

Four Surrealist Images

Edward Germain

Surrealism has consistently asserted its desire to comprehend the essence of thought—a statement usually read in aesthetic terms by art and literary critics or in clinical terms by psychological critics. If this statement is taken more literally, certain overlooked insights arise, including the hypothesis that the surrealists' search for an ultimate synthesis may itself reflect a structure of the mind.

I

In order to comprehend most poems, the words visible in front of you have to trigger an equivalent image inside your mind. The good reader abnegates his ego, becomes transparent to the poem forming within him, sees the words on the page and hears them and pictures them—all simultaneously. “Meaning” in its full sense (what romantic critics call “experiencing the poem”) involves a union of verbal-visual information within the mind. This integration usually occurs whether the poem is heard or read. Typically, the arrangement of words on the page encodes information closely equivalent to the phrasings and intonations of the poet’s voice. The good reader receives this information, just as the good listener does; the written words produce essentially the same experience in the mind as the spoken words. At this level no different neurophysiological processes are apparent. One kind of poetic experience ends here with the reformation of the poem in the mind. Another—the surrealist experience—begins here and, beginning precisely where traditional poetry leaves off, these poems demand cognizance of what *Visible Language* is concerned with and from what they draw their power and authority: the processes of the mind itself.

Shortly before 1924, as he was going to sleep one evening, André Breton noticed an image in his mind and heard simultaneously its verbal counterpart: a man appeared bisected horizontally by a pane

of glass which moved as he moved, accompanied by words to the effect that "there is man cut in two by the window."

This audibly-bisected man precipitated for Breton a synthesis of diverse ideas which can only be suggested here: Rimbaud's experiments with implications of dreams, chance, and poetic "possession"; Lautreamont's sensual, violent, cold-minded anti-romanticism; Baudelaire's correspondences; Dada's irrationality—essentially a half-century of incursions into what Freud at the end of that century called the unconscious mind. Breton's synthesis, philosophic in its implications, was Surrealism. Among other things, it resolved the problem of artistic originality by relieving the artist of that responsibility. The images that appeared on the scrim of consciousness came without rational control; one had simply to record them. Surrealism also identified a validity behind art so produced. No one could successfully accuse the artist of faking or disingenuous fabrication because the very significance of his art lay in its appearance within his mind unbidden and unsought.

The first few years of Surrealism were spent recording the dream-like images that formed within receptive artists. Those more verbally oriented recorded them in words; those visually oriented painted them. (Breton, Eluard, Pèret, Aragon, Soupault, and Desnos were among the writers; Arp, de Chirico, Ernst, Kleé, Man Ray, Masson, Miro, Picasso, Tanguy, Duchamp, and Picabia exhibited with the surrealists from 1925–27.) Presumably not all the "automatic" mental images that formed the bases for these art works were accompanied by words, but most may have been—certainly for the poets. In any case, the distinction was not held assiduously; Breton deferred to inspiration itself—whether verbal, visual, or both—and considered valid only those works through which he could observe the strange force of the unconscious at work. In all these experiments "reason's role . . . [was] limited to taking note of, and appreciating, the luminous phenomenon" of the language visible in the mind. It was not surprising, therefore, that these works were widely misunderstood, often considered incomprehensible.

In 1936 Breton wrote one of his periodic responses to critics in an article, published in London, "Automatism, Limit Not Frontier of Surrealism." To those who mistakenly had equated Surrealism with an abandonment of reason, he replied that automatism is as far

toward the dream-state of unconscious as one's conscious mind can travel while still maintaining awareness. For what the surrealists sought was not irrationality, but a reality superior to that offered by the language of reason. It sought transcendence, not escape; hence its name. Breton esteemed those who had mistepped and fallen into madness—like Nadja or Artaud—but these were tragic figures, not surrealist heroes. Surrealism sought a precarious balance:

The poet of the future will surmount the irreparable divorce of action and dream. . . . He will maintain at any price in each other's presence the two terms of the human relation: . . . the objective awareness of realities, and their internal development in . . . the unconscious.¹

Although automatism had explicitly sought to reveal “verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the real functioning of thought,” critics through the 1930's treated it as an aesthetic technique that was becoming monotonous. Part of this charge was true. The “surrealist image” which Breton had defined in 1924² as “the juxtaposition of two distant realities”—“the chance meeting of a sewing-machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table,” to use the famous phrase from Lautreamont—soon became reducible to a formula: “the —— of the ——”: the “broom . . . of flesh and hair,”³ the “wife with the hair of a wood fire,”⁴ “the thought of heat lightning,” “the key-hole of your eye,” etc. Critics either deplored the monotony or tried to reduce these juxtapositions to paraphraseable themes—just as beginning students often do to poems. Critics still do this. An art historian comments on the phrase from Lautreamont “There is a logic in these particular images. An umbrella's function is to open, a sewing machine's is to close . . . ; they meet on a dissecting table.”

The surrealists *did* have a great deal to say about openings and closings (note the prevalence of doors ajar in their painting, for example), but this is hardly pivotal here. Other “logics” exist in the passage: an umbrella has a point, a sewing machine has a point . . . they meet on a dissection table. And the surrealists *did* have a great deal to say about self-mutilation (see the paintings of Salvador Dali, for example), but this, too, is somewhat beside the point. The sounds of the words in French contain recurring noises, also, so that there is

structure within it. But no mere logical connection will be sufficient apart from the totality of mental processes—the linkings and means of linking—that the juxtaposition involves. Even all these are insufficient unless one holds fast to the sense of wonder at such an incongruous chance meeting of sewing machine and umbrella. The full meaning of the passage is a state of mind: synchronistic, unlimited by its perception of causal connectives, vividly aware of the images and the sound of their meeting, alert suddenly to mystery, feeling now that it will never end.

II

The craters of his eyes⁵
the threads of her heart⁶
the snakes of her hair⁷
the lids of her windows⁸
the houses of their blood⁹
the key-hole of your eye¹⁰
the thought of heat lightning¹¹

Psychologists, Heinz Werner and Bernard Kaplan among them, have identified metaphor as a central process underlying the learning and creation of language. Brian Sutton-Smith, discussing this concept, has given the example of a young child stung by a bee who looks at the swelling and says, “Flower.” He concludes the child is juxtaposing images in his mind, expressing this comparison in the word, which is metaphorical.¹²

Catching this process in mid-stream, surrealist automatism is unconcerned about clarity in a rational context, but all the more interested in clearly observing the mental processes at their fundamental level. “The blossom of the arm,” like “the basement of the sun” or the “hair of oranges,” all catch a way the mind works—according to Sutton-Smith, Werner, and Kaplan, perhaps the most essential way so far as language is concerned.

A reader trained in a different way of reading, however, could analyze the child’s “blossom” as metonymy. Instead of making a comparison, the child could be perceiving the growth process common to both the blossom and the swelling. Expressing his revelation, he substitutes effect for cause. Our language embodies this figure when blossom is used as a verb.

Recent speculations by linguists and literary critics suggest that metonymy, along with metaphor, may be “more intimately related to the processes whereby experience becomes language and thought than study of it as a [literary] figure would suggest.”¹³ Examination of the surrealists’ automatic writings leads one toward this conclusion, for metonymy and metaphor are ubiquitous in about equal proportions. Moreover, if metaphor and metonymy are primary thought processes relating to language-formation, this would throw light on both the surrealists’ early enthusiasm as well as their gradual disillusionment with automatism, for no matter how varied its other contents, repeated experiments always discovered these identical processes.

Breton had spoken of automatism as revealing thought’s true or real functioning because, following both Freud and Jung, he accorded the unconscious an ontological “reality” that clear consciousness would possess only in lesser degree¹⁴—an assumption at odds with the disposition of the public in 1927. That year Breton asked rhetorically, “Does not the mediocrity of our universe depend essentially upon our powers of enunciation?”

So long as the rationalist’s language prevailed in the world, and the rationalist’s picture of the world appeared accurate and sufficient, the experiences of the surrealists could be misconstrued by the public as fantastic idylls. Freud had already shown that the unconscious works continuously beneath daily perceptions; the problem was to catch it in the act, and to communicate this experience to others.

In 1928 Salvador Dali discovered a new kind of surrealist imagery. Breton immediately certified his techniques:

Dali has endowed Surrealism with an instrument of primary importance, in particular the *paranoiac-critical method*, which has immediately shown itself capable of being applied with equal success to painting, poetry, the cinema, to the construction of typical surrealist objects, to fashions, to sculpture, and even, if necessary, to all manner of exegesis.¹⁵

Dali’s paranoiac-critical technique is revolutionary, but not new, suggested both by Leonardo da Vinci, who describes in his notebooks seeing faces and landscapes in the cracks of an old wall, and by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*:

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in the shape of a camel?

Polonius: By the mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.

Hamlet: Or like a whale?

Polonius: Very like a whale.

While it is true that Hamlet tries to humiliate Polonius by showing him as a sycophant—failing because Polonius obtusely thinks Hamlet mad and so merely humors him—the surrealist critic would look beneath the dialogue for its underlying structures of language and thought.

“Paranoia,” wrote Dali, “uses the external world in order to assert its . . . idea, and has the disturbing characteristic of making others accept this idea's reality.”¹⁶ This aspect of paranoia neither obliterates reality nor surrenders to subjectivism, for the faces on the wall or the animals in the clouds depend as much upon what nominally appear as wall-cracks or cloud-shapes as they do upon the desire within da Vinci or Hamlet to transform the object in terms of his own idea. “The two terms of the human relation,” as Breton phrased it, are therefore maintained.

Dali called his method *critical* paranoia to distinguish it from the mental disorder. For the artist this is a healthy, active force liberating the unconscious in his work, whereas for the mental patient paranoia is the tyranny of his unconscious over his critical intelligence.

Dali's paranoiac-critical paintings are almost exclusively double images. “A double image is clearly paranoiac,” he wrote, “a representation of an object that . . . is also, without the slightest physical or anatomical change, the representation of another entirely different object.”¹⁷ Figure 1 is a kind of tour-de-force if the reader sees it as actually a triple image.

The surrealists thought that critical paranoia was paradigmatic of man's ability to conceptualize (“I am paranoiac, therefore I am”?); this in turn suggested to them that the world is continuously perceived by the unconscious but “rationalized” by consciousness that fits it into a known pattern, freezing it in mid-stream. Consider British surrealist Hugh Sykes Davies' “Poem,” published the same year as Dali's *Apparition*.¹⁸

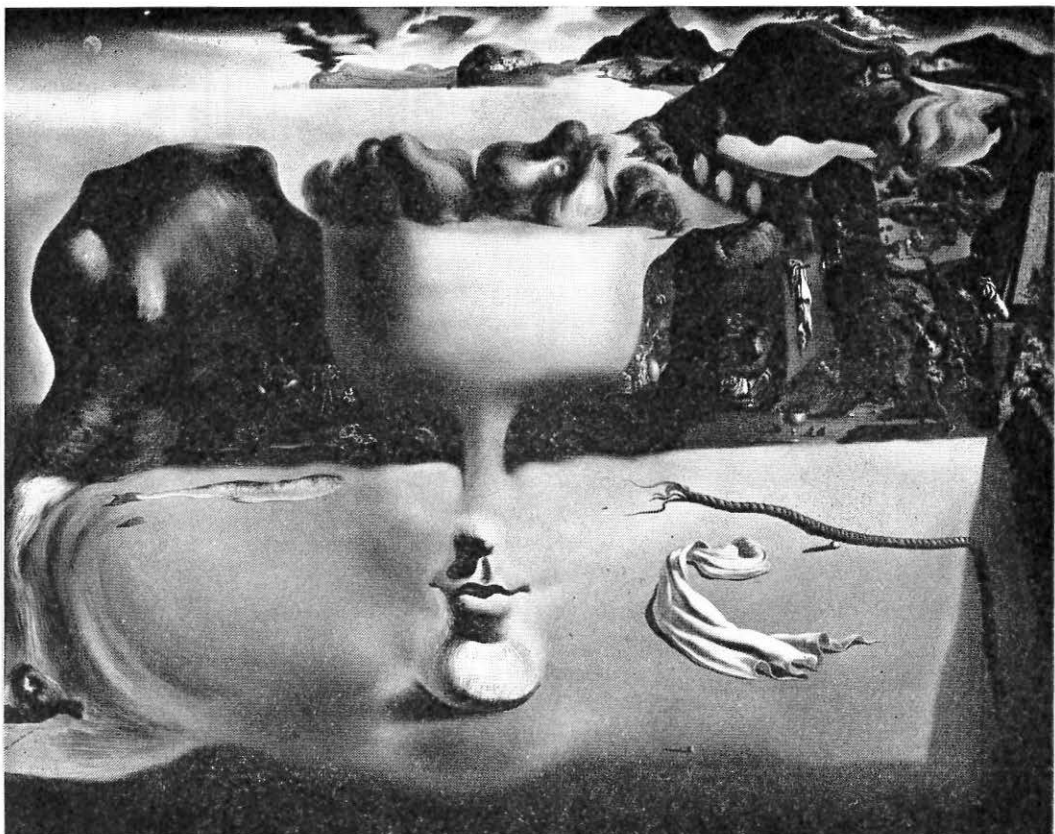


Figure 1. Salvador Dali, *Apparition of Face and Fruit-Dish on a Beach*. 1938. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford Connecticut.

The most noticeable difference between Davies' technique and Hamlet's or Dali's is that he does not name the object under paranoiac scrutiny. Instead of being a game of suggestion or a visual pun, Davies' poem thereby engages the analytic powers of the mind in addition to the paranoiac powers.

One understands that the poem's subject is a great destruction because the progression of images in each line is toward destruction, and one caused by men rather than women because "It doesn't look like my mother . . . it looks like my father." Women have survived it, for there is "an old woman searching in a heap of stones." "Heap of stones" tells us that buildings were destroyed and with them, from

POEM

It doesn't look like a finger it looks like a feather of broken glass
It doesn't look like something to eat it looks like something eaten
It doesn't look like an empty chair it looks like an old woman searching in a
heap of stones
It doesn't look like a heap of stones it looks like an estuary where the
drifting filth is swept to and fro on the tide
It doesn't look like a finger it looks like a feather with broken teeth
The spaces between the stones are made of stone
It doesn't look like a revolver it looks like a convolvulus
It doesn't look like a living convolvulus it looks like a dead one
KEEP YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF MY FRIENDS USE THEM ON YOU BITCHES OR
YOURSELVES BUT KEEP THEM OFF MY FRIENDS
The faces between the stones are made of bone
It doesn't look like an eye it looks like a bowl of rotten fruit
It doesn't look like my mother in the garden it looks like my father when
he came up from the sea covered with shells and tangle
It doesn't look like a feather it looks like a finger with broken wings
It doesn't look like the old woman's mouth it looks like a handful of broken
feathers or a revolver buried in cinders
The faces beneath the stones are made of stone
It doesn't look like a broken cup it looks like a cut lip
It doesn't look like yours it looks like mine
BUT IT IS YOURS NOW
SOON IT WILL LOOK LIKE YOURS
AND ANYTHING YOU SEE WILL BE USED AGAINST YOU

lines 15–16, men. In the poet's view, those who caused this war—for this is what we seem to be describing—acted not out of clear consciousness (the “eye” in line 14), but from an internal decay, “like a bowl of rotten fruit.” All the aspirations of the common folk have been broken like feathers. Their revolvers now lie buried in cinders; their faces have turned to bone beneath the stones, though they remain antagonists. Death has hardened their opposition, “The faces beneath the stones are made of stone.”

Davies' hatred of the aggressor's brutality breaks through grammar and syntax to hidden psychotic repressions when he writes “USE THEM ON YOU BITCHES,” simultaneously swearing at them, exposing their

sexual inadequacy, their sadistic use of women, their callousness; they are the leaders of dogs.

A glance at the date of publication, May 1938, locates the poem exactly one year after the Barcelona uprising. It is reasonable to conclude that the subject of the poem is the take-over of Spain by the fascists. Davies has confirmed this in a letter to me.

Davies exposes Fascism as an extreme form of paranoia wherein the fascist, tyrannized by his paranoid delusions, externalizes the sickness as atrocities of war. Anything the fascist sees becomes part of his disease, yet the poet is able to contradict him effectively, for he holds the controls of both reason and passion. The ending of the poem is a curse, condemning the fascists to their own madness, and holding their actions up to the judgment of the free world.

The power of the poem, and the power inherent in critical paranoia, lies in the mind's ability to transform any object in accord with desire, and to communicate this transformation, making the reader more vulnerable to the world of the poem and less dependent upon his own prelearned and fixed representation of reality. Like automatism, its validity lies in the mind, in the fact of its occurrence, and in the universality of this experience; probably the reader himself has witnessed the metamorphosis of a knotty-pine wall in a summer cabin or, lying on his back, discovered faces upon faces in the leaves.

As Surrealism passed through the '30's, the discovery of other figures of thought behind reason continued to dominate its activities. Consider British poet David Gascoyne's "The Very Image"¹⁹ and painter René Magritte's *At the Threshold of Liberty* (Fig. 2).

Each of these works consists of images amid images. In the poem these images are more differentiated within each stanza, while the painting contents itself with one recognizable image per frame. In perceiving either work, the viewer finds his mind moving through a helplessness of the reason. In the poem the process is incremental. Each stanza presents a tangible object that the next line confounds by a ludicrously inappropriate addition. The following lines force a further juxtaposition until the incongruity of contexts expands beyond reason's ability to encompass the meaning of the evolved image. Somewhere along this process, the mind begins to turn back upon itself, observing the processes through which it has just gone, experiencing a perplexingly pleasant sense of the futility of the search

THE VERY IMAGE

to René Magritte

An image of my grandmother
her head appearing upside-down upon a cloud
the cloud transfixed on the steeple
of a deserted railway-station
far away

An image of an aqueduct
with a dead crow hanging from the first arch
a modern-style chair from the second
a fir-tree lodged in the third
and the whole scene sprinkled with snow

An image of the piano-tuner
with a basket of prawns on his shoulder
and a firescreen under his arm
his moustache made of clay-clotted twigs
and his cheeks daubed with wine

An image of an aeroplane
the propeller is rashers of bacon
the wings are of reinforced lard
the tail is made of paper-clips
the pilot is a wasp

An image of the painter
with his left hand in a bucket
and his right hand stroking a cat
as he lies in bed
with a stone beneath his head

And all these images
and many others
are arranged like waxworks
in model bird-cages
about six inches high.

for meaning. The same thing occurs with the painting, but more quickly.

Keys to the bewildering effects are the distortions of scale in each work. Gascoyne creates five surrealist tableaux of vast spaciousness—

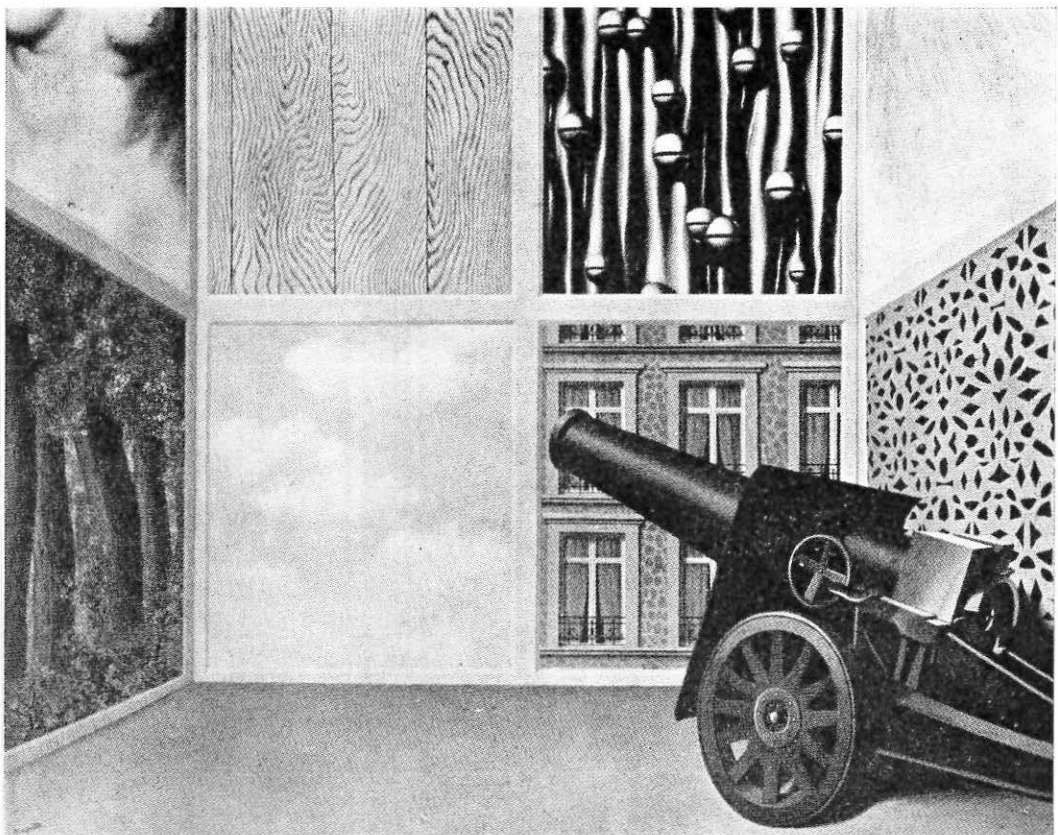


Figure 2. René Magritte, *At the Threshold of Liberty*. 1929.
Humphrey Jennings Collection.

aqueducts, airplanes, churches in the distance—suddenly he telescopes them into six-inch-high bird cages. Magritte paints a nude woman's torso as tall as two stories of a building.

Both artists call specific attention to their *images*. Magritte frames each one, like a separate picture. Gascoyne frankly begins each stanza with the words “An image of. . . .” When he shrinks the tableaux into the birdcages, he carefully notes that the cages themselves are *model* birdcages, not the real thing. Thus the reader is put in the unsettling position of noting that while there is nothing “real” before him—it’s just images—the images nevertheless exist; he finds them in the poem, on the canvas, in his mind accompanied by a sense of

wonder or irritating amusement that suggests they are somehow significant, products of mental activities with which his normal consciousness is typically unconcerned.

In the poem these processes are the dream-work techniques of condensation and displacement. These are hardly new to poetry, but here they are both manifest and structural. In dreams, Freud wrote,

dream thoughts are condensed into new unities. When the thoughts are translated into pictures those forms are indubitably preferred which allow this kind of telescoping, or condensation; it is as though a force were at work which subjected the material to a process of pressure or squeezing together.²⁰

Gascoyne has *embodied* this process in his poem.

Magritte works with another aspect of the mind, where the size of an object can be an index of its power of attraction. We observe this in children's art and in our own language. What we love or fear "looms large" we say. Or one says of her lover: "His face filled the whole room!"; i.e., "my whole attention was attracted to his face." By enlarging the woman's torso, Magritte steps behind these figures of speech into the figure of thought. He has, we might say, "sized her up." Certain images in the painting now begin to reverberate with meaning.

The cannon—separated from the framed images as the ego is separated from the objects of its desire—points at the framed image of the female torso. This is love. The small conning-wheel for aiming the cannon has raised it to the effective erect position. Its trajectory has been calculated. The cannon has a shield to protect it from small nuisances hurled at it from its adorable target. It is a battle of love—with the outcome already determined, for the woman is already nude and judging by the size of the shield, her resistance will be small.

In Gascoyne's poem, the movement in every stanza is towards a strange devitalization. His grandmother is decapitated, her head transfixed upside-down on a spike, and abandoned. The aqueduct has a dead crow hanging from it enshrouded in snow. The piano-tuner turns into a manikin. Even the aeroplane turns into lard. The painter himself lies with his head on a stone, almost a tombstone. Some kind of sterility or fear hangs death-like about this hilarious and entertaining poem.

Our hypothetical reader has found his rational faculties outstripped as each work involves itself at a structural level with processes essentially unconscious in nature. Then, to use a metaphor that fills Breton's *Nadja* as well as scores of surrealist poems and paintings, the effect is not unlike opening doors in his mind. Reason is accessible, with its limits clearly perceived. Unconscious desire, manifesting itself in the symbolic images, fills the conscious mind with wonder or dread. Not clinging to either, perception watches the scenes surfacing, aware suddenly of the powerful conscious and unconscious processes effortlessly evolving beneath it. Standing there, with all the doors open, is surreal.

This precise vantage point, approximating that of the artist who had to open the same doors to get his material, holds in equal value the available conscious and unconscious functions of the mind, allowing their antinomies to resolve into one pattern, which is the poem or painting—itsself a map or instruction to this *point sublime*.

One knows he is following this map when he begins to experience the disorientation produced by the works, called by the surrealists *vertige*. This leads to speculation that the surrealist goal of reconciling opposites has a psychological analogy within the mind. In the bilateral symmetry of the cerebrum, sequential reason is a left-hemisphere function along with language.²¹ *Vertigo* may result from the introduction into sequential reason of the spatial orientation of the right hemisphere to such a degree that it contradicts the former. Thus, *vertige* is a signal connected with the limitations of left-hemisphere rationality and traditional language in whose presence the uncomprehending man might draw back, saying "I can't understand this, Surrealism is pointless." But to the surrealists, *vertige* is a sign that the *point sublime* is not far off. It is quite possible, as the saying goes, that it is accurate to say one cannot "understand" Surrealism—if one means that particular casuistic, rational understanding typical of the left hemisphere. And it is also possible that the shape of the thought behind the surrealist phrases

juxtaposition of distant realities
and
reconciliation of opposites

may turn on equal, simultaneous access to both hemispheres of the mind: the left concerned with language, the right with pattern; the left with words to the effect that "There is a man cut in two by a window," the right with a picture of a man bisected horizontally by a pane of glass that moves as he moves. . . . But on this, the returns are not all in.

1. André Breton. "Les vases communicants" (1932), translated by Maurice Nadeau in his *The History of Surrealism* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 304.
2. *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), translated by Richard Seaver and Helen Lane in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), pp. 10-11.
3. Charles Henri Ford. *The Overturned Lake* (Cincinnati: The Little Man Press, 1941), section III.
4. André Breton. "Freedom of Love," translated by Edouard Roditi in *Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969).
5. Dylan Thomas. "Among Those Killed in the Dawn Raid Was a Man Aged One Hundred," in *New Road* (London: 1944), p. 170.
6. David Gascoyne. "Fragments from 'The Symptomatic World,'" in *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, No. 6, October, 1936, p. 113.
7. Nicholas Moore. "Poem About England," in *View*, III (October 1943), p. 83.
8. Dylan Thomas. "The Marriage of a Virgin," in *New Road* (London: 1944), p. 170.
9. Robert Horan. "Deceptions of Brass," in *View*, I, 6 (June 1941), unnumbered insert.
10. Francis Scarfe. "Billet Doux," in *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, No. 4-5 (August-September 1936), p. 89.
11. Breton. "Freedom of Love."
12. *Child Psychology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1973), p. 229ff.
13. Robert O. Evans in *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Alex Preminger, et al., eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 500.
14. Discussed in Ferdinand Alquié, *The Philosophy of Surrealism*. translated by Bernard Waldrop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), p. 27.
15. *What Is Surrealism*, translated by David Gascoyne (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), p. 83.
16. "The Stinking Ass," translated by J. Bronowski in *This Quarter* 5, No. 1 (September 1932).
17. *Ibid.*
18. In *London Bulletin*, No. 2 (May 1938), p. 7. Reprinted by permission of the author.
19. In *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, No. 2 (June 1936), p. 35.
20. *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, translated from the German by W. J. H. Spott (New York: Norton, 1933), pp. 32-33.
21. As an interesting introduction, see Robert E. Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1972).