin voici sa lettre

Ou sa lèvres: mon coeur est un coucou pour Dieu.

Mais le temps qu'elle parle, il ne reste qu'un mur

Battant dans un tombeau comme une voile bise.

L'éternité recherche une montre-bracelet

Un peu avant minuit près du débarcadère.]

In the case of Robert Desnos, who was able to fall asleep and dream so freely, the process of coupling the concrete and the

160 the road

abstract reached a stage where the distinction was absolutely lost and substance flowed into shadow and became dissolved in "Poèmes à la mystérieuse": (from *Corps et Biens*, 1926)

*I dreamed so much of you
that you lost your reality
can I still touch that living body
 kiss on that mouth the birth
 of the voice that is dear to me,
I dreamed so much of you
that my arms in embracing your shadow
 so used were they to cross each other on my breast
 that they would be clumsy in encircling your contours perhaps.
And were I to see before me what haunts me day and night
I would no doubt become a shadow
O sentimental scale of things
I dreamed so much of you that surely the time is passed
 for me to wake. I stand asleep my body prey to all
 appearances of life and love, exposed to you who count
 alone for me today
More unlikely am I to touch your brow and lips
Than the first brow or lips that come along
I dreamed so much of you
 walked so much, talked, slept with your phantom that I can only
 be perhaps and for all of that a phantom among phantoms
 and shadow a hundred times more than the shadow that
 turns and will turn with happy gait on the sundial of
 your life.*

*[J'ai tant rêvé de toi
que tu perds ta réalité
est-il encore temps d'atteindre ce corps vivant
 et de baiser sur cette bouche la naissance
 de la voix qui m'est chère.*

*J'ai tant rêvé de toi
que mes bras habitués en étreignant ton ombre
 à se croiser sur ma poitrine ne se plieraient pas
 au contour de ton corps peut-être.*

*Et que, devant l'apparence réelle de ce qui me hante
 et me gouverne depuis des jours et des années*

161 the surrealist image

*Je deviendrais une ombre sans doute,
O balances sentimentales.
J'ai tant rêvé de toi qu'il n'est plus temps sans doute
 que je m'éveille. Je dors debout le corps exposé à
 toutes les apparences de la vie et de l'amour et que toi,
 la seule qui compte aujourd'hui pour moi, je pourrais moins
 toucher ton front et tes lèvres,
que les premières lèvres et le premier front venu.
J'ai tant rêvé de toi
tant marché, parlé, couché avec ton fantôme qu'il ne me
 reste plus peut-être, et pourtant, qu'à être
 fantôme parmi les fantômes et plus ombre cent fois
 que l'ombre qui se promène et se promènera
 allègrement sur le cadran solaire de ta vie.]*

Where there occurs a veritable nondistinction between substance and phantom, Desnos is much closer to symbolist form than surrealist despite his cult of the dream, for the dream tends to devalue substance instead of enriching it.

Where Eluard adheres more closely to the phantasmagoria of the concrete the "insolite" has greater immediacy. The poet finds himself in a magnetic field wherein by the attraction of one image to another the objects of reality are deviated from their traditional roles. The result is an incongruous unit which transmits a marvelous vision of the world, a panorama whose landscapes are picked not from within the range of the human eye, but from the combinations with which language can feed the imagination. A good example of this type of poem is Paul Eluard's "Nous Sommes":

*You see the fire of dusk alighting from its shell
And you see the forest plunged deep in its dew
You see the naked plain on the flank of the trailing sky
The snow high as the sea
And the sea straining toward the azure.*

*Stones, perfect polish, soft woods, veiled reliefs
You see the cities in tints of melancholy gilt
And sidewalks with excuses overflowing*

162 the road

*A spot where loneliness has built its monument
Smilingly, and love its sole abode.*

*You see the animals
Cunning counterparts to each other sacrificed*

*Immaculate brethren with shadows intertwined
In a desert of blood.*

*You see a handsome child playing, laughing
Much smaller he appears
Than the tiny bird at the tip of the twigs*

*You see a landscape tasting of oil and water
Whence rock is barred, where earth abandons
Its green to summer's blanket of fruitfulness*

*Women stepping down from their ancient mirror
Bring you their youth and their faith in yours
And one her light the veil which draws you
Makes you see secretly the earth without you*

It is with us that all will come to life.

*Fauve, my real banners of gold
Plains, my good adventures
Useful pasture throbbing cities
Men will come to lead you.*

*Men out of the sweat and blows and tears
But who will gather one by one their dreams*

*I see men, true, feeling, good, useful
Throw off a weight slighter than death
And sleep from joy at the sound of the sun.*

*[Tu vois le feu du soir qui sort de sa coquille
Et tu vois la forêt enfouie dans la fraîcheur*

*Tu vois la plaine nue aux flancs du ciel traînard
La neige haute comme la mer
Et la mer haute dans l'azur*

*Pierres parfaites et bois doux secours voilés
Tu vois des villes teintes de mélancolie
Dorée des trottoirs pleins d'excuses
Une place où la solitude a sa statue
Souriante et l'amour une seule maison*

163 the surrealist image

*Tu vois les animaux
Sosies malins sacrifiés l'un à l'autre
Frères immaculés aux ombres confondues
Dans un désert de sang*

*Tu vois un bel enfant quand il joue quand il rit
Il est bien plus petit
Que le petit oiseau du bout des branches*

*Tu vois un paysage aux saveurs d'huile et d'eau
D'où la roche est exclue où la terre abandonne
Sa verdure à l'été qui la couvre de fruits*

*Des femmes descendant de leur miroir ancien
T'apportent leur jeunesse et leur foi en la tienne
Et l'une sa clarté la voile qui t'entraîne
Te fait secrètement voir le monde sans toi*

C'est avec nous que tout vivra

*Bêtes mes vrais étendards d'or
Plaines mes bonnes aventures
Verdure utile villes sensibles
A votre tête viendront des hommes*

*Des hommes de dessous les sueurs les coups les larmes
Mais qui vont cueillir tous leurs songes*

*Je vois des hommes vrais sensibles bons utiles
Rejeter un fardeau plus mince que la mort
Et dormir de joie au bruit du soleil.]*

By cultivating that very sense of deformity and disproportion which Edgar Allan Poe long before the surrealists had attributed to the poet, they seem to have gone into direct competition with the scientist; for the kind of linguistic reality they grant to the infinite could be likened to the mathematical reality given to the infinite by the number $\frac{1}{2}$ or the concrete symbol of the imaginary in the numerical term of the square root of minus one.

What kind of syntax or sentence structure holds together these images? Here we come to a misconception that often arises concerning the ambiguity of the surrealist style: the contention

that surrealists disdain grammar. The early Dada writings and some of the extreme tongue in cheek statements of the surrealists have done much to give this impression. But as Aragon admits, surrealism is not a refuge against style.¹⁶ On the contrary, in the best of their works the surrealists' grammar is impeccable. The most incomprehensible sentence could be parsed, for it is not the structure that is ambiguous but, as we have seen, the mating of words and the incongruous image that results. The surrealists, freed of the exigencies of rhyme, do not have to resort even to the tedious inversions so frequent in classical and romantic verse.

There are two basic structures in the surrealist poem: sentences which follow the conventional order of subject, verb, and object, as in most of the poem of Eluard quoted above; or a series of noun or adjective clauses which do not pretend to be parts of complete sentences but succeed each other as if they were enumerations of plain nouns and adjectives. Sometimes the two types of composition are joined into one long sentence or stanza. For example in "L'Homme Approximatif," one hundred and twenty-three breath groups form one complete sentence, and nineteen images appear before the principal verb.

The use of verbs is particularly interesting. As Robert Desnos expressed it very appropriately, the tense most often used is the present.¹⁷ Moreover, there can be noted a preponderance of the simplest verbs: *avoir, être, voir, aimer*, the impersonal *il y a*, which in their imprecision permit the loosest form of bonds between nouns, leaving it to the noun to establish the vision. Another significant use of the verb is the frequent occurrence of the infinitive—noncommittal, democratic, since it favors no particular subject.

The freedom of the imagery is further enhanced by the suppression of words of transition: no *ainsi, donc*,¹⁸ *or*, and the like,

¹⁶ Aragon, *Traité du Style*, p. 189.

¹⁷ Robert Desnos, "Confession d'un Enfant du Siècle," R.S., VI, p. 18.

¹⁸ Breton tells us in "Signe Ascendant" that he detests the word "donc," p. 112 in *La Clé des Champs*.

since the continuity is outside of the jurisdiction of grammar and lies in the sensory associations of the reader. Indeed by the flexibility of the form the autonomy of the reader, in interpreting the poem, is increased.

In the place of connective words there occurs a great deal of juxtaposition and apposition, producing those stupefying parallels of concurrent realities of which we become aware in this type of writing.

In sum, what essentially separates the surrealist way of writing from the poetry of the preceding generations is *not* its break and emancipation from metrical form; nor does the difference lie in any disregard for grammatical structure. It is, rather, in the use of words: an enrichment of the active vocabulary of poetry, a release from verbal inhibitions, a selection of word association beyond the barriers set up by logic, a new metaphor built upon these incongruous word groupings, and the images resulting from the association of one metaphor with another—which one might call the square of the metaphor. Finally, these images are cast into grammatically accurate sentences connected primarily on the basis of sensual synchronization.

What the surrealists have done is not to sacrifice clarity but to decide that this asset of prose was a liability in poetry. For French had assumed too long with M. Jourdain that what is not prose is verse. Poetry was discovered to be a different type of intellectual activity, consisting of what one might call mental deviation and linguistic alchemy.

It was a terrible test to which language was subjected, a veritable "trial of language" as Aragon had called it. That language which foreign critics have often condemned as unpoetic, as too specific, too rigid to express the ineffable dream vagueness necessary to true poetry, was now being destined to a plane of mystery and irrationalism beyond anything attempted in any of the so-called poetic languages. Recognizing this renaissance of poetry and the linguistic experimentation related to it, Apollinaire had made this challenging statement as early as 1918: "As

far as can be seen there are hardly any poets today except of the French language."¹⁹

It is too early yet to estimate the extent of the transformation surrealism will bring about in the French language, just as the effects of Du Bellay's sixteenth-century *Défense et Illustration de la Langue Française* were not crystallized until the seventeenth century. The surrealists have written too much, confused liberty with license at times, and probably made five unsatisfactory images for every successful one. There has been much trial and error, and unfortunately the surrealists consider every word that falls from their pen so sacred that they have freely published their errors. But the fact remains that their vociferous rejection of standard styles has affected nonsurrealists as well as surrealists and is beginning to have an effect on the poetic language of other countries as well. The surrealists consider their experimental work only the beginning of a tremendous upheaval which will test man's ability to integrate his perceptions over and above the miscellany of nature and thereby make of the poetic image not a representation of reality but an invention of the human mind directive of things to come.

It is evident that in coming into contact with this type of poetry words such as *understanding, explanation, expression* are inappropriate. *Knowledge, empathy, disturbance* are the type of terms that best convey the surrealist poet's aspirations and his relationship with the reader. "Beauty must be convulsive, or it is not beauty," said Breton in *Nadja*. In other words it has to shake up and shape up our reality.

The crucial difference between previous linguistic revolutions and the surrealist one is that this time the transformation of the word is not an end in itself or even a means to the more effective communication of what *is*. Rather, we see that language creates, it makes concrete the ineffable dream. For the surrealist poet, and as we shall note for the surrealist artist as well, the absolute and

¹⁹ Apollinaire, "L'Esprit Nouveau et les Poètes," *Mercur de France* (December 1, 1918), p. 394.

the infinite are within range of his pen or pencil, dependent on his power over words (or lines), on his ability to shuffle them, seizing their chance meetings, and on the variety of combinations he can produce with them. His mysticism constantly draws on this reservoir of language; and he finds that language is an inexhaustible reservoir. Through the word, the impossible is made possible, nature can be endowed with metaphysical properties, sensuality takes on new proportions: visions dispersed on the face of the earth, going abegging, undiscerned in their individual solitudes, are drawn to the new linguistic magnet and brought together into a new synthesis of imagery, which in turn creates a new synthesis of existence.

A fundamental and common subject of poetry such as love can be entirely altered and identified not with universal, emotional experience, but with an unusual disturbance of physical surroundings as in Breton's "L'Air de L'Eau":

*Your flesh sprinkled by the flight of a thousand birds of
paradise
Is a high flame lying in the snow*

[*Ta chair arrosée de l'envol de mille oiseaux de paradis
Est une haute flamme couchée dans la neige*]

or it can be connected with cosmic awareness:

*They say that yonder the beaches are black
With lava lapped up by the sea
And they roll out at the foot of a great snow smoked peak
Under a second sun of wild canaries
What is this far-off land
Which seems to draw its light from your life
It trembles so real at the point of your lids
Kind to your complexion as an immaterial cloth
Just out of the half-open trunk of the ages
Behind you
The ground of a lost paradise
Casting its last dim fires between your limbs*

*Ice of darkness mirror of love
And lower toward your arms opening
Bringing proof with the spring
To come
Of the nonexistence of evil
The full blossomed apple tree of the sea*

*[On me dit que là-bas les plages sont noires
De la lave allée à la mer
Et se déroulent au pied d'un immense pic fumant de neige
Sous un soleil de serins sauvages
Quel est donc ce pays lointain
Qui semble tirer toute sa lumière de ta vie
Il tremble bien réel à la pointe de tes cils
Doux à ta carnation comme un linge immatériel
Frais sorti de la malle entr'ouverte des âges
Derrière toi
Lançant ses derniers feux sombres entre tes jambes
Le sol du paradis perdu
Glace de ténèbres miroir d'amour
Et plus bas vers tes bras qui s'ouvrent
A la preuve par le printemps
D'après
De l'inexistence du mal
Tout le pommier en fleur de la mer]²⁰*

The expression of the eternity of love, essayed by all the eloquence of centuries of poets, seals in Breton's language its indubitable permanence by the simplest and the most effective contradiction of words:

*I have found the secret
Of loving you
Always for the first time*

*[J'ai trouvé le secret
De t'aimer
Toujours pour la première fois]²¹*

²⁰ Breton, *Poèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 148.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

It is jesting yet passionate in the collision of the elements in Péret's "Un Point C'est Tout":

*But I love you like the shell that loves its sand
where someone will unnest it when the sun takes the shape of
a bean
when it begins to germinate like a pebble baring its heart
under a showering rain*

*[Mais je t'aime comme le coquillage aime son sable
où quelqu'un le dénichera quand le soleil aura la forme d'un haricot
qui commencera à germer comme un caillou montrant son coeur sous
l'averse]*

Saint-Pol-Roux had felt that henceforth art had to consist of invention, but he had not had sufficient resources to accomplish the act of creation. The surrealists found in a linguistic revolution the tool of their earthbound *mystique*. Whereas it is generally assumed that imagination acquires its resources in remembered realities, the imagination of the surrealists is the power of utilizing words to produce unremembered, previously nonexistent realities—but realities just the same, in the full, concrete, dimensional sense of the word. The abstract words are banished and with them the generalizations of experience. The concrete words kindle in their associations a reality of intensified immediate existence which makes escapism no longer necessary. The *mystique* of language disclosed by the surrealists has as far as the French language is concerned begun the alchemy and bewitchment dreamed of by Baudelaire and Rimbaud, paralleled as yet in no other language, but equaled and sometimes even surpassed in the *mystique* of the object cultivated simultaneously by the artists who participated in the same spiritual crisis and in the aesthetic revolution which it released.