

The Poetics of *Bricolage*: André Breton's Theoretical Fables

by

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In this essay, I would like to focus on various textual fragments, which, it seems to me, *hole* André Breton's text. Their connection with his complete *opus* is an odd one, situating them both within and without. They are narrative and yet at the same time have theoretical aims. In my eyes, André Breton's 'theory' or 'thought' has always been analysed in his most literary texts, the most continuous, the most 'complete', those whose titles herald them as bearers of theory ('Manifeste du surréalisme', 'Les Vases communicants' ...), and then it proves to be a disappointment. It has been called paradoxical, pre-scientific (as in the meditation on automatism as 'spoken thought'), insufficient (as in the relationship between the poet and his language). However, if one looks through the entire work, one notices that, with Breton, everything is thought (including poetry) and that basically one large single category ought to be invented, in order to convey the status of the text: it would be one of thinking poetry, in which demonstration and lyricism feed upon each other. Besides that particular textual mass, *another* important craft of Breton's should be given the recognition it deserves: I am referring to that of the *bricoleur*. Take, for example, the 'object-poems' collected by Jean-Michel Goutier for the beautiful book *Je vois j'imagine*, published by Gallimard in 1991.

Indeed, the above-mentioned *textual objects* are probably far more closely linked with *bricolage* than it would first appear; in addition, historically, they often seem to precede the formulation of what surely must be defined as a pseudo-theory; they are like miniature models of theory, formulated in a concrete visual manner: their subsequent development seems to me to be limited to rationalizing and impoverishing theory. These texts could, therefore, be perceived as mirrors (convex mirrors, witch-like mirrors), reflecting the *entire oeuvre*, and not (as today's critics would have it) as in-between zones, threads stitching the *oeuvre's* 'great' pieces together.

In any case, these are fragments located at the edge of publication, put on display as *paratexts*, so to speak, or even as paratexts of paratexts: *L'Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité* was published in *Commerce* during the Winter of 1924-25, a few months after the *Manifeste* came out, it constituted the third section of the nebulous original *Manifeste-Poisson soluble*, then it was published in plaquette form in 1927 and was not reprinted until much later, in the volume *Point du jour*. It could be considered as a whole; here I will only concentrate on two pieces which stand out

in the textual mass like punch-lines and are entitled 'Colloque des armures' and 'Suite des prodiges'. The punch-line effect is achieved through the insertion of an intertitle in small capital letters in the original edition, and through the dramatic status given to the passage (dashes pointing out a change of voice, the indication of speakers' names, as in 'Colloque des armures', and direct address of the receiver in the second passage 'Suite des prodiges').

Next, the excerpt which I will provide, of the book *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*,¹ generated a text published under the same title in *La Révolution surréaliste*, no.6, March 1926. It plays an obvious part as a vast springboard for thought.

'Il y aura une fois' was initially published in no.1 of *Le Surréalisme ASDLR*, then as a preface for the book of poems, *Le Revolver à cheveux blancs*, in a liminal position, which gives it the function of an *ars poetica*.

In 'Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme', which dates back to 1942 and was written for Peggy Guggenheim, then included in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, I will isolate the paragraph on Masson,² the painter who was so close to André Breton during those years (let us recall the work which at that period was *between them*, not yet published, but entirely written by 1941, *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*). I said I would isolate it, but it was in fact already typographically isolated in the first edition. Here Breton returns (belatedly) to automatism and its implications.

Finally 'Les Grands transparents', first published in *VVV* no.1, June 1942, typographically hole the text of 'Prolégomènes au troisième manifeste du surréalisme ou non', for which it is the *coda*, headed with an intertitle (like 'Le Colloque des armures' and 'La Suite des prodiges' for the *Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité*) and printed in italics.³

I hardly need to point out that the list is neither exhaustive nor indefinite. *Au lavoir noir*, a magnificent text published in 1936 in plaque-form could be included. I will return to it later. In any event, I would like to show that these are not miniaturised works or *mises-en-abyme*, but *edges*: here the paratext is a locus where the work falls back onto itself. These are, therefore, *symptom-texts*, in which a rich and complete meditation on being and time as well as on poetic language and visual expression can be read.

Let us then discuss their symbolic content: by simply following these textual objects, we will be led to linger over two or three crucial notions. First comes imagination. *Imagination of Others* in 'Le Colloque des armures' and 'La Suite des prodiges', which hole the text of *L'Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité*, 1924-

25. Secondly, *Imagination of Visual Forms*, in the fable generating the text from *Le surréalisme et la peinture* in the second issue of the journal *La Révolution surréaliste*. Thirdly, the poetic-cum-practical imagination pertaining to action and language in 'Il aura une fois', the text which appeared in 1930, in no.1 of *Le surréalisme ASDLR*.

The next question in point will be that of the *subject*: the subject of automatism, in the sense of a subject as organizer of automatism, with the nest-building (and melody-building) fable in 'Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme' (1942); the subject and his/her libido, with the fable of the 'Grands transparents' (VVV, 1942).

So I am going to describe those five texts and show how they correspond to the type of discourse known as a 'fable'. I shall analyse in turn the *story* they tell, the *moral* they offer, the space they allot to the *writing subject*.

Fables as fabulae

These texts effectively tell a story, or they describe a place which bears story (which amounts to the same thing).

1. The 'Colloque des armures' is like a little play, enabling us to hear a supposedly inaudible dialogue, a *mute* convocation, because it is uttered off-stage, in the beyond, by concealed characters, who can only be recognized from the tones of their voices (one undifferentiated voice at the beginning, then two women's voices, then 'I'). Intertextuality takes us back to the *topos* of the dialogue of the dead, whose author/referent would be Lucian, but here they are not famous dead. It also takes us back to Victor Hugo, who writes of 'confrontations' with silent ghosts in *La Légende des siècles* (line 580 of the Eviradnus legend, when the latter arrives at Count Corbus' castle and sees two long rows of knights and horses: – 'armures vides/mais debout' (line 460) – rise in front of him, in the great hall). The difference with Hugo is that he makes the act of hiding in the empty armour intentional, whereas Breton inscribes it as an absent-minded gesture ('Quelqu'un sans y penser endossera la mienne'). 'La Suite des prodiges' tells of a shipwreck, which leaves the survivors with 'le souvenir émerveillé de (leur) désastre' and holding a *casket* in their hands. Here the intertextuality appears to point to Gide's *Voyage d'Urien*, with the theme of a journey through whiteness. In Breton's story, the fetish objects which are supposed to appeal to the future are white: the plaster virgin, a completely white artificial fly. In Gide's text, the entire chapter 'Voyage sur une mer glaciale'⁴ refers back to the snow, ice and hallucinated and hallucinating transparencies, such as the ship stuck in an iceberg, passing by, locked as it is in its block of ice, carried away by a sea current beneath it, such as the stranger glimpsed by Urien and his friend Ellis, *caught* in the ice, holding a sheet of paper,

which turns out to be a *blank* page. The episode of Ellis' apotheosis is described in terms of whiteness: 'une lumière beaucoup plus blanche m'éblouit' and, on page 62, the following apophthegm can be read: 'd'une excessive blancheur des choses naît une certaine clarté.'

2. The next passage I want to highlight, from *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, tells a story of exploration which can be summed up as follows: I believe, writes Breton, that for a long time hence, men will want to make their way up the river to track down its sources. One of these will always lie in the very mists wrapped around the mountain, beyond the summit itself. Indeed, there will be some explorers who will betray the cause, and attempt to make money by doing trade with the 'natives'. *We* will reach happy shores.

At that particular level of discourse, I have always thought that one intertextual reference for that page could be Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which had first appeared in translation the year before this text, in 1925, after much debate about Conrad, following his death in 1924 (there was a special issue of NRF on him). The plot is easy to remember: a sailor travels up a tropical river, full of anxiety, to hunt for the adventurer Kurtz (who had betrayed the company he was employed by) – and throughout the book the subject of the ivory *trade* keeps recurring (and, according to my reading, reappears on Breton's page with the reference to the *comptoir misérable*).

Another example of thematic intertextuality goes back, conversely, down the river, to Rimbaud's 'Bateau ivre': 'comme je descendais des fleuves impassibles/Je ne me sentis plus guidé par les haleurs.'

Breton's plot is immediately symbolic: the river is 'le fleuve magique qui s'écoule des yeux', the magic river which flows from the eyes (of men). Another story fits into place and another referent, which can be found in any treatise on perspective, showing the eye of the beholder as equipped with a sort of horn, projecting the cone of its possible perception. Instead of gazing downstream at the river, we will go upstream, in order to reach the principle of vision.

3. 'Il y aura une fois' (*Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, no.1, 1930) describes a stage set, but one which is devoid of history and without dialogue. The text is typographically divided into three main movements, separated by blank spaces. The second one is an exclusively descriptive movement (apart from a middle section beginning 'Et en cela finira l'arbitraire'). The plot is a simple one: I would like to rent a mansion near Paris, writes Breton: with about thirty rooms, dark corridors. A mysterious well. Five condemned chambers: a disturbing pierced (holed) place. Missing parts everywhere. Moreover, the story is formally presented as an exemplary

situation. It avoids all circumstantial characteristics, so as to entice us to look for the *idea* concealed within the story: 'What I want to defend here above all, is simply the principle of an association ...' Consequently, the story is doubly 'holed': one might say by the content of the description and by the status of the enunciation.

4. The text of 'Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme' which comes back to automatism in reference to André Masson's painting, successively recounts, as it opens, a meeting, a metamorphosis and a possession. The meeting: 'André Breton tout au début de sa route rencontre l'automatisme.' The metamorphosis: the painter's hand turns into a *bird's wing* – and then, finally, the objects become possessed by the shapes the painter's hand has outlined.

And then, following a typographical gap, the text begins again, but with a lesson to teach (we are now entering the discourse of knowledge, which nevertheless includes if not a description, at least a secondary recollection of objects or of types of behaviour). Psychology (we would say: ethology) teaches us, declares Breton, that a bird builds its nest according to specific and strict rules, analogous to those governing the elaboration of a melody.

5. Finally, the fable of the 'Grands Transparents': let us look closely at the transparency of the air, Breton tells us ... One can indulge in believing that it contains beings whose shapes are not immediately visible to us. Here, as in 'Il y aura une fois', we are not told a story, but put in a dreamer's position, for we (humans) and the world facing us, are being *staged* (mis-en-scène). In between, there appears a third character in charge of all possibilities and threats: the air we breathe and look at without *seeing* it, which is called seeing, as Breton would say, through our visionary's eyes.

Fables as morals

Moreover, a fable is not only a *fabula* or story, but also a 'moral', which means that a *gloss*, usually alongside the story, leads us to reinterpret the narration in a non-factual, non referential mode, but analogous to the story recounted.

Classically – in Aesop's or La Fontaine's fables – the characters are only slightly personified entities, preferably animals: the reader is compelled to *displace* the 'lesson' from the story of the animal kingdom to that of the human species. This does not apply to Breton's text, although it adopts the same metonymic movement of *displacement*: the gloss is articulated over comparisons or *key words*, which play polysemically on two or more levels. Sometimes the gloss is expressed formally, in a discourse outside the fable.

1. This is precisely the case in *L'Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité*: just before the piece to be typographically isolated and titled 'Colloque des armures', the following gloss appears: 'La spéculation littéraire est illicite dès qu'elle se dresse en face d'un auteur des personnages auxquels il donne raison ou tort, après les avoir créés de toutes pièces.' The lesson is one of aesthetics: the fable will show us that an author cannot invest intellectually in a character from a play or a novel. They must be allowed to speak. An intellectualistic novel remains meaningless. Let each man speak about himself, for himself. Writing should be rooted in the emotions or should not be at all.

Hence the stage directions I have already suggested: two (undifferentiated) voices speak out, but they are voices from the 'dead', because they refer to the *living* as *other* than themselves and because they have been designated as those of a 'grand colloque *muet*'. The dead have no mouths. Who could hear their voices easily? Let us now displace our locus of performance into the dimension of the fantastic.

Next two women's voices break through, one is the voice of a 'vierge folle' promoting pleasure: ('amants, faites-vous de plus en plus jouir'), the other that of a 'vierge sage', more or less, hesitating between regretting her virtue ('hélas, je n'existerai que pour vingt buissons d'aubépine') and, like Augustine talking about his beginnings, the remorseless memory of exalted moments: *amare amabam*, I loved love.

Finally the 'I' speaks in a stanza which is constructed around the repetition of 'without': in the form of a prose poem, it celebrates and exalts the rhythm of change/becoming, as though it were an aim in itself: 'l'âme *sans* peur s'enfonce dans un pays *sans* issue, où s'ouvrent des yeux *sans* larmes'. The country is exitless, not because it encloses one but because one is already caught in a movement/rhythm: one is *sinking* rather than entering. The country (of life) has no ultimate limits because it has no previous ('antérieure') limit either. Similarly: 'nul ne peut fermer la porte sans gonds'. Let us rejoice: for we cannot close the door. It must remain open. The *lesson* could be Valéry's: 'courons à l'onde en rejaillir vivants'. Here the apology of pure movement is also the movement of all abstraction.

One can see that the text is playing on the superimposition of an *aesthetic* type of moral over a plain moral, that of the surrealist art of living. There lies one of the difficulties presented by those fables. They operate on three different levels. First on the historical one, which is so important in order to accede to the concrete aspect of Breton's thought, then the gloss level, but the latter in turn *intertwines* two categories of preoccupations: aesthetics and ethics.

The remarks of 'Suite des prodiges' essentially pertain to ethics: one moves forward through the adventure of life, taking risks and provoking the unknown, but the most disturbing marvel is to find ambivalence within love itself: 'l'idée désarmante de la présence et de l'absence dans l'amour'. The fable is entirely allegorical.

2. 'longtemps, je pense ...' What manner of gloss is this? We have already seen that the exploration story too, plays on the designs of the treatises on perspective, and also, I hasten to add at this point, on the baroque metaphor: the gaze indeed resembles a river (we say in French 'couler un regard à quelqu'un'). The exploratory expedition upstream (the story level) is *also*, metaphorically, an investigation of favourable conditions in which to generate images.

To travel up into the gaze, inside the cone of perception, metaphorically designates an investigation of the conditions in which the gaze operates, of the conditions of the very practice of perception. At that point the gaze will be discovered to be of a *visionary* nature, so that the things which are and those which are not, will not be separated by a difference in nature, being part of the same hallucination. They belong to the same realm. To my mind, this upward journey can therefore be read phenomenologically, like a reflection on the *consciousness of*.

The fable's second moral appears with the sentence introduced by 'alors':

Alors s'il reste au monde, à travers le désordre du vain et de l'obscur, une seule apparence de résolution parfaite ... je ne demande pas mieux que ce soient les vingt ou trente tableaux dont nous avons fait les seuls rivages heureux de notre pensée – heureux sans y penser, heureux qu'après tout il y ait des rivages.

That 'alors' is a logical 'alors' rather than a mere chronology established at the level of the story. Everything leads to the idea that the canvases and works of art we love best are the 'rivages' of our thought. What the image conveys is that aesthetic pleasure constitutes the edge of thought and that whatever pertains to pleasure cannot be enveloped in thought. Either you love or you think.

Finally, the third 'moral' of this fable would be that, in aesthetic matters, there can only be *reflection on specific things*, since for each one of us, there are no more than 'vingt ou trente tableaux dont nous avons fait les seuls rivages heureux de notre pensée'. We are there therefore scarcely able to love more than twenty or thirty pictures, which renders useless the elaboration of aesthetic theories claiming to embrace works of art as a whole, because we are not equally *sensitive* to all of them.

It seems to me that at this level an ultimate intertextuality is at work (I have already mentioned Rimbaud and Conrad, concerning exploration up or down the river) and that would be the figure of speech named *adunaton* (the impossible) in Greek stylistics, and which is expressed through a thematically coded content and a static syntax: 'quand les fleuves remonteront vers leur source ...'¹⁵

In Breton's case, it is not by chance that his semanticism precisely provides a typical example of *adunaton*: Breton's surrealism consists entirely of dreaming about the impossible *becoming possible* – about the possible 'quand même'. Here, the lesson can be formulated as follows: *the gaze can (and therefore must) become visionary*.

3. 'Il y aura une fois': here a gloss opens the text and facilitates our reading of it: 'Imagination n'est pas don mais par excellence objet de conquête,' and the gloss develops into a channeling image, one of '*pressure pipeline*', by means of which hydroelectric energy can be obtained:

C'est tout le problème de l'énergie qui se pose une fois de plus. Se défier comme on fait, outre mesure, de la vertu pratique de l'imagination, c'est vouloir se priver, coûte que coûte, des secours de l'électricité, dans l'espoir de ramener la houille blanche à sa conscience absurde de cascade.

The absurdity pointed out in human conduct and – by analogy – in poetic activity, indicates an attitude of quaint resistance consisting in being suspicious of electricity, in using candlelight and preferring to see a waterfall leap down a mountainside rather than confine that same cascade within the canals of a '*pressure pipeline*'.

The 'moral' in this instance leads one to praise certain forms of *constraint*. But within what constraint must the poet flow? It is a matter of finding the poetic site, where language must necessarily become inventive. '*Placer l'esprit dans la position qui me paraît poétiquement la plus favorable*' – so as to be unable to say anything other than: 'il y aura une fois'.

The beginning and end of the text would therefore constitute a simple *ars poetica*. The reason why I am referring to all those pages as a fable, is that, in addition, a décor is described in the midst of it all, and that everything *works together*. The connection between the two is obvious: it is an analogical connection between inventing life (as suggested in the middle part through description) and inventing a poetic discourse, glossed at both ends. In the story and in the gloss, 'situons-nous', suggests Breton, in an uncomfortable place, in an unstable balance. Invention must be difficult or not be at all. It must take emotions into account or not be at all.

The 'lesson' is thus both one of ethics (in the middle part of the story) and one of aesthetics (on the edges: at the beginning and end). In both positions, the inhabitant of the domain's and the poet's, a certain contention within the mind becomes desirable, in the form of a violent reversal of human time or of a language turning itself inside out and revealing its other side: *lalangue* as Lacan would have said.

Such a projection into the future ('il y aura une fois'), therefore by no means represents an extrapolation of the past: it is a question of prophesying⁶ poetic language, while at the same time pointing to its roots in the unconscious.

Similarly, we find ourselves left on the threshold of a story, which we are never told. Our uneasiness incites us to tell ourselves a story – or to live through one.

Let us now recapitulate: as far as invention is concerned we must go from a passive state to one of violent activity and, within all these undertakings (even the invention 'de la vie' – of life) André Breton's originality resides in the observation that *life* is 'manipulated' by language⁷ and that the energizing transformation is brought about by *the human language, in its poetical force*.

I had announced that this essay would deal with the *imagination* of the other, with formal imagination, with poetic-cum-practical imagination, but *already* at this point, with the reference to language, the question of the writing subject is being addressed.

4. Now it is precisely the subject in the context of automatic activity who is being described, I would have thought, in the nest-building story, concerning André Masson ('Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme' in the volume first entitled *Art of This Century* to become *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*). He is described in two different fashions which at first seem to be in contradiction and which are in fact complementary: first the painter's hand *s'aile* with automatism: thereby achieving its freedom and, strangely, it encounters *le réel* – a second or future reality.

[The active hand in automatic painting] n'est plus celle qui calque les formes des objets, mais bien celle qui éprise de son mouvement propre et de lui seul décrit les figures involontaires dans lesquelles l'expérience montre que ces formes sont appelées à se réincorporer.

The painter's hand in its automatic activity reinvents an object which embodies a *second* or *future* reality. Automatic activity precedes the readability of its own form but guarantees its rigour and rectitude. Besides, automatism creates 'l'unité rythmique' (?) *as* the bird builds its nest, according to precise rules, dictated by instinct. The gloss is

in fact woven into the story. The metaphorical identification between the hand and the bird becomes total in the neologism: 'la main s'aile ...', and Breton adds more comparisons, in a complicated fashion, in the second part of the text: a musician's elaboration of a melody, *like* the bird's building of its nest, *like* automatic activity, all bring about rhythmic unity. Finally, we still have to attempt to answer the question: rhythmic unity of what?

Personally, I completely endorse the *nest-building* comparison, that is, the analogy with a 'finalized instinctive conduct', as biologists call it. Here automatism is described by Breton and that is remarkable, not as a plunge into the id's drive but as a mimicry of what *animal instinct programmes* into any behaviour, that is, to use a Kantian analogy: automatism functions like any work of art according to Kant: it 'takes the form of a finality without any representation of its end' by following a direction which 'knows' its own pole, without knowing the whys and wherefores of that pole.

The 'moral' of this little fable must therefore be that the *rhythmic unity* brought about by automatic activity is first and foremost the subject's. I checked that interpretation by reading, immediately *after* the page I had singled out (and I now return to page 70 of *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*): 'Une oeuvre d'art ne peut être tenue pour surréaliste qu'autant que l'artiste s'est efforcé d'atteindre le champ psychophysique total dont le champ de conscience n'est qu'une faible partie' (Breton is actually referring to Freud here).

The intuition which makes its way through Breton's text is, I think, with the concept of unity, the sudden appearance of the notion of relationship. That notion arises in Freud's work with the second topic in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920): relationship is a process tending to limit the free flow of excitations, to link representations among themselves and to maintain relatively stable forms. In the context of the last drive theory, relationship becomes the major characteristic of the various life-drives by contrast to the death-drives.

The mechanism thus detected by Breton all the way through his work as a witness to painting, is not so much that of the presence or absence of a unifying force which would show through the canvas' surface by organizing its plastic entities, as of the presence of a rhythmic tension in the subject, that is of the related workings of the imaginary within the symbolic (to use Lacan's terms).

Consequently, automatism certainly speaks about the *future* of *shapes* drawn by the painter, but also and especially, at the other end of the line, concerning the *subject*, about the primary processes from the moment when they are developed within the *relationship* with the subject ... Breton's meditation concurs with Asger Jorn's,

who, in a book published in 1958 by *L'Internationale situationniste* coined a pertinent formula, defining the painter's *shaping* activity as *resistance* to movement.⁸

5. Let us return, at last, to the 'Grands Transparents': the opening argument ('Man is perhaps not the centre, the *focus* of the universe...') first leads us to examine the thematic content: let us decentre our gaze and abandon all our illusions concerning man's place in the universe. But could such a generalized sort of relativism constitute the whole moral of 'Les Grands Transparents'? What is more striking is precisely that there is no story, only stage directions and a moral, just as *Il y aura une fois* never told us what was happening in the strange castle Breton was determined to rent. Dangling from the edge of a narrationless narration, this text is an *invitation* to tell, an *invitation* to the reader to take over the narration. It may perhaps be nothing more than an *invitation/incitation*, up to and including the key sentence of the text, which is pompous and assertive: 'Il n'est pas douteux que le plus grand champ spéculatif s'*offre* à cette idée.' *S'offre* designates an *invitation* and sets up the idea as *bait*. The content of the *invitation* can be better understood in the light of Diderot's texts (Addition to the *Lettre sur les aveugles*), which Breton liked to quote in 1942. One such reference had just recently been published in the beautiful volume put together by Matta, and it is in a note sent from Breton to Matta during the first part of the year; the other was printed on the very first page of 'Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme', the piece Breton wrote for *Art of this century*, a book/catalogue of Peggy Guggenheim's (October 1942), a few months after *Prolégomènes* ...

Si tous les corps ne sont pas autant de miroirs, c'est par quelque défaut dans leur texture, qui éteint la réflexion de l'air ... C'est apparemment le fond de la toile, l'épaisseur de la couleur et la manière de l'employer qui introduit dans la réflexion de l'air une variété correspondant à celle des formes⁹

and on the first page of 'Genèse et perspective ...', in a note:

'Et qu'est-ce à votre avis que des yeux?' lui dit M. de ... 'C'est, lui répondit l'aveugle, un organe sur lequel l'air fait l'effet d'un bâton sur ma main ... Cela est si vrai, continua-t-il, que quand je place ma main entre vos yeux et un objet, ma main vous est présente, mais l'objet vous est absent. La même chose m'arrive quand je cherche une chose avec mon bâton, et que j'en rencontre une autre.'¹⁰

For Breton the analogy is a simple one: man is put in a situation requiring him to spot signs of the unknown within the air's transparency and to imagine creatures different from himself, against whom he may even have to defend himself. For we are all put in the position of the man blind from birth about whom Diderot writes. He is

surrounded by shadow, as we are by transparent air. So, just as shadow is deceptive *because it is not homogeneous*, similarly, air could be much less homogeneous than it looks and conceal various creatures ...

Such suspicion directed at sight is accompanied by a valorization of scientific imagination. The unknown as a whole opens up to our mind's hypothetical power.

So, our strength (and perhaps our defence) lies in the *will* to conquer intellectually. The text tends to lead us to develop such a will. The bait set before us is what the Fathers of the Church called *libido sciendi*. When *everything* is known about the world around us, and our sight has sized it all up, instead of paying attention to our disgust, we can still question the unconscious source of taste and distaste (disgust): *libido*. The air's transparency beckons to us. A speculative field is offered. It would be *unbearable* to be so blind as to be unable to imagine *Les Grands Transparents*.

Finally, the conquest of the unknown is also *lucidity on the libido* itself. Let us now consider Guy Rosolato's analysis:

L'invisibilité des grands Transparents est avancée pour mettre en valeur le caractère inconscient du fantasme, où les parents [car ainsi peut se découper le mot trans-parent] restant trans-parent, sont la métaphore d'une puissance qui, tout en pouvant prendre des aspects cosmiques ou ésotériques, n'est autre que celle de l'inconscient lui-même dans ses potentialités de désir ('De la scène originaire au mythe de création')¹¹

As for 'trans', let us also read it as 'transe': Rosolato quotes Breton:

L'acte d'amour, au même titre que le tableau ou le poème se disqualifie si de la part de celui qui s'y livre, il ne suppose pas l'entrée en transe.¹²

That trance aspires to growing into contagious orbs. *Les Grands Transparents* says little else, except, perhaps that: *grands/trans/parents* evokes the gradation of the three generations needed to establish a genealogy.

In passing, it is impossible not to note how characteristic this over-semanticization of a message-bearing syntagm (*les trans/parents//les grands/parents//les grands/trans/parents*) is, of a perpetual textual mechanism in Breton's writing; he even goes so far as to transform the play of signifiers into a rebus, one which he had found in the work of Michel Maier (the hermeticist): a giant is carrying a baby Dionysos in his belly. Here the belly of the 'grand' is transparent.

Let us then conclude our thoughts on the fable's moral: if the 'fable' of the *Grands Transparents* means nothing more than the recognition of the *libido* and an appeal to the *libido sciendi*, this fable, often referred to as a myth – with respect to the terms used by André Breton himself – is in any case but *the form of a myth*. It does not offer any 'new' mythical content, but, through its *libido sciendi* aspect, it arouses in us a taste for interpretation and for all sorts of adventures of the mind.

The fable sets the scene for the writing subject

It so happens that in the fable, the speaking subject who provides the 'lesson' is thus (and always) put in a position of power. Now, in Breton's work, and in particular in the pages in point, the *enunciative mode* of discourse is made blatantly obvious. It is a *dramatic mode*, a staging, in which the I speaks as in an ancient *parabasis* (remember the 'Colloque des armures', the first piece we examined, 'les Grands Transparents' being the fifth).

I will only examine two more examples here.

'*Longtemps, je pense, les hommes ...*' The modest 'je pense' conceals a formidable capacity for generalization; 'les hommes' marks the transition from individual experience to philosophical generalities and to a form of *certitude*, strongly expressed on another level by the future tense of the verbs.¹³ And when the text bounces back with 'alors' ... the thought rhythm reduces all those futures to a *single hypothesis* and subordinates them to a 'je ne demande pas mieux que ...' which resembles a gesture of pride. *The good will* of the enunciating subject is greatly stressed: it retains a whole range of possibilities.

The other example I would like to mention is taken from 'Il y aura une fois'. For it is mainly in that text that there is a proliferation of *shifters* (to use Jakobson's term), which tend to stage the enunciating subject in both an emphatic and a solemn fashion¹⁴ and also *stage* the speech receiver, whose reticence¹⁵ becomes neutralized – or again to deride any resistance on the part of the receiver,¹⁶ in order to be able to win him over to our side:

Se méfier, comme on fait, outre mesure, de la vertu pratique de l'imagination, c'est vouloir se priver, coûte que coûte, des secours de l'électricité, dans l'espoir de ramener la houille blanche à sa conscience absurde de cascade.

One can see what a caricature has been sketched of a stubborn person who 'at all costs' uses candlelight to observe beautiful waterfalls in the mountains. Once he has been

reduced to his own caricature, the writing subject takes him along with him, in a semi-Pascalian wager. Let us recall the formula of the final paragraph:

si l'on consentait une première fois à suivre sa pente – et je gage qu'on
l'acceptera

The intoxication of lyrical contagion does the rest; we have been taken aboard.

A particularly sly process consists in having the reticent (even indignant) receiver speak so as to make him utter a few pretentious schoolmaster idiocies and to have the enunciating subject treat him like a bad pupil: 'you over there, try not to make so much noise.' That you clearly designates Breton, addressed by an adversary who simultaneously declares: 'but the mind trips at every step' on its own *tracks*. We are the prisoners of our memory. Why deny it?

Finally the text's practical horizon is *signified* or *designated* everywhere: 'idées reçues' oppose 'des idées ... qui sait, à faire recevoir'; 'idées harassées' (ideas which have been beaten to death) oppose 'idées harassantes' (which term, as will have become obvious, becomes valorized here).

Thus the act of writing has been ubiquitously staged. Personally, I can see traces of the *bricoleur's* pride here: next to his object of 'bricolage' (think of the *Facteur Cheval*), the 'bricoleur' always looks as though he were posing for a photograph.

I would like to conclude with three brief remarks. The 'theory' which is expressed through these 'fables' consists of many interwoven levels: the level of ethics is entwined with the level of aesthetics but the first tends to hide the second. It is not easy to see the place occupied by reflection on *poetic language* and on the subject of automatic activity, which is presented as the point of contact with the imaginary within the symbolic. And yet their places have been marked out, even if they are enrobed in a more obviously and frequently ethical discourse.

A second remark imposes itself: these fables are not myths. Myth revolves around more eschatological questions, it does not necessarily demonstrate (it certainly does not include any gloss), finally, the position of the subject narrator has been erased.

One might therefore conclude that the fable is perhaps less of a literary genre than a functional mode, one of *exposition of thought*. That concrete and dynamic mode, not really suitable for revealing any well defined concepts, is, in my opinion, the mode *par excellence* through which to expose André Breton's thought. The absence

of philosophical concepts which could be related to other fields of thought makes his work remain difficult to categorize. I see that as *one* of the reasons for his isolation in the context of contemporary thought – and for his being underrated in comparison with the more clear-cut case of Georges Bataille. To take an example, along the lines of my reading, André Breton, in 'Les Grands Transparents,' says exactly the same thing as Georges Bataille in a text titled 'L'Absence du mythe' in the 1947 exhibition catalogue: in the absence suggested by Bataille, he writes that 'the pale transparency of possibility is in a way perfect'. The word 'transparent' is the same, but it becomes an abstract substantive for Bataille, who expresses only the idea, the very idea of *libido sciendi*, as opposed to André Breton's staging that idea by transforming it into relational conditions. To my mind he gives the *libido body*. But who wants to see this homology?

(Translated by Georgiana M M Colvile)

Notes

1. André Breton. *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, 1965 edition, p. 7: 'Longtemps, je pense, les hommes éprouveront le besoin de remonter jusqu'à ses véritables sources le fleuve magique qui s'écoule de leurs yeux ...'
2. André Breton. *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, 1965 edition, pp.66-68. These are the paragraphs beginning: 'Dès l'origine du mouvement surréaliste engagé à fond dans la même lutte que Max Ernst mais en quête beaucoup plus tôt de principes autorisant à se fonder sur eux de manière stable, André Masson ...'
3. It can be found in the various editions of the *Manifestes du surréalisme*.
4. André Gide. *Romans*, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, p.52.
5. Readers will also be familiar with: 'quand les poissons voleront dans les arbres ... quand les poules auront des dents ... 'When pigs will fly' ...
6. In a hermeneutic, not a magic sense.
7. Paul Ricoeur agrees with the intuition that life only exists from being told about.
8. Asger Jorn, *Pour la forme: Ebauches d'une méthodologie des arts*, Paris, Editions de l'Internationale Situationniste, 1958 (a collection of articles written between 1954 and 1957), p.118.

9. Matta, *Entretiens morphologiques: Notebook*, Number 1, 1936-44, ed. G Ferrari, Sistan/Filipacchi, 1987, p.129.
10. André Breton, text reprinted in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, 1965 edition, p.51.
11. Guy Rosalato, in *Violence, Théories, Surréalisme*, eds. J. Chénieux-Gendron and Timothy Mathews, Lachenal and Ritter, 1994, p.40.
12. André Breton. *Arcane* 17, 1947, p.206, 1965 Gallimard edition.
13. *éprouveront* le besoin; ils *placeront* une de ces sources; cette région leur *apparaîtra*.
14. Why not say so? First paragraph: 'Je dis que ... ' Second paragraph: 'Qui martèlent les jointures du texte.'
15. First paragraph: 'Je sais l'objection ... ' Final paragraph: 'Il ne saurait s'agir ... '
16. Final paragraph: 'Comme on va pouvoir s'ennuyer là-dedans, ah on est bien sûr que rien ne va se passer.'