

Classic Poetry Series

Andre Breton
- poems -

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Andre Breton(19 February 1896 – 28 September 1966)

a French writer and poet. He is known best as the founder of Surrealism. His writings include the first Surrealist Manifesto (Manifeste du surréalisme) of 1924, in which he defined surrealism as "pure psychic automatism".

Biography

Born to a family of modest means in Tinchebray (Orne) in Normandy, he studied medicine and psychiatry. During World War I he worked in a neurological ward in Nantes, where he met the devotee of Alfred Jarry, Jacques Vaché, whose anti-social attitude and disdain for established artistic tradition influenced Breton considerably. Vaché committed suicide at age 24, and his war-time letters to Breton and others were published in a volume entitled *Lettres de guerre* (1919), for which Breton wrote four introductory essays.

Breton married his first wife, Simone Kahn, on 15 September 1921. The couple relocated to rue Fontaine # 42 in Paris on 1 January 1922. The apartment on rue Fontaine became home to Breton's collection of more than 5,300 items: modern paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, books, art catalogs, journals, manuscripts, and works of popular and Oceanic art.

From Dada to Surrealism

In 1919 Breton initiated the review *Littérature* with Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault. He also associated with Dadaist Tristan Tzara. In 1924 he was instrumental in the founding of the Bureau of Surrealist Research.

In a publication *The Magnetic Fields* (*Les Champs Magnétiques*), a collaboration with Soupault, he implemented the principle of automatic writing. He published the Surrealist Manifesto in 1924, and was editor of the magazine *La Révolution surréaliste* from 1924. A group of writers became associated with him: Philippe Soupault, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, René Crevel, Michel Leiris, Benjamin Péret, Antonin Artaud, and Robert Desnos.

Anxious to combine the themes of personal transformation found in the works of Arthur Rimbaud with the politics of Karl Marx, Breton joined the French Communist Party in 1927, from which he was expelled in 1933. During this time, he survived mostly by the sale of paintings from his art gallery.

In 1935, there was a conflict between Breton and Ilya Ehrenburg during the first "International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture" which opened in Paris in June. Breton had been insulted by Ehrenburg—along with all fellow surrealists—in a pamphlet which said, among other things, that surrealists were "pederasts". Breton slapped Ehrenburg several times on the street, which resulted in surrealists being expelled from the Congress. Crevel, who according to Salvador Dalí, was "the only serious communist among surrealists" was isolated from Breton and other surrealists, who were unhappy with Crevel because of his homosexuality and annoyed with communists in general.

In 1938, Breton accepted a cultural commission from the French government to travel to Mexico. After a conference at the National Autonomous University of Mexico about surrealism, Breton stated after getting lost in Mexico City (as no one was waiting for him at the airport) "I don't know why I came here. Mexico is the most surrealist country in the world".

However, visiting Mexico provided the opportunity to meet Leon Trotsky. Breton and other surrealists traveled via a long boat ride from Patzcuaro to the town of Erongaricuaru. Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo were among the visitors to the hidden community of intellectuals and artists. Together, Breton and Trotsky wrote a manifesto *Pour un art révolutionnaire indépendant* (published under the names of Breton and Diego Rivera) calling for "complete freedom of art", which was becoming increasingly difficult with the world situation of the time.

1940s

Breton was again in the medical corps of the French Army at the start of World War II. The Vichy government banned his writings as "the very negation of the national revolution" and Breton escaped, with the help of the American Varian Fry and Harry Bingham, to the United States and the Caribbean during 1941. Breton got to know Martinican writer Aimé Césaire, and later composed the introduction to the 1947 edition of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. During his exile in New York City he met Elisa, the Chilean woman who would become his third wife.

In 1944, he and Elisa traveled to the Gaspé Peninsula in Québec, Canada, where he wrote *Arcane 17*, a book which expresses his fears of World War II, describes the marvels of the Rocher Percé and the extreme northeastern part of North America, and celebrates his new romance with Elisa.

Later life

Breton returned to Paris in 1946, where he opposed French colonialism (for example as a signatory of the Manifesto of the 121 against the Algerian war) and continued, until his death, to foster a second group of surrealists in the form of expositions or reviews (La Brèche, 1961–1965). In 1959, he organized an exhibit in Paris.

By the end of World War II André Breton decided to embrace anarchism explicitly. In 1952 Breton wrote "It was in the black mirror of anarchism that surrealism first recognised itself." "Breton was consistent in his support for the francophone Anarchist Federation and he continued to offer his solidarity after the Platformists around Fontenis transformed the FA into the Federation Communiste Libertaire. He was one of the few intellectuals who continued to offer his support to the FCL during the Algerian war when the FCL suffered severe repression and was forced underground. He sheltered Fontenis whilst he was in hiding. He refused to take sides on the splits in the French anarchist movement and both he and Peret expressed solidarity as well with the new FA set up by the synthesist anarchists and worked in the Antifascist Committees of the 60s alongside the FA."

André Breton died in 1966 at 70 and was buried in the Cimetière des Batignolles in Paris

Always For The First Time

Always for the first time
Hardly do I know you by sight
You return at some hour of the night to a house at an angle to my window
A wholly imaginary house
It is there that from one second to the next
In the inviolate darkness
I anticipate once more the fascinating rift occurring
The one and only rift
In the facade and in my heart
The closer I come to you
In reality
The more the key sings at the door of the unknown room
Where you appear alone before me
At first you coalesce entirely with the brightness
The elusive angle of a curtain
It's a field of jasmine I gazed upon at dawn on a road in the vicinity of Grasse
With the diagonal slant of its girls picking
Behind them the dark falling wing of the plants stripped bare
Before them a T-square of dazzling light
The curtain invisibly raised
In a frenzy all the flowers swarm back in
It is you at grips with that too long hour never dim enough until sleep
You as though you could be
The same except that I shall perhaps never meet you
You pretend not to know I am watching you
Marvelously I am no longer sure you know
You idleness brings tears to my eyes
A swarm of interpretations surrounds each of your gestures
It's a honeydew hunt
There are rocking chairs on a deck there are branches that may well scratch you
in the forest
There are in a shop window in the rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette
Two lovely crossed legs caught in long stockings
Flaring out in the center of a great white clover
There is a silken ladder rolled out over the ivy
There is
By my leaning over the precipice
Of your presence and your absence in hopeless fusion
My finding the secret

Of loving you
Always for the first time

Andre Breton

Freedom Of Love

(Translated from the French by Edouard Roditi)

My wife with the hair of a wood fire
With the thoughts of heat lightning
With the waist of an hourglass
With the waist of an otter in the teeth of a tiger
My wife with the lips of a cockade and of a bunch of stars of the last magnitude
With the teeth of tracks of white mice on the white earth
With the tongue of rubbed amber and glass
My wife with the tongue of a stabbed host
With the tongue of a doll that opens and closes its eyes
With the tongue of an unbelievable stone
My wife with the eyelashes of strokes of a child's writing
With brows of the edge of a swallow's nest
My wife with the brow of slates of a hothouse roof
And of steam on the panes
My wife with shoulders of champagne
And of a fountain with dolphin-heads beneath the ice
My wife with wrists of matches
My wife with fingers of luck and ace of hearts
With fingers of mown hay
My wife with armpits of marten and of beechnut
And of Midsummer Night
Of privet and of an angelfish nest
With arms of seafoam and of riverlocks
And of a mingling of the wheat and the mill
My wife with legs of flares
With the movements of clockwork and despair
My wife with calves of eldertree pith
My wife with feet of initials
With feet of rings of keys and Java sparrows drinking
My wife with a neck of unpearled barley
My wife with a throat of the valley of gold
Of a tryst in the very bed of the torrent
With breasts of night
My wife with breasts of a marine molehill
My wife with breasts of the ruby's crucible
With breasts of the rose's spectre beneath the dew
My wife with the belly of an unfolding of the fan of days

With the belly of a gigantic claw
My wife with the back of a bird fleeing vertically
With a back of quicksilver
With a back of light
With a nape of rolled stone and wet chalk
And of the drop of a glass where one has just been drinking
My wife with hips of a skiff
With hips of a chandelier and of arrow-feathers
And of shafts of white peacock plumes
Of an insensible pendulum
My wife with buttocks of sandstone and asbestos
My wife with buttocks of swans' backs
My wife with buttocks of spring
With the sex of an iris
My wife with the sex of a mining-placer and of a platypus
My wife with a sex of seaweed and ancient sweetmeat
My wife with a sex of mirror
My wife with eyes full of tears
With eyes of purple panoply and of a magnetic needle
My wife with savanna eyes
My wife with eyes of water to be drunk in prison
My wife with eyes of wood always under the axe
My wife with eyes of water-level of level of air earth and fire

Andre Breton

It Was Going on Five in the Morning

It was going on five in the morning
The ship of steam stretched its chain to shatter the windows
And outside
A glowworm
Lifted Paris like a leaf
It was only a long trembling scream
A scream from the Maternity Hospital nearby
FINIS FOUNDRY FANATIC
But whatever joy escaped in the exhalation of that pain
It seems to me that I was falling for a long time
I still had my fist clenched around a handful of grass
And suddenly that rustle of flowers and needles of ice
Those green eyebrows that shooting-star pendulum
From what depths was the bell actually able to rise again
The hermetic bell
Which nothing last night made me foresee would stop on this landing
The bell whose sides read
Undine
Moving to raise your spearheaded Sagittarius pedal
You had carved the infallible signs
Of my enchantment
With a dagger whose coral handle forks into infinity
So that your blood and mine
Would become one

Andre Breton

Le Verbe Être

Je connais le désespoir dans ses grandes lignes. Le désespoir n'a pas d'ailes, il ne se tient pas nécessairement à une table desservie sur une terrasse, le soir, au bord de la mer. C'est le désespoir et ce n'est pas le retour d'une quantité de petits faits comme des graines qui quittent à la nuit tombante un sillon pour un autre. Ce n'est pas la mousse sur une pierre ou le verre à boire. C'est un bateau criblé de neige, si vous voulez, comme les oiseaux qui tombent et leur sang n'a pas la moindre épaisseur. Je connais le désespoir dans ses grandes lignes. Une forme très petite, délimitée par un bijou de cheveux. C'est le désespoir. Un collier de perles pour lequel on ne saurait trouver de fermoir et dont l'existence ne tient pas même à un fil, voilà le désespoir. Le reste, nous n'en parlons pas. Nous n'avons pas fini de désespérer, si nous commençons. Moi je désespère de l'abat-jour vers quatre heures, je désespère de l'éventail vers minuit, je désespère de la cigarette des condamnés. Je connais le désespoir dans ses grandes lignes. Le désespoir n'a pas de coeur, la main reste toujours au désespoir hors d'haleine, au désespoir dont les glaces ne nous disent jamais s'il est mort. Je vis de ce désespoir qui m'enchant. J'aime cette mouche bleue qui vole dans le ciel à l'heure où les étoiles chantonent. Je connais dans ses grandes lignes le désespoir aux longs étonnements grêles, le désespoir de la fierté, le désespoir de la colère. Je me lève chaque jour comme tout le monde et je détends les bras sur un papier à fleurs, je ne me souviens de rien, et c'est toujours avec désespoir que je découvre les beaux arbres déracinés de la nuit. L'air de la chambre est beau comme des baguettes de tambour. Il fait un temps de temps. Je connais le désespoir dans ses grandes lignes. C'est comme le vent du rideau qui me tend la perche. A-t-on idée d'un désespoir pareil! Au feu! Ah! ils vont encore venir... Et les annonces de journal, et les réclames lumineuses le long du canal. Tas de sable, espèce de tas de sable! Dans ses grandes lignes le désespoir n'a pas d'importance. C'est une corvée d'arbres qui va encore faire une forêt, c'est une corvée d'étoiles qui va encore faire un jour de moins, c'est une corvée de jours de moins qui va encore faire ma vie.

Andre Breton

Less Time

Less time than it takes to say it, less tears than it takes to die; I've taken account of everything, there you have it. I've made a census of the stones, they are as numerous as my fingers and some others; I've distributed some pamphlets to the plants, but not all were willing to accept them. I've kept company with music for a second only and now I no longer know what to think of suicide, for if I ever want to part from myself, the exit is on this side and, I add mischievously, the entrance, the re-entrance is on the other. You see what you still have to do. Hours, grief, I don't keep a reasonable account of them; I'm alone, I look out of the window; there is no passerby, or rather no one passes (underline passes). You don't know this man? It's Mr. Same. May I introduce Madam Madam? And their children. Then I turn back on my steps, my steps turn back too, but I don't know exactly what they turn back on. I consult a schedule; the names of the towns have been replaced by the names of people who have been quite close to me. Shall I go to A, return to B, change at X? Yes, of course I'll change at X. Provided I don't miss the connection with boredom! There we are: boredom, beautiful parallels, ah! how beautiful the parallels are under God's perpendicular.

Andre Breton

Postman Cheval

We are the birds always charmed by you from the top of these belvederes
And that each night form a blossoming branch between your shoulders and the
arms of your well beloved wheelbarrow
Which we tear out swifter than sparks at your wrist
We are the sighs of the glass statue that raises itself on its elbow when man
sleeps
And shining holes appear in his bed
Holes through which stags with coral antlers can be seen in a glade
And naked women at the bottom of a mine
You remembered then you got up you got out of the train
Without glancing at the locomotive attacked by immense barometric roots
Complaining about its murdered boilers in the virgin forest
Its funnels smoking jacinths and moulting blue snakes
Then we went on, plants subject to metamorphosis
Each night making signs that man may understand
While his house collapses and he stands amazed before the singular packing-
cases
Sought after by his bed with the corridor and the staircase
The staircase goes on without end
It leads to a millstone door it enlarges suddenly in a public square
It is made of the backs of swans with a spreading wing for banisters
It turns inside out as though it were going to bite itself
But no, it is content at the sound of our feet to open all its steps like drawers
Drawers of bread drawers of wine drawers of soap drawers of ice drawers of
stairs
Drawers of flesh with handsfull of hair
Without turning round you seized the trowel with which breasts are made
We smiled at you you held us round the waist
And we took the positions of your pleasure
Motionless under our lids for ever as woman delights to see man
After having made love.

Andre Breton

The Spectral Attitudes

I attach no importance to life
I pin not the least of life's butterflies to importance
I do not matter to life
But the branches of salt the white branches
All the shadow bubbles
And the sea-anemones
Come down and breathe within my thoughts
They come from tears that are not mine
From steps I do not take that are steps twice
And of which the sand remembers the flood-tide
The bars are in the cage
And the birds come down from far above to sing before these bars
A subterranean passage unites all perfumes
A woman pledged herself there one day
This woman became so bright that I could no longer see her
With these eyes which have seen my own self burning
I was then already as old as I am now
And I watched over myself and my thoughts like a night watchman in an
immense factory Keeping watch alone
The circus always enchants the same tramlines
The plaster figures have lost nothing of their expression
They who bit the smile's fig
I know of a drapery in a forgotten town
If it pleased me to appear to you wrapped in this drapery
You would think that your end was approaching
Like mine
At last the fountains would understand that you must not say Fountain
The wolves are clothed in mirrors of snow
I have a boat detached from all climates
I am dragged along by an ice-pack with teeth of flame
I cut and cleave the wood of this tree that will always be green
A musician is caught up in the strings of his instrument
The skull and crossbones of the time of any childhood story
Goes on board a ship that is as yet its own ghost only
Perhaps there is a hilt to this sword
But already there is a duel in this hilt
During the duel the combatants are unarmed
Death is the least offence
The future never comes

The curtains that have never been raised
Float to the windows of houses that are to be built
The beds made of lilies
Slide beneath the lamps of dew
There will come an evening
The nuggets of light become still underneath the blue moss
The hands that tie and untie the knots of love and of air
Keep all their transparency for those who have eyes to see
They see the palms of hands
The crowns in eyes
But the brazier of crown and palms
Can scarcely be lit in the deepest part of the forest
There where the stags bend their heads to examine the years
Nothing more than a feeble beating is heard
From which sound a thousand louder or softer sounds proceed
And the beating goes on and on
There are dresses that vibrate
And their vibration is in unison with the beating
When I wish to see the faces of those that wear them
A great fog rises from the ground
At the bottom of the steeples behind the most elegant reservoirs of life and of
wealth
In the gorges which hide themselves between two mountains
On the sea at the hour when the sun cools down
Those who make signs to me are separated by stars
And yet the carriage overturned at full speed
Carries as far as my last hesitation
That awaits me down there in the town where the statues of bronze
and of stone have changed places with statues of wax Banyans banyans.

Andre Breton

Tournesol

La voyageuse qui traverse les Halles à la tombée de
l'étée;
Marchait sur la pointe des pieds
Le désespoir roulait au ciel ses grands arums si beaux
Et dans le sac à main il y avait mon réve ce flacon de sels
Que seule a respiré la marraine de Dieu
Les torpeurs se déployaient comme la buée
Au Chien qui fume
Ou venaient d'entrer le pour et le contre
La jeune femme ne pouvait étre vue d'eux que mal et de biais
Avais-je affaire à l'ambassadrice du salpétre
Ou de la courbe blanche sur fond noir que nous appelons pensée
Les lampions prenaient feu lentement dans les marronniers
La dame sans ombre s'agenouilla sur le Pont-au-Change
Rue Git-le-Coeur les timbres n'étaient plus les mémes
Les promesses de nuits étaient enfin tenues
Les pigeons voyageurs les baisers de secours
Se joignaient aux seins de la belle inconnue
Dardés sous le crépe des significations parfaites
Une ferme prospérait en plein Paris
Et ses fenétres donnaient sur la voie lactée
Mais personne ne l'habitait encore à cause des survenants
Des survenants qu'on sait plus devoués que les revenants
Les uns comme cette femme ont l'air de nager
Et dans l'amour il entre un peu de leur substance
Elle les interiorise
Je ne suis le jouet d'aucune puissance sensorielle
Et pourtant le grillon qui chantait dans les cheveux de cendres
Un soir près de la statue d'Etienne Marcel
M'a jeté un coup d'oeil d'intelligence
André Breton a-t-il dit passe

Andre Breton