

## INTRODUCTION *Phrases Knocking at the Window*

Theorist, polemicist, art critic, political agitator, Surrealist impresario, cultural terrorist: André Breton's public persona commands such dramatic attention that we might sometimes forget he was, first and foremost, a poet. And as these activities help define the man, his poems provide a remarkably faithful, if cryptic, record of his life. At the same time, these poems challenge our notions of autobiography—veering, sometimes in the course of a single work, from the pointedly candid to the maddeningly opaque. It is this mixture of transparency and obfuscation that underlies both the seduction and the frustration of Breton's poetical writings. In them, he rarely speaks directly of his concerns, whether philosophy, politics, emotional turbulence and group dynamics, admired predecessors, or valued contemporaries. Rather, he uses these concerns as conduits, means to channel the marvelous reality hidden just beneath the surface of our humdrum world.

The intricate collage of Breton's poetry begins, as if following a classical apprenticeship, with the imitation of his predecessors. His earliest pieces were wittingly obscure sonnets styled after the nineteenth-century Symbolists, whose verses he discovered in his early teens. It was from the Symbolists, with their penchant for abstruse formulations and sensual decadence (best visualized in the paintings of Gustave Moreau, another enthusiasm of Breton's during this time),

that the young man early on adopted a taste for hermeticism that never entirely left his writing. He absorbed the precious aestheticism of such now-forgotten writers as René Ghil and Stuart Merrill, the dark and fusty enigmas of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Jean Lorrain. He became a passionate devotee of Stéphane Mallarmé, perhaps the most arcane poet France had yet produced, whom the young Breton considered "God made manifest."<sup>1</sup> And at almost the same time, he was enthralled by the liberating insouciance and perpetual adolescent revolt emanating from another literary deity, Arthur Rimbaud, "a veritable god of puberty such as no mythology had ever seen."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his adult life, what interested Breton was less an author's work per se than the "human attitude" behind it. As he later put it, "Poetry, which is all I have ever appreciated in literature, emanates more from the lives of human beings—whether writers or not—than from what they have written or from what we might imagine they could write." Poetry, in other words, was primarily a means of accepting "the unacceptable human condition,"<sup>3</sup> a "specific solution to the problem of our lives."<sup>4</sup> More generally, poetry was a crystallization of Breton's belief that words and language could change the world, that they could act as passageways to a richer, more fulfilling universe, and even as tools for creating such a universe out of one's inner resources.

Finding a solution to "the problem of our lives" was not merely theoretical: in a very real sense, and from the beginning, poetry represented for Breton an alternative to a childhood he always remembered as sad, lonely, and bleak. Born on 19 February 1896, in the town of Tinchebray (Normandy), he spent his first four years surrounded by the wondrous Norman forests, but he grew up in the industrial Paris suburb of Pantin, under the care of his blandly ineffectual father and loveless, socially ambitious mother. Anxious that the boy make something of himself for the family's sake and ill satisfied with the rude en-

vironment of Pantin, Marguerite Breton forbade her son from playing with the neighborhood's working-class children or exploring his budding interest in literature, which was in her eyes a waste of time that only distracted Breton from his studies. Breton's later celebration of childhood memories as "the most fertile that exists" and his judgment that the "unintegrated" feeling of childhood "comes closest to one's 'real life'"<sup>5</sup> are in this light a wistful commentary on an existence he never knew—or perhaps on the lost paradise of his Norman infancy.

Little wonder, then, that Breton's demands of poetry often contained a pronounced element of escapism, for literature was often his only path away from his mother's strictures and his depressing surroundings. He described these demands in a revealing passage from 1923:

The only thing I would consider worth doing is escaping, as much as possible, from that human type we all share in. For me, to get away from the psychological rule, to no matter how small a degree, is equivalent to inventing new ways of feeling. Even with all the disappointments it has already caused me, I still see poetry as the terrain on which the terrible difficulties that consciousness has with confidence, in a given individual, have the best chance of being resolved. That is why I occasionally act so harshly toward it, why I can forgive it no abdication.<sup>6</sup>

As a child, he had been particularly enchanted by the macabre Celtic folk tales told by his Norman grandfather, and later by adventure novels such as Louis de Bellemare's *Costal l'Indien*, with its fabulous Mexican setting. As a teenager, his passion for the Symbolists largely hinged on their ability to evoke a misty, mysterious world so different from the industrial drabness of Pantin. Later, as an adult, his taste ran toward the fanciful flights of Rimbaud's "The Drunken Boat," the

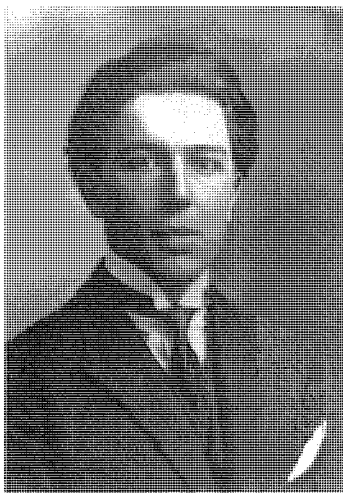
amoral hallucinations of Lautréamont's *Maldoror*, the exotic locales parading through Apollinaire's "Zone," and the absinthe-soaked delirium of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu* plays. Similarly, his own poems, whether dredged raw from his unconscious or based on a very deliberate appreciation of his environment, generally followed the prescription he first sketched at age seventeen: that the true merit of poetry is to "unsettle the walls of the real that enclose us."<sup>7</sup> It is appropriate that Breton's first known poem, published under a pseudonym when he was sixteen, was a hymn to that other great means of escape, the dream:

A dream is a gaze cast unendingly far ...  
Something that's blue, like a fragment of myth ...  
A glittering jewel, but tarnished by day ...  
Perhaps the sole fruit that our daylight permits ... [ ... ]<sup>8</sup>

In the fall of 1913, under parental pressure, Breton enrolled in medical school—though, as he said, his "physical presence on the lecture-hall benches or at the laboratory tables should not imply the same presence of mind."<sup>9</sup> Instead, he pursued his literary activities as chances allowed, publishing three poems the following spring in the Symbolist magazine *La Phalange* and making the acquaintance of Symbolism's leading survivor, Paul Valéry. Breton's poems from this time show distinct traces of Valéry's influence, with their convoluted phrasings and muted eroticism (even if the nymph of "Merry"—a prime example—has more in common with Maxfield Parrish than with Moreau's *Delilah*). Still, it was not so much Valéry's poetic credentials that appealed to Breton, nor even that he had once frequented the revered Mallarmé, but his cerebral narrative *An Evening with Monsieur Teste*—and, even more so, the fact that in 1896 *Teste* had acted as Valéry's farewell to published literature. "In my eyes," Breton later told an interviewer, Valéry "benefited from the prestige inherent in a myth ...

that of a man turning his back on his life's work one fine day, as if, once he had reached certain heights, the work somehow 'rejected' its creator."<sup>10</sup> When Valéry later broke his twenty-year silence with the epic poem *The Young Fate*, Breton felt personally betrayed.

Shortly before his nineteenth birthday, in February 1915, Breton was drafted into the Great War, "a cesspool of blood, mud, and idiocy,"<sup>11</sup> which soon had him putting his scant medical training to work as an orderly in the city of Nantes. The makeshift wards afforded him his first direct contact with the mysteries of the unconscious, partly through his treatment of shell-shocked patients—victims of what today would be called post-traumatic stress disorder, in most cases suffering not so much from clinical delusions as from the technological horrors into which their CO's had thrust them—and partly through his discovery of Freud, who was all but unknown in France at the time. Although Breton continued to write, he considered abandoning literature to become a practicing psychiatrist. The two were not so contradictory as it might seem, for Breton's interest in his patients focused on how they presented verbally more than medically. "Nothing affects me so much as interpreting these madmen," he told a correspondent. "My fate, instinctively, is to subject the artist to a similar test."<sup>12</sup> For Breton, the genius of these "madmen" (regardless of whether or not they were actually mad) lay in their instinctive ability to fashion "the most distant relations between ideas, the rarest verbal



Breton as a medical student,  
ca. 1913.



Marguerite and Louis Breton later in life. *Courtesy Sylvie Sator.*

alliances”<sup>13</sup>—in other words, to create poetry of the most startling, unusual, and fertile kind. Indeed, it is doubtful that Breton the grudging intern did much to help his patients. A writer above all, he took from his consultations and his readings of the early psychoanalytic theorists the inspiration for his later soundings of the unconscious mind. The prose monologue “Subject,” written during that period, is an attempt

to capture the logic and language of one particular patient, who claimed that the war was but a vast simulacrum staged for his sole benefit. In 1930, Breton would further push his attempts to recreate from within the so-called psychotic discourse in *The Immaculate Conception*, whose centerpiece is various “simulations” of mental illnesses.

During these years as well, Breton met the young men who would form the core of the early Surrealist group—Louis Aragon, Philippe Soupault, and Paul Eluard, all fledgling poets like himself—along with others whose example would largely shape this period of his life: most notably the poet, critic, and impresario Guillaume Apollinaire and a twenty-year-old grenadier corporal named Jacques Vaché. From Apollinaire, Breton learned the habit of café meetings, the omnivorous interest in all forms of the unusual. But it was the sardonic Vaché, with his dismissive concept of *umor* (“a sense of the theatrical—and joyless—pointlessness of everything”<sup>14</sup>) and his disdain of Breton’s beloved literature, who exerted the most profound and lasting influence.

The two men met in early 1916 during Breton’s rounds in the military hospital, where Vaché was recuperating from a leg wound, and where he spent his time sketching a series of curious postcards depicting elegantly aloof men (usually himself) standing amidst the war’s carnage as if against the zinc of a fashionable bar. He wove around himself a dramatic cloak of elaborate lies that he did not bother to maintain from one day to the next; his past, to hear him tell it, was exotic and alluringly unfathomable. Once released, Vaché spent his days on the waterfront of Nantes and his evenings around town in various military costumes, dreaming of a composite uniform that could be mistaken simultaneously for that of the Allies and that of the enemy, for the war was a particular target of his sarcasm (“My God, it’s hot—



Jacques Vaché in uniform, around the time of his meeting with Breton. *Courtesy Georges Sebbag.*

I'll never win all these wars!!!"<sup>15</sup>). With Breton, he flitted from cinema to cinema, rarely staying in place for more than five minutes, pasting together a collage of unrelated sequences more interesting than any of the individual films, or setting up a noisy picnic in the seats, to the astonishment and outrage of the movie audience. At one theatrical premiere, he showed up waving a pistol, grumbling that he



wanted to shoot the spectators because he didn't like the stage sets. "I have never experienced anything quite as *magnetizing*," Breton later wrote. "The important thing is that we came out of it 'charged' for a few days."<sup>16</sup>

Such moments can easily be dismissed as at best adolescent pranks, at worst acts of potentially criminal negligence. What does bear noting is the lasting impact they had on Breton's psychology, attitudes, and writing. At the time, he summed up Vaché's influence as one of deterrence: "If not for him, I might have become a poet. He overcame in me the conspiracy of dark forces that makes one believe he can have anything as absurd as a vocation."<sup>17</sup> The elegiac bravado begs the obvious fact that Breton did write poems, then and later. Instead of continuing to emulate Mallarmé and his followers, however, he began producing work that reflected the disorientation of his relationship with his new friend, and that pointed toward a much less traveled course in the years ahead.

Compare pieces such as "Black Forest," "For Lafcadio," and "Mister V," all written in the spring of 1918, with a predecessor such as "Age" from two years before. Each of these works is based on an autobiographical moment: "Age" is a Rimbaudian meditation on turning twenty, "Black Forest" and "For Lafcadio" interweave snippets of Breton's literary passions (Rimbaud's legendary break-up with Verlaine for the first, André Gide's casually homicidal antihero for the second), while "Mister V" pieces together fragments of the author's relations with Paul Valéry, including excerpts from the mentor's correspondence. But in structure and conception, the approach of the latter three works could not be more different from the *Illuminations*-derived prose of "Age" or the formal versifying of earlier works such as "Merry." Here, blanks speak louder than the words punctuating them, and the words themselves are only cryptic snatches, half-erased

ciphers that add up to an intangible sum. “I managed to extract from the blank lines of [these poems] an incredible advantage,” Breton later explained:

These lines were the closed eye to the operations of thought that I believed I was obliged to keep hidden from the reader . . . I had begun to cherish words excessively for the space they allow around them, for their tangencies with countless other words that I did not utter. The poem *BLACK FOREST* derives precisely from this state of mind. It took me six months to write it, and you may take my word for it that I did not rest a single day.<sup>18</sup>

If there is one overriding aesthetic of this period, it is the collage, an assemblage of “indirect loans,” disparate fragments borrowed from life, literature, advertising slogans, and any other element deemed useful. Apollinaire had experimented with this approach in his “conversation poems,” fashioned from bits of overheard small talk. The Cubist painters had tried it in the visual domain. In his 1918 trilogy of poems, Breton uses the minutiae of admired literary figures as signposts, guides for the text, even as accomplices—just as he named his friends in many of his prose writings throughout his life. Even Breton’s daily existence at this time was a collage, a sundry patchwork of military duties, long-distance literary activities, periodic exchanges with his friends Aragon and Soupault, and, more than anything, his infrequent but much-awaited encounters with Vaché, who was now back on the frontlines.

For Breton, meeting Vaché had entailed a radical revision of everything he’d been taught, not only by family and society, but even by his supposedly advanced literary heroes. Not surprisingly, it also entailed a revision of his poetic forms. Indeed, although “Mister V” is by Breton’s own admission based on his waning relations with Valéry, whose irritating paternalism and unseasonable good sense seep between the

lines of the poem, behind Valéry, as in all the blanks from this trilogy of 1918, one can also glimpse the elusive figure of Mister Vaché, with his frequent absences, his flippant and caustic rejection of art (“ART IS FOLLY”), his mysterious past full of gaps and silences, and the disjunctions and disruptions that his sporadic presence occasioned in Breton’s life.

As the war slowly progressed, Breton’s meetings with Vaché took on an increasingly somber cast. Vaché, Breton told a correspondent in 1917, was playing “that victim of modern inevitability: the traveler. One of his great roles . . . Dryness of heart; nonetheless allow for friendship.”<sup>19</sup> The following spring, the traveler himself was exercising his sarcasm on Breton: “Everything is so amusing—very amusing, it’s a fact—how amusing life is!—(and what if one killed oneself as well, instead of just going away?).”<sup>20</sup> In the end, the remark proved to be less casual than it appeared, or even than Vaché might have intended. Shortly after the Armistice, Breton made plans to rejoin his friend, appropriately via a collage-letter, but the message never reached its destination: on 6 January 1919, having taken a hotel room with several army buddies, Vaché stripped naked, swallowed an overdose of opium pellets, and did not wake up. The wound was one from which Breton never recovered, and for years afterward many of his writings carried traces of Vaché’s final disappearance. “I cannot express here the pain that the news of his death caused me, or the trouble I had getting over it,” he wrote in 1921. “For a long time, Jacques Vaché was everything in the world to me.”<sup>21</sup>

Eager to fill the void, Breton sought replacements for his departed comrade in various surrogates, and nowhere more so than in the charismatic spokesman of the Zurich Dada movement, the Rumanian-born poet Tristan Tzara. Breton knew Tzara, who was then in



Louis Aragon, ca. 1920.

Switzerland, only from his writings and others' reports, but this did not deter him from projecting enormous expectations on the man. "If I have an insane confidence in you, it's because you remind me of a friend, my best friend, Jacques Vaché, who died several months ago," he wrote to the Dadaist in April 1919.<sup>22</sup>

When Tzara finally left Zurich for Paris in January 1920, largely at Breton's urging, the future Surrealists threw themselves wholeheartedly into Dada's infiltration of the French capital. "There were several

of us who awaited Tzara in Paris as if he were that savage adolescent [Rimbaud] who fell upon the devastated capital at the time of the Commune," Aragon later remarked.<sup>23</sup> Disgusted with the French literary scene and with the postwar atmosphere in general, Breton, Aragon, Eluard, Soupault, and others around them enthusiastically welcomed Dada's flamboyant refusal of everything that constituted good breeding, good values, or good sense. For the next two years, they participated in Dada "demonstrations": theatrical performances featuring nonsense readings, disturbing noises, harangues to the crowd—anything to rile the audience, to remind it of how furious the younger generation was about the war, how much they loathed the writers and artists who had pamphleteered for it and the culture that had spawned it. "The beginnings of Dada were not the beginnings of an art, but those of a disgust," Tzara wrote. "Disgust with the magnificence of philosophers who for three thousand years have been explaining everything to us."<sup>24</sup>



Eluard, Philippe Soupault (on the floor), Breton (with revolvers strapped to his head), and Théodore Fraenkel performing *You'll Forget Me* at the Salle Gaveau, May 1920.

Breton's work from this period is a suicidal pact with itself, an erasure of his own past and an embrace of Dada's across-the-board demolition. One poem, "Counterfeit Coin," stretches a self-serious stanza of his from 1914 into a broad burlesque, while another, "PSSST," turns his byline into just another "Breton" listing in the Paris phone book, amid dairymen and coal merchants (giving a new twist to Rimbaud's famous dictum, "the writer's hand is no better than the ploughman's"). In a play written with Soupault at around the same time, Breton even thought momentarily to take Dada's self-destructive nihilism a step further, by ending the last act of the (presumably) single performance with a literal bullet to the head onstage.

The real revolution of this period, however, ultimately had little to do with Dada, or with any of Breton's previous literary models. In the spring of 1919, before Dada came to Paris, and just as his first book of poems, *Pawnshop (Mont de piété)*, was coming off press, Breton turned back to his psychiatric studies and to the startling imagery that he'd heard from his traumatized patients during the war. This imagery, as he described it a few years later, at first occurred to him largely unbidden:

One evening . . . before I fell asleep, I perceived, so clearly articulated that it was impossible to change a word, but nonetheless removed from the sound of any voice, a rather strange phrase which came to me without any apparent relationship to the events in which, my consciousness agrees, I was then involved, a phrase which seemed to me insistent, a phrase, if I may be so bold, *which was knocking at the window*. I took cursory note of it and prepared to move on when its organic character caught my attention . . . I realized that I was dealing with an image of a fairly rare sort, and all I could think of was to incorporate it into my material for poetic construction . . . I resolved to obtain from myself what we were trying to obtain from [my patients], namely, a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any intervention on the

part of the critical faculties, a monologue consequently unencumbered by the slightest inhibition and which was, as closely as possible, akin to *spoken thought*.<sup>25</sup>

That June, while awaiting his discharge from the army, Breton spent hours in his hotel room with Soupault, “blackening” sheets of paper with a rapid flow of words jotted down without premeditation or vigilance—words that, he hoped, would form a verbal record of his unconscious. The resulting book, *The Magnetic Fields* (*Les Champs magnétiques*), stands as the first full volume of “automatic writing” and inaugurated a decade of experimentation with coaxing the “mouth of shadows” (as Victor Hugo had called it) to speak. Though eventually abandoned and much maligned, even by its champion, this writing was the cornerstone on which Surrealism was built.

The response to *The Magnetic Fields* was not entirely what Breton had hoped. Immediately after its publication in the spring of 1920, he sent a copy to Sigmund Freud in Vienna, expecting the father of psychoanalysis to recognize in it an unprecedentedly fertile ground for examination. But Freud, like any detective, was more interested in normalcy and its discontents than in the unconscious ostensibly laid bare, and his bland and bemused reply to the young French poet was a harsh disappointment. (Or perhaps Freud recognized that the author had made slight edits to the text before publication, further undermining its value as a psychoanalytic tool.) Nor did the book receive much credit on the literary level: despite Breton’s anticipation of a major reaction from the critics—if not acclaim, then at least some satisfying uproar—it went politely unnoticed at home as well.

Despite this setback, over the next two years Breton sought out manifestations of the unconscious in everyday life, both through written automatism and through such extra-literary essays as “sleeping fits,” séances in which certain members of the group began reciting