

André Breton was the greatest surrealist of them all; even if his poems had no intrinsic “literary” value in themselves, they would be the valued witnesses to an epoch, a movement, an attitude. But the present selections are not intended to be inscribed in a single school or perceived from a single optic; their complex interrelations with other texts and with the visual universe, passionately arrived at, circumvent any isolating tactic.

The translations of these poems themselves have a double goal, both accuracy within the composition and the attempt to keep the atmosphere of the original. That atmosphere is not itself always “poetic,” if that term is taken to mean lyric, self-reflective, self-contained, or appealing: these poems are often and deliberately uneven, ungraceful, obscure. They can be luminous without being intelligible, magnetizing while not attractive in the ordinary sense. We have tried to choose the most illuminating poems as well as the most representative ones, from different periods and different styles, offering various perspectives corresponding to the multiple approaches Breton, and surrealism, took over the years.

As some indication of the complexity of Breton’s universe, we might briefly consider the echoes and the postures and mirrorings, the costumes, the role-playing and the play of images. One of the more revealing titles is the early *Mont de Piété* [Pawnshop], for these texts are indeed often composed of borrowings and resettings, as heteroclitc objects make a brilliant bric-a-brac. Surrealist trades this for that, making of the exchange itself a work of art. In the early poems, these objects, for example *The Mystery Corset* take precedence over what we might think of as the “human” as well as the formal aspects of the text, whereas later, their profusion is subdued, for greater emotional and poetic effect. As for the anecdotal interest, and other references to

the exterior, we give in the notes only the most essential clarifications, believing in the self-contained, and frequently self-referring, quality of the text. Not that our attitude is “neutral” or objective: the intensity of surrealism demands a like response, passionate in kind.

Just as the title *Mont de piété* indicates the juxtapositions and convergences of objects, those of sight and those of desire, Breton’s titles often indicate not only his states of mind but the basic tenets of surrealism itself: such expressions as *L’Air de l’eau* [Airwater] and *Clair de terre* [Earthlight] suggest in their composite formation the surrealist hope placed in the juxtaposition of two elements, of two states or two things, eventually and eternally crossing over one into the other, as *clair de lune* [moonlight] crosses light with night, the luminous with the obscure. Here the surrealist takes the initial set phrase or the accepted cliché, *clair de lune*, and reconditions it. We might examine, in the light of this technique, a highly significant expression, paradoxical to the extreme from one of Breton’s poems, *Toujours pour la première fois*, “always for the first time.” It is, I think, this “first time” that gives exceptional value to the convergence, seen rapidly and rapidly transcribed. The paradox enhances the intensity of the psychological and poetic effect: surrealism is meant to be, and is, *striking*. Pierre Reverdy’s notion of the image giving off its fullest light when it is the product of two elements clashing, as they are taken from distant fields and juxtaposed, finds its fullest realization in Breton, who acknowledges Reverdy as the source of this notion so important in surrealist thought.<sup>1</sup> The spark struck by the meeting of opposites clarifies by its brilliance the dullest of everyday perceptions, in-fusing it with the light of the marvelous. The perception precedes the remaking of the world, but the latter is indeed—for the surrealists—remade as it is reseen. Following the same train of thought, we might consider that the retranslation of a poem is the recreation of it: Breton would not have disagreed.

As language is to remake the universe, the power of speech determines both existing and knowing: “Thought is made in the mouth,” said Tristan Tzara,<sup>2</sup> and Breton goes a step further. “Man is soluble in his thought”:<sup>3</sup> thus the image of a dissolving fish, undone and created by its own element. *Poisson soluble*. And so the titles continue to indicate the mental attitude on which the texts are predicated: *Le Revolver*

à *cheveux blancs* [The White-Haired Revolver] exemplifies the clash of contraries, for the white smoke coming forth makes a powerful visual reminder of an elderly man and, in conjunction with the fire potential in the weapon, typifies the clash between age and youth's fiery temper: both meanings are implicit, held in tension within the title, just as the best surrealist writing holds in tension its ambivalences, consciously and vigorously. That so many of the word plays of surrealist poetry have to be differently captured in translation is not to be grieved over, for the very shifts and switches enable the fresh reading which should keep the poetry alive, exactly as it does not serve the cause of prosaic consistency.

Surrealist poetry never serves: this is another matter of conscience. The poem from *Le Revolver à cheveux blancs* called "Non-lieu" [No Grounds], for instance, insists upon the concept of freedom as unusable except in its own limits:

Jamais la liberté que pour la liberté

[Never freedom except for freedom]

The texts of the movement, untamed in their own motion, development, and space, are to be given free rein, but nothing can be expected or predicted of them. This poetry at its summit is likely to celebrate, as Breton does, not a smooth domesticated tissue of images in a neat system and an untroubled text, but a barbaric flame, racing the length of a text as of a life, until the final extraordinary convergence of one element with its opposite, a convergence toward which the reading projects all its haste and passion, its optimistic meeting and active joining:

Flamme d'eau guide-moi jusqu'à la mer de feu<sup>4</sup>

[Flame of water guide me to the sea of fire]

Such convergence provides for the elements the same kind of "free union" that Breton claims for the ideal love of man and woman in *L'Amour fou* [Mad Love], the overwhelming because irrational emotion

From *Mont de piété* [Pawnshop]

1919

# Monsieur V

à Paul Valéry

A la place de l'étoile<sup>1</sup>

L'Arc de Triomphe

qui ne ressemble à un aimant que pour la forme

argenterai-je

5

les jardins suspendus

BERCEUSE

*L'enfant à la capote de rubans*

*L'enfant que chatouille la mer<sup>2</sup>*

En grandissant

10 il se regarde dans une coquille nacrée

l'iris de son oeil est l'étoile dont je parlais

MARCHE<sup>3</sup>

*Pierre ou Paul<sup>4</sup>*

15 Il s'apprête à tirer les rois<sup>5</sup>

aujourd'hui comme ailleurs

ses égaux

Rêve de révolutions

On ne saurait décrire en art

20 L'engin à prendre le renard bleu

## Monsieur V

*for Paul Valéry*

Instead of a star<sup>1</sup>

The Arch of Triumph

which resembles a magnet by its shape only

shall I besilver

5 the hanging gardens

LULLABY

*The child with the ribbon bonnet*

*The child tickled by the sea<sup>2</sup>*

While growing

10 he looks at himself in a pearly shell

the iris of his eye is the star of

which I spoke

MARCH<sup>3</sup>

Peter or Paul<sup>4</sup>

15 He gets ready to draw a pair of kings<sup>5</sup>

today as elsewhere

his equals

A dream of revolutions

In art one can hardly describe

20 The device for catching the blue fox

André Breton

**TK -- FILL IN HERE**

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