

THE LUCID CLUSTERS:
POETICS OF CLAUDE GAUVREAU

Translated, and with an introduction by,
Ray Ellenwood

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INTRODUCTION

When the group of artists originally dubbed the Montreal Surrealists and later the Automatists published their manifesto, *Refus global*, in 1948, they were at the high point of an action begun a few years earlier, trying to introduce new ideas on art and artistry, and on the potential social impact of creative spontaneity. The story of this important avant-garde movement is gradually becoming better known in English-speaking North America.ⁱ The group included people who would become some of Canada's most celebrated visual artists, dance and theatre performers, writers, designers and media producers.

Claude Gauvreau (1925–1971) was introduced to the group while still in his teens, through his older brother, Pierre, a painter, and he soon became an ardent spokesman, publishing articles in the Montreal newspapers with titles such as “Cézanne, Truth, and the Vipers of Good Taste,” “Painting is No Toy for Dilettants,” and “Automatism Doesn't Come from Hades.”ⁱⁱ Between 1944 and 1946, he wrote a series of short dramatic objects that were later collected under the general title, *Les Entrailles* [Entrails], very experimental pieces that not only ~~flouted~~ flouted normal conventions of theatre, but of language itself. For example, “Fatigue et réalité sans soupçon” [Trustful Fatigue and Reality] is nineteen lines long, has a title but no identified characters and no stage directions except to close the curtain. The eccentricity of its language would be obvious even to a non-francophone. Here is a small sample:

Keulessa Kyrien Cobliéniz Jaboir
Veulééioto Caubitchounitz Abléoco
Vénicir Chlaham Kérioto Kliko
Sannessa vélo Moutchnaïk Révoi....

ⁱ An extensive exhibition entitled *The Automatiste Revolution, Montreal 1941–1960*, curated by Roald Nasgaard assisted by Ray Ellenwood, showed at the Varley Gallery in Markham, Ontario (October 21, 2009 to February 28, 2010) and the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, New York (March 19 to May 30, 2010). It was the first time an exhibition of the entire group had been mounted outside Québec, and there was a concerted effort to acknowledge the importance of arts other than painting for the Automatists.

ⁱⁱ Here and throughout, translations are mine.

flouted

One of the plays from the *Entrailles* collection, "Bien-être" [The Good Life], was performed by Gauvreau and his friends in front of an astounded and unsympathetic audience shortly before the publication of *Refus global*. It was eventually included, along with two others from the collection, as part of the manifesto. In 1956, Éditions Erta published a selection of five "Entrailles" under the title *Sur fil métamorphose*, and in the same year, Éditions Feu-Antonin published a set of early Gauvreau poems, *Brochuges*. These, along with another collection of poems entitled *Étal mixte*, brought out by Éditions d'Orphée in 1968, were the only volumes of his work published in his lifetime.

At the time of his death, Claude Gauvreau had just witnessed the flop of one of his major plays, *La Charge de l'original épormiable* [The Charge of the Expormidable Moose], a work that has since had major, well-received productions and is now seen as a keystone of theatrical modernism in Québec. Apparently undeterred at the time, Gauvreau was working on compiling the 1500-page edition of his complete creative works that would be published posthumously in 1977.ⁱⁱⁱ He would never be a popular author in the Michel Tremblay tradition, but over the past thirty years there have been several major productions of his plays on stage and television, his poetic and critical works have been re-edited, books and films have been devoted to him, and he has taken on the stature of a *poète maudit* in Québec, an almost mythical figure of great influence on young writers, especially experimental ones. Rober Racine, an interdisciplinary artist widely admired in Québec, remembers his excitement at seeing a film with shots of Claude Gauvreau reciting his poems:

There, at last! new words were living, whirling, exploding, hyperboling, inventing themselves to celebrate what the poet called "explorational language." In front of us was this astronaut from a still uninhabited planet of unexplored sounds, launched into the void of pure creation, declaiming his inventions, ~~blinding~~ our ears and hearts by *magnifying* liberty.^{iv}

dazzling

iii Claude Gauvreau. *Oeuvres créatrices complètes* (Montréal: Éditions Parti pris, 1977).

iv Rober Racine, "Étrange et foudroyants," in Claude Gauvreau, *Étal mixte et autres poèmes 1948-1970* (Montréal: Éditions de l'Hexagone, 1993), 240.

But even back in the months following the publication of *Refus global*, Claude Gauvreau was becoming increasingly recognized as an important activist in the Montreal scene, and his creative work was respected by many people in the artistic community. In the fall of 1949, an up-and-coming young musician named Pierre Mercure, who had collaborated earlier with Automatist-associated choreographers and dancers, invited Gauvreau to write a libretto for an opera to which Mercure would write the music. The result was an astonishing text entitled *Le Vampire et la nymphomane* [The Vampire and the Nymphomaniac], full of conceptual and linguistic experiments like those in his earliest dramatic objects.^v A journalist getting wind of the project published a mocking article, which in turn provoked a quarrel between composer and librettist in three open letters to the newspapers. Mercure announced he was dropping the project, saying Gauvreau's text was unsuitable for a number of reasons. It was a minor incident but it had important results for our purposes because a high-school student, Jean-Claude Dussault, who had heard of Gauvreau and was interested in meeting him, was stimulated by this public spat to get in touch with the poet and to begin an exchange of letters that went on from December 18, 1949 to May 10, 1950—a substantial correspondence running to over 400 pages when it was eventually published.^{vi} In these letters Claude Gauvreau not only talked about his life and adventures with the Automatists, but expounded his poetic theories more clearly and completely than he ever did elsewhere, obviously stimulated by a young man he seemed to regard almost as a disciple, sometimes patronizing (though he was only in his mid-twenties himself), always passionately engaged and candid.

What you are about to read are excerpts from two letters of that collection. With a number of useful but scattered texts to choose from, I have selected two passages that seem the most extensively and directly relevant to questions of poetics. I hope they will help transmit the ideas of this fascinating poet to a new and growing audience.

v The libretto was later printed in Gauvreau's *Oeuvres créatrices complètes* (175-209), and a wonderfully imaginative production of the opera, with music by Serge Provost, directed by Lorraine Pintal, was given in Montreal in September, 1996.

vi Claude Gauvreau, Jean-Claude Dussault. *Correspondance 1949-1950* (Montréal: Éditions de l'Hexagone, 1993), with an introduction by Dussault and notes by André-G. Bourassa.

A BRIEF LIST OF SOURCES IN ENGLISH RELATING TO CLAUDE GAUVREAU

Betts, Gregory. "Just Playing Mad: Irrationalism in Automatism via Claude Gauvreau," *The Brock Review* 10 (2009): 10–25 [forthcoming as a chapter in *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature: The Early Manifestations*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011].

Bourassa, André-G (trans. Mark Czarnecki). *Surrealism and Québec Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984.

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Cain, Stephen. "A Homophonic Translation of Claude Gauvreau's 'Trustful Fatigue and Reality,'" *Exile* 32.4 (2008): 122–23.

Ellenwood, Ray. *Egregore, A History of the Montréal Automatist Movement*. Toronto: Exile Editions, 1992.

---. "Reclaiming Gauvreau," *Literary Review of Canada* 6.2 (May, 1997): 21–22.

---. "Who's Afraid of Claude Gauvreau," *Border Crossings* 29.2 (May, 2010): 57–59.

Ferron, Jacques (trans. Ray Ellenwood). "Claude Gauvreau," *Exile* 3.2 (1976): 20–57.

Gauvreau, Claude (trans. Ray Ellenwood). "The Reflections of a Young Dramatist," *Exile* 1.2 (1972): 45–52.

---. (trans. Ray Ellenwood). "Ode to the Enemy & Three Dramatic Objects," *Exile* 3.2 (1976): 58–76.

---. (trans. Ray Ellenwood). *Entrails*. Toronto: Exile Editions, 1991.

---. (trans. Ray Ellenwood). *The Charge of the Expormidable Moose*. Toronto: Exile Editions, 1996.

---. (trans. Ray Ellenwood). "Trustful Fatigue and Reality" and "The Leg of Mutton Créateur," in *Poems of the Millennium*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris. Berkley: University of California Press, 1998. 230–233.

McCaffery, Steve. "The Elsewhere of Meaning," in *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986*. New York: Roof, 2000. 93–106.

Information about Claude Gauvreau can be found on the internet, but should be approached with caution. Look for film clips of him reading his texts.

Ray Ellenwood
Toronto, 2010

THE LUCID CLUSTERSⁱ

i Passages from letters by Claude Gauvreau to Jean-Claude Dussault (*Correspondance 1949-1950*, ed. André-G. Bourassa. Montréal: Éditions de l'Hexagone, 1993).

Letter of February 1, 1950 (p.98-105)

[...] when you talk about my "theories" you are using an expression without foundation. A "theory," it seems to me, is a more or less a priori hypothesis, most of which remains to be proven.

My thought does not include any a priori hypotheses. Everything I've told you and will tell you in future comes from a posteriori deduction, as legitimate as I can make it, based on observations from experience and experiment.

Finding myself confronted with certain observations confirmed again and again, I've tried to find a response to the question of why. What I offer you now is the result of those experiments, nothing more and nothing less, a result carefully based in the material world.

Of course, if you want to, you can oppose these palpable certitudes with mental hypotheses that don't cost you anything. But I would argue that these sense-based realities, when adapted to a speculative formula, can demolish any gratuitous proposition. That's what I propose to show you today.

I am also proud to state unequivocally that I never, at any moment in my existence, had the slightest preoccupation with "style". Realising very early that "style" can be nothing more than the involuntary result of my efforts to translate adequately whatever is most vital and most urgent in me, I've long been freed of any dependence on such false dilemmas. The only time I think of style—in a completely a posteriori way—is when people ask me about it. I've always trusted fully in the power of the creative impulse to discover, spontaneously, all sorts of valuable, complex, and completely new constructions. An unshakeable conviction that I can maintain a perfect balance between my desire and my will is all I've needed to sustain my peace and serenity.

Thought will always find a way to express itself, using its own invented tools, as long as it is passionate enough and dynamic enough to be felt like a bleeding wound. There are those who are too timid

or weak to allow volcanic desire its full, dazzling flight. Let them worry about shuffling and arranging words.

Obviously, if we limit our artistic aspirations to a few vain and facile baubles, we'll have no concept of faith, or inspiration, or expression, or tangible reality.

But let's proceed a little more systematically (alas!). We'll still arrive at the same conclusions.

My friend, where do you find in my earlier statements any kind of link between alphabet and technique?

I told you technique "can be anything that makes use of creative impulse and personal expression" or more exactly: which furthers the materialization of the creative impulse. I also told you that the alphabet, in poetry and most literature, is "inert matter", meaning the passive substance through which desire will strive to exteriorize itself and fix itself in a permanent expression. (As you know, inertia is a force.)....

Please read the passages in question and see if that's not what I said.

Of course I could have described "the French language" itself, rather than the French alphabet, as inert matter. But surely, then I would have been committing an abstraction. In fact, the words "French language" do not refer to any determined object; they refer to a vague cluster of conventions in a perpetual state of rapid change easily witnessed not only from one decade to the next, but from year to year, and from individual to individual.

Using the word "alphabet" avoids ambiguity. Obviously, the French alphabet designates a precise number of letters with different, relatively fixed sonorities, used in ways that tend to evolve very slowly.

The letter is to language as the atom was to the chemistry of our fathers. It's the smallest indivisible particle of a whole.

Some day we may see the fracturing of the letter, at least we hope so....

In any case, until that day comes, it's quite simply infantile to argue that anyone still using the conventional alphabet is incomprehensible. Every single letter is the exact common denominator of a whole series of states transmissible by that letter and that letter alone. One has to be bone dry and blinkered not to be sensitive to these common denominators. But let's leave that for a moment...

We know that any artistic process is inconceivable without the initial existence of desire; desire developing out of freedom and translating itself through a rigorous process.

How does it translate itself? Through inert matter. Rigour is necessary, precisely to make sure that the force of inertia inherent in matter does not defeat the efforts of desire.

Personally, I believe that all rigour needs, in order to fulfill its role, is to remain sensitive to the powerful dictates of desire. You seem to believe that rigour can be aided in its task by a few basic tricks to help subdue matter.

Personally, I believe that desire, unless it's somehow stunted, has to be at a very low ebb (low enough to be called "intention" rather than "desire") before it will be satisfied by any kind of impersonal expression.

Here's why:

When desire/anxiety is imprinted in matter, what does the operation produce? The result is an object, obviously.

What is the fundamental reality of that object? It is a system of intrinsic RELATIONSHIPS resulting from the disposition of matter.

In painting, these relationships will be plastic; in poetry, they will be "image relationships."

I hasten to define what I mean by "image relationships" or "imagistic relationships", because I know all kinds of books use the term "image" haphazardly.

Basically, the IMAGE in poetry consists of the association or confrontation of all kinds of verbal elements: syllables, abstract words, concrete words, letters, sounds, etc. (Let's not forget that every sound is an onomatopoea).

It is through the many and often complex linkages established among the different elements in a complete object that a new, concrete reality is formed.

The nearly imperceptible modifications of matter, the spontaneous and ingenious subtlety of harmonies and contrasts, the shimmering and imponderable amplifications of rhythm, the unpredictable alternations of tenderness and violence, the tragic unions of the diaphanous and the ochroid, the progressive dissolution of what is slow and languorous into the greenish ink of the metallic or grating, the miraculous sudden metamorphosis of the shadowy and the porous into an intoxicating and shimmering light, the capricious and matchless arabesques of lyrical deployments, the gut-wrenching volume of howled distress drowning in muffled sound or a basin of heavy mercury, minced vigors transforming into rivulets of mauve and kettle-drum, the new throwing itself at the feet of the outworn, the threadbare dancing a cabriole with the down-soft, those are the kinds of objective relationships that cause the truly critical eye to stop and look.

There are several kinds of language just as there are several kinds of drawing. I think you are a little confused about this.

Common language is the means of expression we find convenient to convey our most simple immediate desires and intentions. It is satisfied with rudimentary translations.

Logical connections are enough to translate routine ideas more or less appropriately.

But as soon as we go beyond the routine, when we transcend the simplistic, when we transcend the mechanical, when thought finds itself face to face with infinitely shaded nuances...how can we free these marvels from their cage?

We have no choice: if we want to transmit the imponderable, the subtle, we have to rely on tangible RELATIONS. Intentional lucidity has no place in this picture.

Wherever analogy has failed, wherever deduction is proven insufficient, the infinite variety of relationships within matter will show itself—quite miraculously—to be irresistibly precise (for senses that are open to it, of course).

There is nothing more supple and more expressive than material relationships for translating all the sinuous adventures of thought and desire—and with highly intense precision. The more matter is spontaneously moulded according to the rhythms of thought, the more faithful will be the expression, and the more the object will be authentic!

You'll appreciate that time is an important factor in these enterprises. Careful introspection is of no use in capturing the explosive varieties of desire. You must admit, for all kinds of reasons, that the most solid and apt expressions are the ones that allow the creative voice to be recorded in as lively and intimate a way as possible.

Rational and reasoned language is as different from imagistic language as a drawing by Matisse is from an architectural plan. Or, if you like, the difference is the same as between conventional sign language and the movements of an inspired dancer.

One expresses itself through logical connections (a manifestly limited means); the other expresses itself through material relations (a means of expression whose limits are not yet known).

Imagistic language, like all plastic language, is only accessible to people with open and alert sensibilities! All others can take a hike! It's not up to a bunch of amputees flaunting their impotence to stand

in the way of seers and their infinite wisdom. They have no right to command artists to abandon their already limited capacities!

Too bad for the blinkered and the sly!

I can't stress too much the fact that imagistic or plastic relationships have to be judged completely apart from authorial intention. That doesn't mean we have to return to a platonic and outdated aestheticism, but simply that "the consequence is more important than the goal".

Critical objectivity has to be applied to the intrinsic relationships of objects.

Obviously, an object can be seen and understood from a number of angles. I think I've already mentioned three different ways, and those may be ranked in importance.

In any artistic object, regardless of what it's made of, we can discern three distinct realities: the manifest content, the latent content, and the exterior or superficial aspect.

Choosing an example from visual arts, I can show you more easily what I mean.

Take a painting by Rembrandt, a figurative painting.

The painting "represents" an old man, in some kind of setting in a given colour. It's an anecdotal subject.

Clearly, this anecdotal subject has absolutely no importance in itself. Any modestly gifted student could copy that anecdotal subject and provide a more or less identical superficial aspect. But that doesn't mean he will reach the expressive heights of a Rembrandt. The student copier will do nothing but deceive a few particularly naïf and uneducated laymen.

Many people never see beyond this facade. They get a vague sentimental pleasure from it: "the expression in the eyes is so touching,"

they say, "the painting is a perfect depiction of human dignity; I love the way the old man carries himself so nobly, he reminds me of my grandfather, the colours are pretty, etc."

Such people have no idea of the fundamental reality of a painting.

What is that fundamental reality?

Obviously, it's the convulsive shock, the tangible, inherent richness of material relationships which I spoke of earlier.

These plastic relationships are all that matter in art. Intention is unable to produce them; they can only flow from total generosity.

If desire is ardent and strong, those relationships will write themselves in matter, by themselves, unpredictably and significantly. The artist is only concerned about them a priori. . .

The particular reality of material relationships is called (at least by me) the manifest content.

It is through the quality of the manifest content that we recognize the authenticity of a process. I cannot believe that a small-minded process will ever give birth to an authentic product, any more than small-minded products can be the result of an authentic process. The content and the container are qualitatively inseparable.

No doubt, though the manifest content may be the only ultimate reality from the artistic point of view, that doesn't mean it's the only reality found in the object.

An object of art is capable of giving all, of revealing all. Those of us who are least demanding get the inferior gifts; the most demanding get the most nourishing.

Obviously, since an art object is produced by a human being, by a human brain, by particular libidinal energies, the psychological reality of that human is also trapped in matter.

A rigorous psychoanalytic process, by competent specialists, could no doubt reveal in detail the artist's psychological reality; but I insist—no offence to good old Freud—psychological reality (the latent content) is much more discernable in the manifest content than in the apparent subject.

In any case, these preoccupations are the concern of psychoanalysis and are extrinsic to art; I have no desire to comment further at the moment.

We'll have plenty to keep us busy just limiting ourselves to the manifest content.

As another illustration of my argument, let's take Victor Hugo's poem, "Le mariage de Roland."

The apparent aspect of this poem would be the brief epic story it tells, charming in its own right and capable of being told in many different ways.

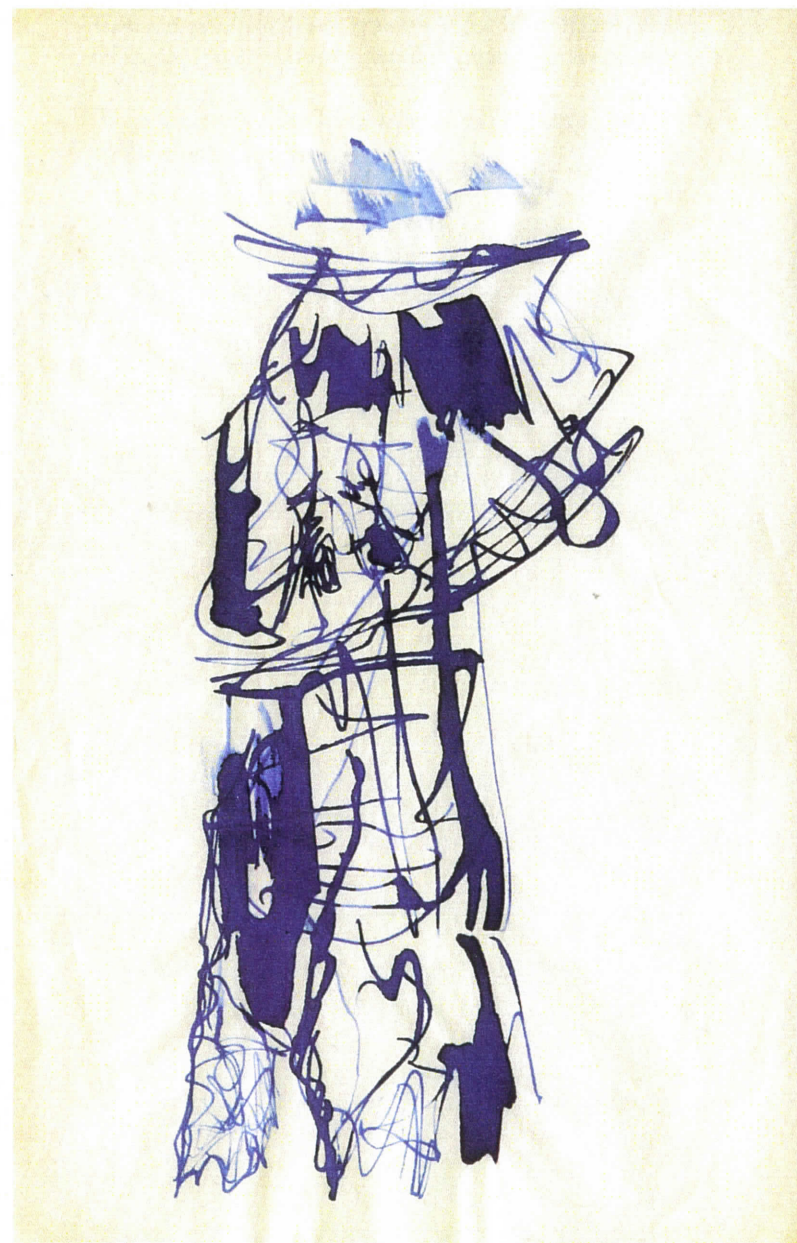
The manifest content would be the intrinsic proportions of the object: the progression and intermixing of rhythms, the verbal shocks, the imagistic particularities, the relationships, all qualities impossible to repeat.

The latent content would be the unconscious preoccupations of Victor Hugo which dictate to him this choice of epithet, that emphasis, this mixing of elements, that break or disjunction, etc.

I hope I'm making myself clear.

Now, the convulsive elements of the manifest content give the impression of a sort of imponderable fluidity, impossible to analyse, flowing through the veins of the object thanks entirely to the balance of desire and will in the poem's creator.

Though the exterior aspect of a work may be sometimes copied, its manifest content (its fluid) is infallibly impossible to transpose.



Creators produce living, emotive objects; imitators, despite their
often very patient servility, produce frigid objects of no interest.

There is no substitute for the dictates of the unpredictable rhythms
of thought and desire.

Letter of April 13, 1950 (p.293-304)

[....]

I've already told you that the aspiration and the essence of all poetry is to translate through the image, consciously or unconsciously, the most subtle and most pressing nuances of thought.

I defined "poetic image" more or less in this way: "It is the association or confrontation of all kinds of verbal elements: syllables, abstract words, concrete words, letters, sounds, etc." (Incidentally, having said that, I wonder how [Tristan] Tzara can remain so much a closed book for you.)

By means of a projection, I also tried to give you a better sense of the nature of imagistic relationships.

Did I succeed? I don't know.

In any case, before getting back to concrete references (which were, in fact, the sources of my definitions), I should explain that, during the past summer, I was able to classify the image into four categories (the distinctions may not be absolutely clear, as the classification is obviously based on questions of intellectual understanding and discipline, not on the basic, sensory quality of the objects): the rhythmic image [l'image rythmique], the reflective image [l'image mémorante], the transformational image [l'image transfigurante], and the explorational image [l'image exploréenne].

I can only pity the imbecile who might try to use my definitions to "construct" transformational or explorational images...Like all living realities, these images can only be produced involuntarily (and only if they are invented in the passion of an especially demanding expression), and they escape us whenever we try to make them ends in themselves.

The rhythmic image is the result of an already ancient observation that "every sound is an onomatopœa". The rhythmic image is the basic, necessary framework without which the existence of any ob-

ject is unthinkable. I would compare it to colour in painting; and I would also compare its role (maybe less precisely) to that of the bass in a jazz band.

To speak of sound is to speak of rhythm (heavy rhythm or subdued, doesn't matter). To speak of the letter is to speak of sound. It is impossible to have poetry without rhythm (I don't mean necessarily a codifiable rhythm).

Some sounds are harsher than others, some softer, more muffled, more grating, deeper, more whistling, more drab, sharper, more soporific. I'm sure you'll understand that it's no small matter which of these sound categories is used for expression.

Alternating rhythms in a succession of letters or combination of letters is in itself a force that can be suggestive or evocative, a force that can establish (even independently) a climate referring to any one of the senses: an odour, a warmth, a brightness, a heaviness, a tension, a clenching, a serenity, a thickness, a fluidity, a contradiction, a collision, a uniformity, open plains, emptiness, a gap, intervals, rage, gentleness, a friction, a tenuousness, a grating, a darkness, a calmness, an erection, a masturbation, a trail, a reflection, a twinkling, a strangling, a regular or irregular succession of alternates, a stickiness, a vitality, sleep, a breeze, a lute, a trumpet blast, an avalanche, depression, tears, a grinding, a tarantella, a gravity, a long, a short, a flowing, a tragic darkness, an erotic whiteness, a ferocity, an indulgence...

All I need do is call up the example of music to prove how sound is capable of suggesting anything...But that comparison causes me some trouble.

The rhythm of the rhythmic image is not exactly musical rhythm. Music is an art that appeals to the ear, essentially involved with hearing.

Be forewarned, this is not easy to explain!

Poetry, taken as a whole, is never satisfied with sensory stimuli alone. (Here I'm speaking of the spectator's point of view, of course.)

Poetry is the only art I know whose objects can be constructed through an exclusively mental process. Aside from poets, all artists express themselves by establishing a correspondence via instruments that exist outside their thought: the painter uses his colours and his tools; the dancer uses a spatially defined body; the musical composer uses notes classified by a system outside himself.

I think a composer, regardless of his skill, can never be sure that he has definitely invented something new until he has experienced it through the instrument he intended it for.

In poetry, relationships do not depend for their development either on an interpretive instrument, nor on any material outside thought.

Pencil and paper are elements totally extrinsic to the act of creating poetry. They do not play a determining or instrumental role.

The poetic object takes place integrally in the head. Pencil and paper are there as a substitute for deficient memory. They show our preoccupation with not losing the object, a consideration entirely independent of creation.

It is impossible in music to have theoretically unpredictable relationships, because all possible sounds are knowable in advance. Poetic relationships play on mental relationships and can be infinitely graduated, so there is no known limit to imagistic expression.

I'm not suggesting that poetry is superior to music, on the contrary, but I am trying to clarify differences. Music is a fantastic instrument of expression that the surrealists stupidly misunderstood.

For a poet, the image is the singular and nuanced mental state that pre-exists all writing, all possibility of writing. For the critic, for spectators, objectively, it is also a mental state constantly changing and unfolding—but only insofar as it is transcribed in matter, insofar as it is made concrete and capable of being experienced through

an apprehension of the object, with absolutely no consideration for the author's idea.

Thus, poetry plays constantly with analogy. For example, a poet will experience a special psychological state, a condition never to be repeated. That psychological ambience is, for him, poetic reality. But that reality, because it is unprecedented and unidentified, can never be translated by a simple conventional sign; and yet, since that reality is a human psychological reality, since there is nothing in human mentality that comes directly from the cosmos, the poet may (spontaneously), by taking simple realities or fractions of simple and common realities, create a new reality which, taken as a whole, will be an adequate equivalence for the initial psychological ambience.

This is a highly contemporary and important discovery: fractions of simple reality, assembled in new combinations, can give an adequate translation of a complex reality.

A thousand fractions of analogies, juxtaposed or fused, will manifest a reality that is unique (and perfectly knowable by alert sensibilities, supposing they have assimilated the thousand analogies then current).

Music appeals directly to the sense of hearing, through sound. It can happen that, in poetry, certain elements are musical, but I have difficulty imagining an imagistic relationship transmissible in any way but through a mental process (of comparison) on the part of the receptive spectator (an instantaneous operation, you might say). It is by disrupting in the spectator all the analogies accumulated by his normal experience that the poetic object is able to move him profoundly. (Needless to say, qualities of receptivity vary from one spectator to another.)

So I would argue that even the rhythmic image is not exclusively musical; it is translated through sound, but not insofar as it strikes our hearing, rather insofar as it conveys analogy. Thus, I consider the rhythmic image to be essentially an onomatopoeia.

Obviously, the term onomatopoeia will have to be enlarged beyond all the bounds acceptable up to now. This onomatopoeia does not occur only when a limited and specific object is evoked through simplistic imitation—but it does occur each time a scrap of reality (noumenal or phenomenal), or a psychological state, can be apprehended by means of verbal rhythm.

The pulsations of thought are necessarily written in rhythmic images. All poetic realities of all times possess the rhythmic image.

Now, is it possible for the rhythmic image to exist on its own in a given poetic reality? Are some fragments of Tzara's "Pélamide" made up exclusively of rhythmic images? Or, once again, are the images "explorational" (which obviously includes the rhythmic image)?

It's a problem I leave to your understanding (when you've read the entirety of this letter). We can come back to that later, if you wish.

By "reflective image" I mean the imagistic substance of a kind of poetry that limits itself to establishing links of comparison or metaphor among diverse constituent elements.

Even in Rimbaud, you will never find anything beyond rhythmic and reflective images.

There's not a single word in Rimbaud that is outside current usage. His incredible inventiveness resides in the way he situates words in relation to one another.

Even so, it is obvious that the subtlety of these dispositions and juxtapositions allowed him to communicate profoundly complex states.

The "transformational image" transcends metaphor. The elements are no longer assembled according to implicit comparisons—rather, fusions are produced comparable to chemical combinations, as when sodium chloride is no longer either chlorine or sodium.

In the transformational image, the transfigured elements can still be traced back relatively easily to their constituent elements. For example, a psychoanalytic reading of the transfigured elements is fairly simple.

An uncomplicated example of a transformational element might be: "the fish-chair." Everybody knows (at least by their functions) what a chair and a fish are. In "nature" a fish has neither the form nor function of a chair, any more than a chair has the form and function of a fish.

And yet, there you have a mental object that is the fusion of two ideas—or more accurately, the common denominator of two impressions produced by these objects.

"Chair" is an abstract word. "Fish" is an abstract word.

"Fish-chair" is an abstract word, though of a more evolved kind.

If we confine ourselves to the idea of "fish-chair", we'll never have a poem or poetry—but we will have a rather new idea, able to delight or trouble us.

The role of poetry is to take these abstract elements and concretise them by fixing them in singular relationships.

I'm sure you'll agree that mental automatism, when furnishing a quantity of transformational images, can produce a reality like no other (translating a unique mental ambiance)—and yet, all the constituent elements are widely known and current analogical elements.

Transformational poetry is easy to read. Frankly, I can't understand the cretins who are confused by it. Their sensitivity and their brains are stuck in mush.

The poetry of [Paul-Marie] Lapointe, among others, has not yet gone beyond the transformational image.

The more it evolves, the more transformational imagery has a tendency to unite intimately its constituent elements. The "chevreuil-anneau" [deer-ring] will become the "chevranneau" quite naturally, and "Agathe-âne-oeil" [Agatha-ass-eye] will become "ageneuil."

As the need for an expanded expression is felt more strongly, so poetry will be forced to use generic elements acting as common denominators in multitudes of words—and it is precisely the common element in each of these words, an element having no previous autonomous existence, which will now be expressed totally, and in its relationships with other, equally substantial and purified elements.

The totality of these complex relationships will represent a unique psychic climate.

Anyone with a sensitive, contemporary insight into poetry will show a capacity to assimilate automatically, instantaneously, instinctively, all the multiform nuances of this entire complex—because if we want to be able to vibrate in tune with poetry, we truly must feel something else in verbal matter besides dull, logical similitudes!

And don't come to me with some stupid objection that poems—perfectly material and concrete—are hermetic and inaccessible! If I can grasp Tristan Tzara's poems in their entirety, anybody is capable of understanding absolutely any poetic reality!

First you have to scrape the mud off your sensitivities, of course!

Every syllable is an integral part of an avalanche of words. What that syllable represents is precisely what every one of those words has in common. I don't know of any modern poet to date who has not used syllables to express himself—and letters. Anybody able to use the French language knows instinctively (or should know) the imponderable weight usually given to each syllable. Where there are syllables, there is current language; where there is current language there is something tangible.

So where does this ridiculous charge of incomprehensibility come from?

Syllables and words are values, they are tinctures, they are not the lackeys of some imaginary abstract monster!

I insist we cannot understand a poetic object by knowing the origin of the creative act, but only through the concrete and legible consequences of that act.

Theoretically, the author of a poetic object is no better situated than anyone else to help us appreciate his work.

Wherever the substance is integrally concrete, singular and unequivocal, how do you expect an impoverished, vague and general, logical language to play any role as an acceptable medium?

I must insist that contemporary poetic objects (such as paintings)—regardless of what popular mythology may say—are not complicated masks covering simple reality. These objects are singular realities, and like everything that is unique, there is no (more or less) transparent substitute for them.

Modern art is not a puzzle. The idea is not to go looking for something that might be concealed by verbal or plastic fireworks.

Paintings and poems are realities in themselves—realities that we can know through direct contact.

We have to learn how to appreciate this kind of concrete matter on its own terms—otherwise we sink into nominalism, and then all we can tolerate without bitterness is “the well-worn phrase, the vague illusion, or the precise, abstract, devitalized similitude with no mystery left in it” (Borduas).

Thus, through the force of natural evolution, through the exigencies of the mechanism of knowledge always searching for new mysteries to be solved, the expressive dynamism demands more and more strict singularity and precision.

The more tree-cutting allows access to unexplored plains, the more we become conscious of tenuous, unexpressed and (I swear) inexpressible subtleties. As all multi-functional elements appear increasingly insipid and impotent, we have to resort more to virgin terms, to nuts and bolts that have never gone together before.

Nothing could be more logical: special conditions need to be translated by special elements.

But since these singular elements are not found just anywhere (alas), we have to invent them starting from existing materials. Traces of known abstract words, shaped into a bold unconscious jumble, produce the explorational image.

An explorational image is involved whenever the elements forming new, singular elements are no longer discernable by any analytic operation. I would also suggest that an explorational image exists when the present state of psychoanalysis will not allow that science—at least not without a laborious operation still unknown—to discover the latent content of the poetic object.

Before surreational automatism in poetry, the explorational image was never used except accidentally in the general evolution.

I must admit—without false modesty because it's quite simply true—that the explorational image is the personal discovery I'm most proud of.

The "Lettriste" school now active in Europe—which is inclined to codify Dada—is nothing but a more or less rigid school of abstract art, in my opinion.

It seems that for them, poetry can only be found (and it may be, of course) in a regularized rhythmic image. Besides, the onomatopoeia in their work is not terribly bizarre or unexpected!

Apart from a few bits of [Antonin] Artaud, certain passages of Tzara's poetry and also maybe of Arthur Cravan, I believe it is impossible to find in history a poetic image so evolved as the explorational image (and again, I'm not so sure the images found in the works of Tzara, Artaud and Cravan—as in Aimé Césaire—are not simply rhythmic images).

Surrealist automatism—which is psychic automatism—never produced anything more than rather elementary transformational images (which leads me to believe that, through intellectual habit, in spite of themselves, more or less unconsciously, the Surrealists still exercise a kind of aesthetic control over all of their productions—because psychic automatism, when pushed as far as it will go, as my own personal experience shows, always ends up by producing nothing but syllables).

For me, psychic automatism is the following: an attempt to write while the will is in as complete a state of relaxation as possible. One tries to achieve a maximum state of emotional neutrality. So it is a question of writing down the mundane, habitual unfolding of subconscious mental associations. One must therefore try to be impassive, to forget oneself, to distract one's logical mind.

Believe me, psychic automatism is a fascinating experience. But precisely because of that state of emotional "sleep," I believe the only elements that rise to the surface are the most superficial, which soon become commonplace, creating a certain kind of monotony.

The unconscious mind cannot be exploited, any more than the conscious. Psychic automatism—precisely because it soon allows a complete loss of anxiety—is no longer able to arouse or uproot anything precious; it is satisfied with capturing a few rather facile and superficial elements.

It leads to a kind of routine new genre.

You can see how it would be easy to get tired of psychic automatism.

In my opinion, "intellectual habits" have screwed up the whole of surrealist automatism. They didn't go deep enough.

To go deeper into the unconscious, to dynamite certain apparently impassable walls, what you need is precisely the commotion of an emotional volcano.

To allow a strong emotion to build up after it has shaken and shocked all our mental barriers, and then to write down in order, without any kind of preconceived idea or method, the whole unique sequence which has unwound like an endless snake (until you've had enough), that is how to expose in broad daylight caverns and deep recesses that the murmurings of the superficial unconscious won't even allow us to imagine. And that is surreational automatism.

Take my word for it, there is more than one level and layer to the unconscious.

The explorational image is the authentic offshoot of surreational automatism.

I will give you an extract from a text of psychic automatism by Raymond Queneau, and then an extract of one of my own texts in which you will see a few explorational expressions (rather moderate ones, incidentally). That way, you can have a comparative appreciation of the differences in discipline in the two texts.

Here is the Queneau extract:

The asteroids scatter over all the nations. The women gather them to decorate their pianos, men hold out their hats, children shout and dogs piss against walls spotted with brains.

And now here is an extract taken randomly from *Le vampire et la nymphomane* [The Vampire and the Nymphomaniac]:

The three-cornered java is the emblem of my hoop
and the afghan with the gorilla mucouses is the
stereoscope of my grammarian games.
A lasso thrown in the shiver of April weather describes
the depths of my mastiff smell-sense.
I pirouette like the star of French women's pinions.
But rakutt-ni. I obozz the magay with its lunar toon gar!
Nannanna da fubulutt.
Keyrrac!! Twelve welve!
Doggie with a cool cube a doob.
Marmamira microscope.
I am a tailor hoarding the measurementments of handsome dalo.

You can see how the transformational image quite naturally calls up the explorational image.

The nuances of thought felt are so shimmering and fine at this point, all possible means of concretization are necessary to produce an expression that's not too pathetic.

Did you notice how it may be necessary and enlightening, for example, when you want to capture a tiny, tyrannical nuance, to use a feminine article to qualify a word that's usually masculine?

Can you see how traditional spelling can be relatively useful in that it allows us to translate minute (and therefore all the more cherished) subtleties by maintaining our distance through the violent and puerile breaking of one of its rules?

In "Au Coeur des quenouilles"—a little play that was printed in *Refus global*—an absolutely deliberate and necessary "spelling error" has become almost famous...

A cold-blooded clown named Roger Duhamel thought he could make fun of me by pointing out the mistake!...

Things have become so difficult, we now have to make use of every expressive weapon at our disposal.

The possibilities for the spectator are immense as well—if only he can lose a bit of his constipation!...

My humble apologies for having quoted myself just now—necessity called. (Sincerely, I don't know any texts besides my own with a definitely explorational quality)

In my texts, the constant mixing together and interlacing of everyday words and explorational words is one of the most frequent causes of the stupefaction some readers feel. It's also the most recognized part of my footprint.

The explorational image is a great blessing. Since the latent content of explorational works is not yet easily classifiable, explorational poetry saves the poet from the analytic mania that can lower works of art to the level of puzzles.

You ask if Tzara's works and my plays are examples of "unconscious delirium".

I don't know exactly what you mean by that expression—but let me assure you that surreational works, at least, are created in the most trembling lucidity.

Surreational automatism is an "inspired automatism." (That is precisely what distinguishes it from psychic automatism, which is supposedly more of a "passive" automatism in which inspiration is not supposed to have any place.)

Let me repeat that I'm convinced "automatic inspiration" has its roots firmly in libidinous energy. The elements appear and arrange themselves under the most fantastic state of emotion—but I don't think it should be labelled as a case of delirium, properly speaking.

Delirium, it seems to me, destroys all volition. In surreational automatism, volition is not totally abolished—it exists after all, at the service of rigour.

No

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