

Georges Sebbag

## The Animated Painting of the Surrealist Dreamer (I)

The surrealists packed a punch. They embarked on a reformation of understanding. Better yet, they carried out an “integral recasting of the human spirit” (Breton, 1957, 275). These new founders of “mental substance” (Aragon, 1924) donned the mantle of the poet and the philosopher, refurbished the tools of the artist and the experimenter, and forged a group. They seized upon the dream, mental substance *par excellence*, and made it run the gauntlet. They tried and tested it from all angles: dream, erotic slumber, nightmare, somnambulism, mediumistic state, hypnotic sleep, hypnagogic visions (at the onset of sleep, during semi-wakefulness or on awakening), waking dream, reverie, erotic reverie. They experienced and studied the dream on a sentient, esthetic and theoretical plane. Since they sought to conduct their own research, they were not burdened, at least in the beginning, by the interpretation of dreams proposed by Sigmund Freud. For them, the choice of the dream was a major concern, as is clearly shown by the *philosophical* definition of surrealism proposed by André Breton in 1924: “Surrealism is based on a belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of the dream, and in the disinterested play of thought.” (Breton, 1924b, 26).

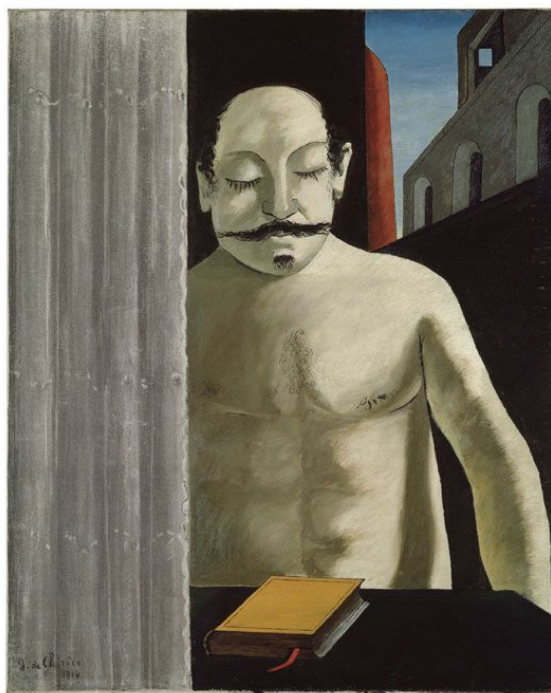
A consideration of surrealism and the dream involves, in my opinion, three stages. To begin with, there would seem to be a need to compile an extensive inventory of surrealist research in this area. Next, it is important to understand the extent to which an examination of the dream is mandatory in the philosophical system devised by Louis Aragon and André Breton. Lastly, and most importantly, it will be necessary to see how the surrealist conception of the dream as *animated painting* is applied to visual works, an idea the surrealists more or less borrowed from their extraordinary precursor, the illustrator J. J. Grandville.

### Research into the dream

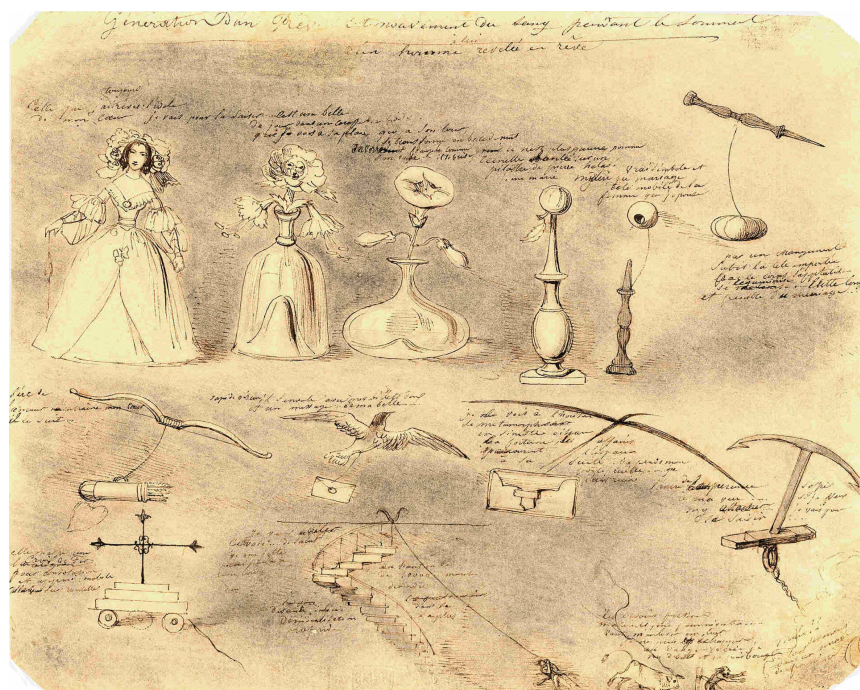
“The dream is a second life”—thus begins Gérard de Nerval’s *Aurélia*. The entire Surrealist adventure stipulates this lifting of the barriers between dream and wakefulness. Twelve moments punctuate the surrealist research into the dream:

#### 1. The onset of sleep (early 1919)

At the end of January 1919 Breton hears, prior to falling asleep, the phrase “There is a man cut in two by the window.” From this automatic message there will ensue the automatic writing of *The Magnetic Fields*, a symbiotic work by the “hermit crabs” Breton & Soupault.



Giorgio De Chirico, *The Child's Brain*, 1914



J. J. Grandville, *Femme au bal* (1840s?)

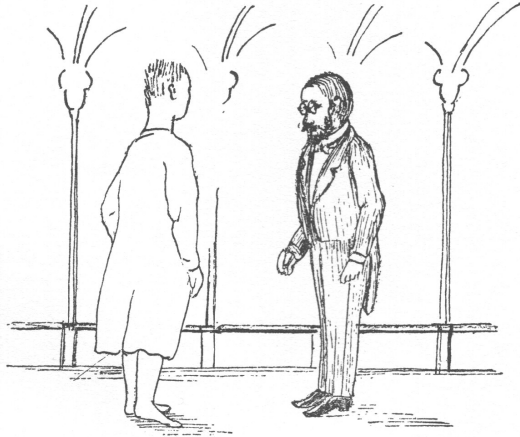
#### 2. Dream narratives (March 1922 – June 1929)

In March 1922 the first issue of the new series of *Littérature* publishes “Three Dream Narratives” by André Breton, preceded by a reproduction of the painting by Giorgio de Chirico, *The Child's Brain*, in which the corpulent bare-chested figure before us, with eyelids lowered, appears to have just climbed out of bed at night like a sleepwalker. (In December 1929, in the final issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, sixteen photo booth portraits of the drowsy Surrealists, their eyes shut, will frame the René Magritte painting *I Do Not See [the Woman] Hidden in the Forest*. During the 1920s all the members of the Surrealist Group devote themselves to automatic writing and transcribe their dreams upon waking. *Littérature* publishes, in October 1922, three dreams by Robert Desnos and then, in December, a dream by Breton. With *La Révolution surréaliste*, this will become an avalanche. December 1924: a dream by De Chirico, three dreams by Breton, a long dream by Renée Gauthier, six dreams by Michel Leiris entitled “The Land of My Dreams,” and lastly a speculative piece by René Crevel on the topic of dream and sleep, evoking in passing a painting by De Chirico. April 1925:

(continued on page 4)

## PERCY GOLDTHWAIT STILES – DREAMS (II)

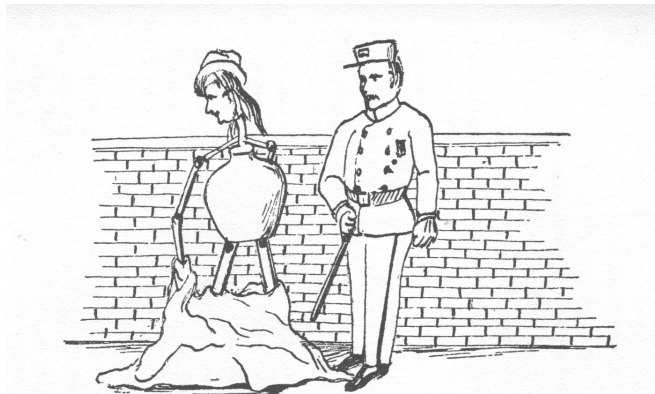
The dreamer was strolling along a hotel corridor, an ornate and brightly lit place where there was much coming and going. He did not at first mind the circumstance that he wore only a night-shirt. But his complacency was short-lived. An immaculate stranger stopped for a moment to survey him and then said scathingly, "Well, I suppose you may call that evening dress." Extreme embarrassment resulted and the scribe retreated to his room.



A QUESTION OF ETIQUETTE

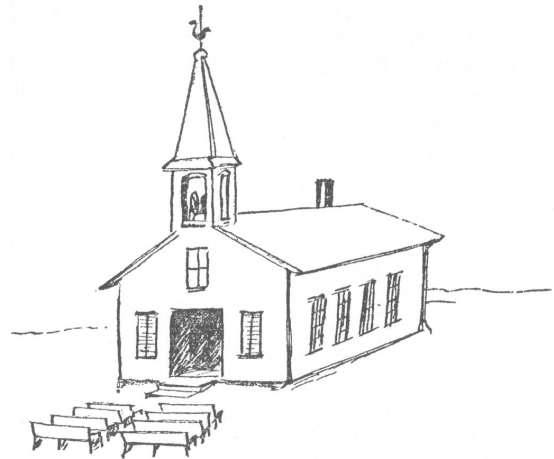
The scene was a shabby street believed to be in the West End of Boston. The witness saw three or four policemen walking rapidly and peering around as though following a trail. He himself looked about for suspicious characters. He did not see any such, only a plain woman trudging along the opposite sidewalk. One of the policemen overtook her and without warning began to strike her with his heavy club. The dreamer was mildly startled by the vicious attack; then he was more surprised by the indifference of the victim. She took several steps before a telling blow made her swerve against a brick wall and stand still.

Under a continuation of the beating, her clothes fell to the ground and the mystery was cleared up. The "woman" was an automaton contrived to move on two legs but having a large glass carboy for a body. The inference was drawn that this contained liquor. The ingenuity of the device for this illicit traffic impressed the looker-on considerably. So did the vigilance of the officers who had detected it.



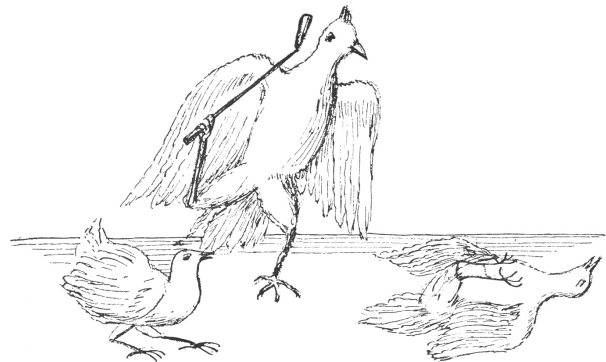
THE ANIMATED CARBOY

The dreamer saw a church, a common type of New England meeting-house standing in a green enclosure. He decided that the denomination was Baptist. The single door of the building stood open and not far from it on the grass were several pews. He understood at the time that these could be occupied by worshippers not finding room within. They could perhaps look down the aisle to the chancel and catch something of the service. (He recalls a Civil War picture in which General Grant and his staff are seated in pews removed from a Virginia church.) On reflection he inferred that this was a sex dream featuring the fact of restraint. The fundamental idea is that of remaining outside.



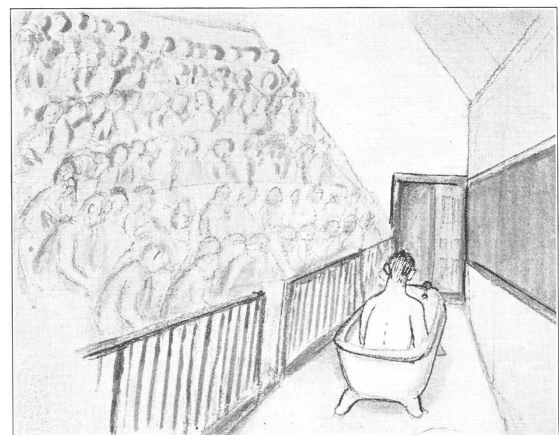
CONTINENCE

The attention of the dreamer was attracted by the movements of a large and handsome bird. It was strutting about on a shining surface. A very small bird ran before the large one, which instantly whipped a miniature golf-club from beneath its wing and with it stunned or killed the little fellow by a single blow. In a moment a second small bird blundered too close to the bully and was served in the same outrageous manner.



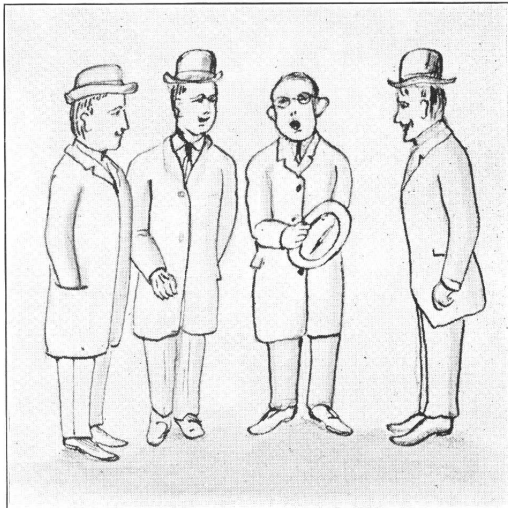
A DOUBLE TRAGEDY

The dreamer found himself taking a bath. The tub had replaced the table of the lecturer in a large amphitheater supposed to be one of those at the Harvard Medical School. A glare of white light beat mercilessly upon the tub and its occupant. He could not distinctly see the outlying parts of the room, but he made out that the seats were filled with spectators, silent and motionless. He hoped desperately that they were asleep.



HUMILIATED

The dreamer was one of four men in a drugstore. Something had been said or done to cast doubt upon the Americanism of this quartette and they had been boldly upbraided by a young woman who was on duty behind the counter. She charged them with revolutionary intentions. "We must square ourselves," said the narrator, honestly impressed and humbled by the reproaches. So he began to sing "My Country, 'tis of Thee." He supposed that his three friends were uniting with him; just as he was about to begin the third stanza with the utmost fervor, he realized that they were keeping still and grinning at his efforts. He was thoroughly abashed.



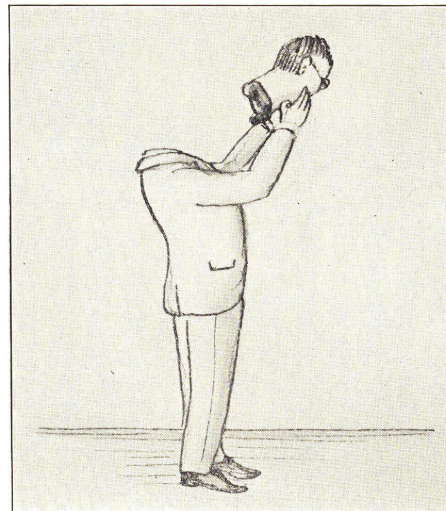
AN ARDENT SOLOIST

The dreamer found himself in the old Museum of Fine Arts which was in Copley Square, Boston. This building had been abandoned at least five years before the date of the dream. He was in company with G., one of his oldest and best friends. It struck him as very amusing that his companion should be carrying a fire-shovel. It seemed an extreme case of absent-mindedness for one to come from home to the city and forget to leave the implement. The next thought which came to the dreamer redoubled his risibility. He considered that G. would surely be stopped when he should try to leave the Museum. He would be accused of having stolen the shovel from among its treasures.



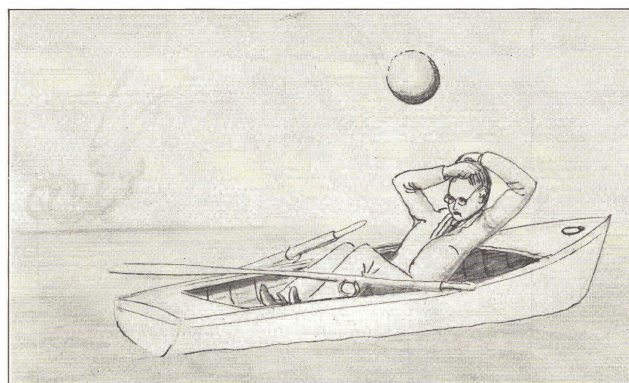
VAINGLORIOUS MALICE

The dreamer had a carbuncle in June, 1904, and naturally feared for several weeks that there might be some recurrence. It was during this period that he thought he took off his head and inspected the severed neck from below to check up on the healing process. Appearances were not reassuring. There was an ugly cavity with gangrenous borders. Even as he realized this ominous condition, he had an additional shock: the thyroid gland detached itself and fell upon the floor. Here was a dilemma, and it was appreciated with more acumen than has been usual in the dreams of this series. If the organ were left out, serious disturbances might be expected. If it were put back, an infection would be pretty certain to be carried with it. The decision as to what course to pursue was never reached, for the subject woke up.



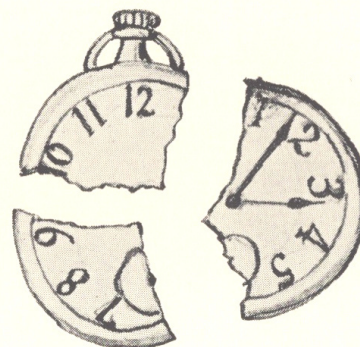
THE PROBLEM OF THE THYROID

He seemed to be drifting contentedly in an open boat upon a smiling blue sea. He thought that he was near Newport. About a mile away in a northerly direction there was a low sandy shore, from which at intervals there shot up gushes of white smoke. He thought that a mortar battery was in practice. He could hear the heavy reports and he discovered that he could follow the flight of the shells. It was not long before one came in his direction. He had just time to make out that it was an old-fashioned spherical affair when it landed on his head and he woke.



IMMINENT DEATH

The dreamer was distressed to find his watch completely broken into three parts. Bits of the internal mechanism were scattered about the floor.



A SERIOUS MISHAP

three dreams by a child, a dream by Max Morise, three dreams by Antonin Artaud, six by Paul Éluard, two by Pierre Naville, one by Raymond Queneau, one by Jacques-André Boiffard. July 1925: a long dream by Morise, four dreams by Leiris. October 1925: three old poems by De Chirico ("Hopes," "A Life," "One Night," in which a mixture of dream vision and "metaphysical painting" appear; five dreams by Leiris and three by Morise.

June 1926: two long dreams by Marcel Noll and a long dream by Leiris. October 1927: one dream by Aragon and one by Naville. March 1928: a long dream by Morise. Furthermore, in *Le Surréalisme en 1929* ("Surrealism in 1929"), a special issue of the Brussels magazine *Variétés*, two dream narratives by Georges Sadoul appear, as well as an iconography about the dream, which we will come back to.

(to be continued)

# Skeleidoscope

On the morning of February 4, 1993, I had this dream: in a meeting with friends, I propose that we explore the irrational uses of marrowbones. It seems to me that we could use them as time telescopes to know the past and the future. I now have the vision of Goethe being present at the battle of Austerlitz. He has just sawed such bones in ten-centimeter-long sections, and having adjusted them end to end, he looks down through this cylinder as if he were at the edge of a well scrutinizing the mystery of the abyss. He thus foresees the outcome of the battle which he now observes, using his bones as a telescope... Then I see him the following year, trying the same experience at the battle of Jena. But this time he appears worried because the results are far from conclusive...

Reading some time ago *Les Nuits du veilleur de nuit* by Jean-Pierre Guillon, I noticed in this collection of dream accounts the following one from the night of November 12 to 13, 1993: "A linguist who is a little crazy assures me that, with the help of very sophisticated calculations, he has managed to find the exact weight and real value of all the words in our language. Thus, according to him, dream, the word *dream* ("rêve" in French), weighs only two grams and is worth only two francs! Then, he displays a weird object, consisting of two pieces of a tibia bone nested one inside the other. He slides them before my eyes and asks me to admire the complex interplay of convergent and divergent lenses. 'This,' he tells me, 'is a telescope. But by comparison with the word *rêve*, that poor little four-letter word, I let you imagine the weight and the value that my calculations will give



Adolf Wölfl, *Calculation of Interest*, 1913 (detail)

to the word *telescope*. Judge for yourself!' And he shows me his results: astronomical figures with an impressive sequence of zeros, as in some paintings by Wölfl!"

## O N E I R I C C H I O E S

As an addendum to the section devoted to dreams about Marcel Duchamp in Dreamdew #4 (and also in #5 and #6), here is another dream recorded by Bruno Jacobs on July 8, 2018:



Marcel Duchamp at the Football World Championship of 2018

Note: While realizing the oneiric picture the next afternoon, I remembered that I had heard the previous day that the name of the coach of the French football team was Deschamps. (Original: *With My Tongue in My Cheek*, Marcel Duchamp, 1959)

What to think about the similarity of these two dreams in which appears an unlikely bone telescope? To prevent any easy solution, I must say that I have with Jean-Pierre Guillon, who lives in Quimper, a mostly epistolary connection, although in recent years we meet at least once a year in Paris; but I do not remember telling him, neither in 1993, nor since, my dream.

Without a collection of diurnal elements that may have predisposed to these optical assemblages, I do not attempt an analysis of these two dream accounts. I only note that behind these constructions there is the desire to see everything, to know everything. Similar to the ambition of the poet or of "a linguist who is a little crazy," the look is exalted to confuse the visible and the vision, the spectator and the spectacle, in a sliding movement, like the sexual act. Mold and counter-mold of desire, phallus of the voyeur internally doubled by the vagina of clairvoyance, this object that circulated from one mind to another, where is it now? Oneiric optical instruments belong to everyone. But who will establish the law of their symbolic functioning which is exercised, from one dreamer to another, as rigorously as that which lends the same weight and value to *rêve* and to *Jena*, both four-letter words, but who hesitates quite rightly as to the equivalence between *Austerlitz*\* and *telescope* ("longue-vue" in French), which have ten and nine letters, respectively? Could it be that the dash of the latter is worth, possibly, a tenth letter, at the risk of increasing the final result, these "astronomical figures with an impressive sequence of zeros"?

Guy Girard (1997)

\*Austerlitz, that in my approximate German, I allow myself to hear thus: "oster Licht," which means: "light of the east." We know that Goethe's last words were: "Mehr Licht!," ("More light!") And by playing with the numbers ten and nine, and also given my tendency to seek in certain dreams a premonitory aspect (which, for my above dream, is not excessive at all), by adding nineteen years to 1993, that makes 2012, the year that started for me with a trip to Korea —*Ex oriente lux.*

(Note of 2018)