

Georges Sebbag

The Animated Painting of the Surrealist Dreamer (II)

3. The period of sleeping fits (autumn 1922)

In the fall of 1922 the Surrealist Group experiments with hypnotic sleeping fits, as described by Breton in *Entrée des médiums* [The Mediums Enter]. One by one, Crevel, Desnos and Benjamin Péret fall asleep spontaneously. The first declaims a lengthy speech about “the negress in white stockings” who is completely enamored of paradoxes. When questioned, the other two respond verbally or scribble down words and drawings. During the period of sleeping fits the unrivalled medium Desnos gets to draw or paint the tombs of his Surrealist friends and write their epitaphs: *Ici mourut Aragon* [Aragon Died Here], *Ci-gît Paul Éluard* [Here Lies Paul Éluard], *Mort de Max Morise* [Death of Max Morise], and *Mort d'André Breton* [Death of André Breton]. Later, on July 29 and 30, 1925, he will pen in some school notebooks *Trois livres de Prophéties* [Three Books of Prophecies] that will remain unpublished during his lifetime. The first book is devoted to world history up to 1999, the second to his surrealist friends, and the third to his own destiny.



Robert Desnos, *The Death of André Breton*, 1922

4. The offensive on behalf of the dream (autumn 1924)

From October to December 1924, three publications focus on the dream: *Manifeste du surréalisme*, suivi de *Poisson soluble* [The Manifesto of Surrealism, followed by Soluble Fish] by André Breton, *Une vague de rêves* [A Wave of Dreams] by Louis Aragon, and the first number of *La Révolution surréaliste* [The Surrealist Revolution] which includes several dream narratives. In addition, the Surrealists distribute a number of “papillons” [small cards] with slogans, one of which reads: “PARENTS! Recount your dreams to your children.”

5. The dream object to be put into circulation (March 1925)

In his *Introduction au Discours sur le peu de réalité* [Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality] André Breton suggests manufacturing several examples of an unusual book perceived in a dream: “So, on one of these last nights, while asleep, I was at an open-air market which was taking



Robert Desnos dreaming, 1922

place near Saint-Malo, I lay my hands on a curious book. The spine of this book consisted of a wooden gnome whose white beard, carved in the Assyrian style, descended to its feet. The thickness of statuette was of normal and did not prevent one, however, to turn the pages of the book, which were made of thick black wool. I was eager to acquire it and, upon waking up, I regretted not finding it nest to me. It would be relatively easy to reconstruct it. I'd like to put a few such objects into circulation; their fate seems to me problematic and disturbing.” (Breton, 1925, 16). Besides the duchampian readymade, this book glimpsed in a dream, with its pages of black wool and statuette spine, is the first to introduce the problematic of the *surrealist object*. It should be noted that in 1935 Breton will give the name “dream object” to a model faithfully recreating a dream of “a hotel corridor with five doors giving onto it.” (*Cahiers d'art*, no. 5-6).

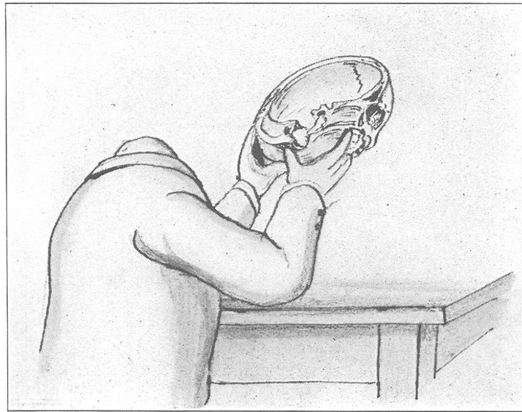
6. *The intrusion of succubi in the bed of the dreaming man* (March 1926)
Entrée des succubes [The Succubi Enter] by Louis Aragon reviews different kinds of female demons, or she-devils. “These voluptuous daughters of hell,” “these delicate furies” (*La Révolution surréaliste* no. 6) haunt the slumber of sleepers left bloodless by them after several nights of debauchery. For Aragon, the succubi, hideous and monstrous females, have as much presence as the *femmes fatales* in black stockings who vampirise the big screen of silent cinema, or as the sensual and elegant creatures who issue forth from the dazzling photographic plates of Man Ray. Dedicated to André Breton, *Entrée des succubes* is of course an echo of *Entrée des médiums*. In similar fashion, the *Lettre aux voyantes* [A Letter to Female Seers] written by Breton will soon be followed by *Lettre à la voyante* [A Letter to the Female Seer] written by Artaud.



(continued on page 4)

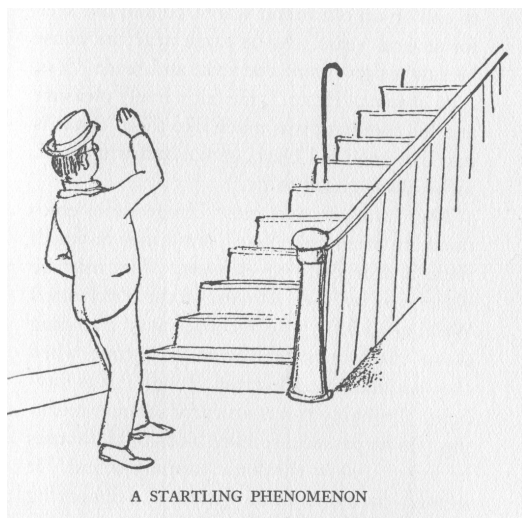
PERCY GOLDTHWAIT STILES – DREAMS (III)

It is natural to recount along with this dream another which was recorded in 1907. The dreamer availed himself of the unusual if gruesome privilege of examining his own dried and empty skull. It had been sawed through in the middle plane, so that the space formerly occupied by the brain was wide open. This proved to be one of those exceptional dreams in which there is dissatisfaction with oneself. It was noted that the brain had always had restricted quarters. Over a large area the walls of the skull were two or three times as thick as they should have been. The space enclosed was correspondingly smaller than would have been expected. One of the halves still contained a tumor resembling an onion, which had not been removed with the other soft tissues. The observation of this abnormal head-piece was attended by feelings of lively contempt.



A POSTMORTEM STUDY

The recorder was tramping about the streets of Boston at a time when they seemed quite deserted though it was daylight. Probably it was an early summer morning. As he passed a somber block of old houses he heard a slow rhythmic tapping sound. It seemed to come from within a neighboring door, and this he was impelled to throw open. A dingy entry was revealed. From it rose a flight of wooden stairs, and on one of the upper steps there stood—upright—a simple walking-stick. While the observer watched it with deepening horror, it rose, moved forward, and descended with a sharp rap upon the next step below, precisely as if borne by an invisible hand. He thought that he fell to the ground overcome by the intensity of his feeling.

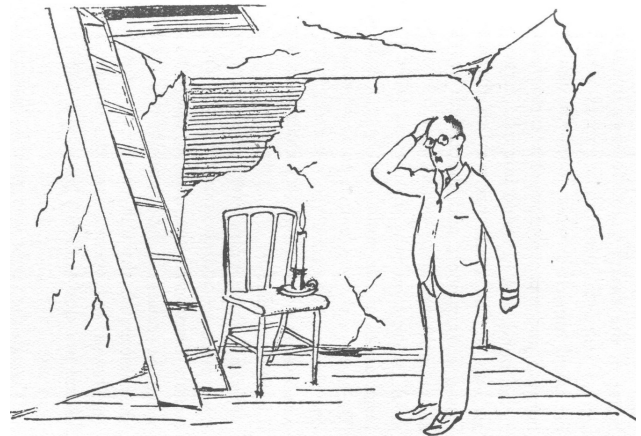


A STARTLING PHENOMENON

In the earliest period of this collection, and probably before, if memory can be trusted, there was an emotional dream which recurred with minor variations. It was always profoundly disturbing, though it may be difficult to justify this fact as the dream is related. The invariable feature was the discovery of an unknown room somewhere within the walls of the boyhood home. Unexpected access to this apartment was had from various places,

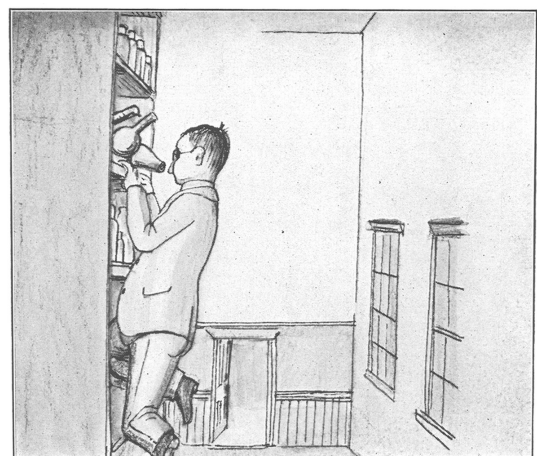
usually from the attic or “the shed.” It was always entered with extreme apprehension. The strange room was in a dilapidated condition and gave at first the impression of complete disuse. But the haunting conviction grew upon the discoverer that *something* of a secret and sinister character had just happened there.

A detailed account of one of these recurrences of this troublesome dream dates from 1897. The writer was passing his father's house in the twilight, and looking up to the second story he observed a lighted window. He asked himself in what room the light was burning, and was conscious of a fearsome thrill as he found that he could not tell. Urged by an impulse, he made his way to the attic, raised a trap-door, and descended by rude stairs into the place of mystery. It was a small, mean room; the plaster had fallen from large areas of the walls, exposing the laths. There was only one feature to show that anyone else had preceded the dreamer, but that was final and terrifying: on a chair there stood a lighted candle!



THE PLACE OF MYSTERY

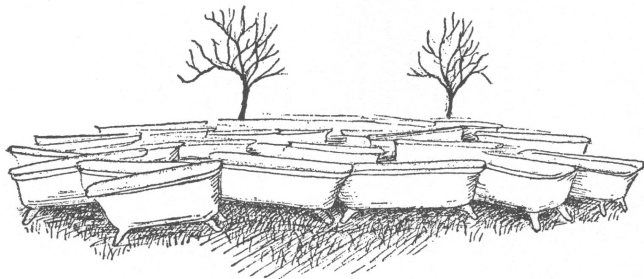
Terror at the prospect of a fall has been experienced more than once. Here is a case in which the anxiety felt was divided between the dreamer's own safety and that of a collection of glassware. He attempted to reach the floor of a large store-room in a school building by means of a set of shelves. He entered from the story above and judged the descent to be about twenty feet. The shelves made an awkward ladder, but he had passed several of them and was gaining confidence when one tilted under his weight. It held a quantity of chemical apparatus. The dreamer struggled hard to save himself from a fall and also keep the precious condensers and graduated flasks from coming down with him. It seemed a losing battle—and he woke.



A TICKLISH DESCENT

The dreamer, with his wife and little boy, then about five years old, started to cross Scollay Square. A light rain was falling. There were some cars passing and many people. The little fellow suddenly broke away from his father and

mother and ran heedlessly across the shining asphalt. A car came swiftly toward him. The actual striking of the child was not seen, but a knot of horror-struck witnesses indicated the spot. The dreamer grasped his wife by the hand and they both ran toward the place, he sobbing, "Oh, dear—oh, dear!" The anguish was frightful. Before the distance was covered, the agonized father saw the severed leg of his boy, a brown shoe on the foot and the calf muscle twitching within the brown stocking. It was cut off at the knee. The next moment he caught a glimpse of the boy himself. He raised his head for a moment from the wet pavement, then laid it down. The tinge of blood spread from the body over an expanding area. The latest feeling recalled is the hope that the little chap did not suffer.



THE FIELD OF GRIEF

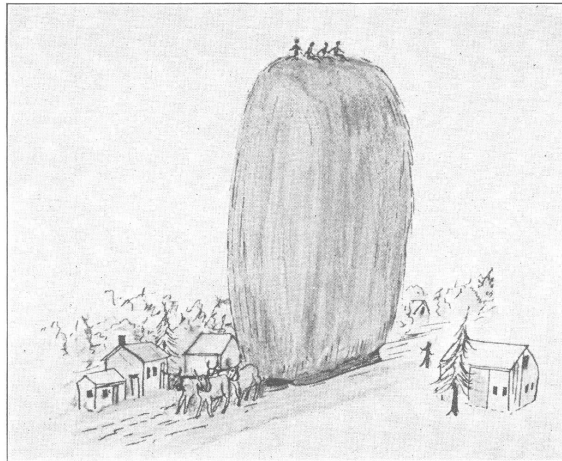
The dreamer looked across a wintry plain. It was overhung by lowering clouds. Closely massed to cover an acre or more of ground were hundreds of bathtubs. The feeling of desolation that prevailed can scarcely be communicated. It is recalled as paralyzing in its power.

The narrator was on a steamboat at night. He stood near the pilot-house and before him was the port light. He raised this from its box, noticing as he did so that the two electric wires were sufficiently slack to let it be lifted, and he began to cast its red rays upon various parts of the lower deck. A bearded officer immediately came up and put a stop to this. Without speaking and without roughness, yet with decision, he took the lantern and returned it to its place.



A YOUTHFUL PRANK

A curious one was the dream "Of an enormous Load of Hay." The setting was the quiet street of a country village. It was winter and the load in question was supported by a low, massive sledge drawn by oxen. The dark bulk of hay rose to a height which amazed the beholder. It towered above the houses and the leafless trees. A number of people who occupied the perilous summit of the swaying pile were scarcely to be made out from below. "How high is it?" asked the dreamer, profoundly impressed. "Two hundred and twenty-five feet," was the instant reply of a native. That seemed about right; it really looked about as tall as Bunker Hill Monument.



A MAMMOTH LOAD

It is now possible to sum up some well-marked traits of the dreaming personality. It is, first of all, egotistical. The prevailing mood is one of self-satisfaction. The dreamer considers that he reasons admirably when in fact his logic is grossly at fault. He is proud of his inventions. Even in those exceptional passages in which there is sharp self-ridicule there is an underlying conviction of his own importance. This has made him sensitive, under certain conditions. More commonly, he has been impudent and aggressive, displaying an excess of self-confidence.

(...)

If, now, the dreamer is in many respects a youth, alert, well-informed, but injudicious and undisciplined, it follows that he has much in common with primitive man. There is the love of show, a partiality for ceremonial and pantomime, which—both in dreaming and in barbarism—may represent a compensation for an inadequate command of language. There is likewise a susceptibility to unreasoning and crippling fear.

Havelock Ellis has asked in his most stimulating book [The World of Dreams, 1922] a very disturbing question: "Dreams are real while they last—can we say more of life?" Dreams are indeed a part of life. But we may still be justified in claiming that the dreamer is far below his best level. To sleep is to contract, to wake is to expand the sphere in which we live. To dream is to be committed to crass egotism and to sitting in the seat of the scornful. We wake to a broader vision, a more patient philosophy, a kindlier idealism.

Percy Goldthwait Stiles

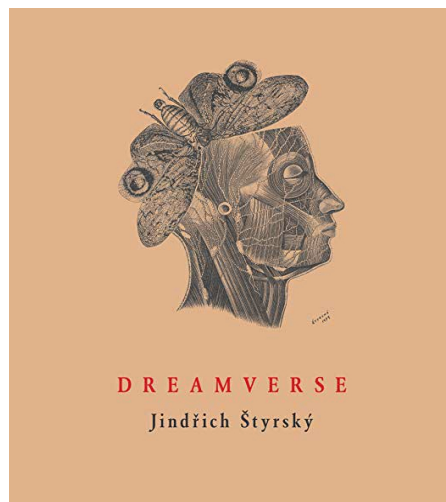
O N E I I R I I C E C H O E S

It would be futile to look for any concessions to what's in vogue or to outside pressures in Štyrský's work. The occupation and war have not diverted him from his path, which is at one with the path of revolution.

— Benjamin Péret

DREAMVERSE: Twisted Spoon Press has just published a major book on the great Czech surrealist Jindřich Štyrský:

"Published posthumously in 1970 as *Dreams*, Štyrský's dream journal spanning the interwar years comprises prose, sketches, collages, and paintings. The present volume includes the complete series of texts and full-color and halftone images based on Štyrský's layout for its publication in the 1940s, his sole volume of poetry (also published posthumously), as well as a selection of his most important essays, articles, manifestos, and assorted other texts. This edition presents in English for the first time the broad range of Štyrský's contribution to the interwar avant-garde and Surrealism."



DREAMVERSE
Jindřich Štyrský

7. *The half-asleep vision of an “animated painting” (October 1927)*

In *La Révolution surréaliste* nos. 9-10 Max Ernst recounts a vision he had had between the age of five and seven when half-asleep. These dramatic hypnagogic images depict a person who is painting on a panel of fake mahogany in a scabrous fashion. The man turns out to be Max’s father, the painter Phillip Ernst. The scene has all the erotic allure of a “primal scene,” when the child discovers the sexuality of his parents. But it also stresses the fact that Max is initiated, during this session of “animated painting,” into the automatism and metamorphoses specific to painting and dream. The father, who takes out from his trouser pocket a “fat pencil” made of a “soft material,” tackles the fake-mahogany panel, onto which he “quickly creates new forms, that are surprising and abject.” Then, in a rapid whirl, the pencil transforms a vase he has just painted into a spinning top before turning himself into a whip. “With fiendish passion [my father] causes the abominable top, which contains all the horrors, to whirl and leap around my bed.” In any case, this vision of “animated painting” on a fake-mahogany surface is undoubtedly connected with the invention of “frottage,” an automatic procedure discovered in 1925 by Max Ernst when rubbing with a pencil a sheet of paper placed on a parquet floor.

8. *The apparition of a woman at the sleeping man’s bedside (October 1927)*

A second disturbing testimony enriches the same issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*. Under the title of *Journal d’une apparition* [Journal of an Apparition] Robert Desnos relates the ghostly nocturnal visits of the chanteuse Yvonne George, whose name is designated in the text by three asterisks. A journal, kept from November 1926 to February 1927, details the first apparition, notes the regularity and variety of the visits, and finally decides to record their breaking off. Desnos sums up the strange experience thus: “*** really came to my place. I saw her. I heard her. I smelled her perfume and sometimes she even touched me.” He refuses to regard the nocturnal visits of Yvonne George as hallucinations. He doesn’t consider “whether it’s all false or all true,” because he intends “to put dream and reality on an equal footing.” Let’s remind ourselves that Breton had invoked a similar experience in *Manifeste du surréalisme*, and later in an excerpt from *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* [Surrealism and Painting] relating to Giorgio de Chirico. He was enchanted by the case of a patient who had hallucinated, through sight and touch, a marvellous tiny hand belonging to a young woman with a radiant, childlike voice.

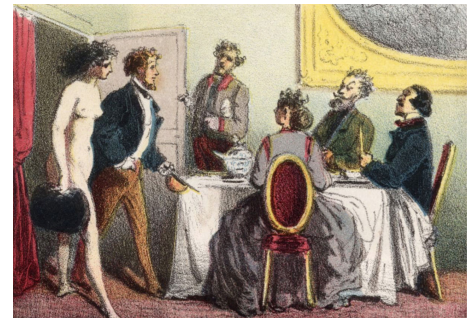
9. *The iconography of the dream (June 1929)*

There is an entire dossier on the iconography of the dream in the June 1929 issue of the publication *Variétés* [Varieties]. To begin with, four paintings, all bearing the title *Le Rêve* [The Dream], are reproduced. The first is by an anonymous painter: a woman sleeping in the disorder of her bed grips and squeezes a sort of pillow between her thighs. The second, dated 1864, is falsely attributed to Gustave Courbet: a half-undressed woman contemplates a naked, slumbering woman. The third, from 1888, is the famous picture by Édouard Detaille in which conscripts sleeping on the ground



dream of the glory of their predecessors. As for the fourth, *Le Rêve* painted by Henri Rousseau in 1910, represents a naked woman on a divan in the depths of the jungle. About the latter Breton will say in 1942 that this great canvas contains “all the poetry and, with it, all the mysterious gestations of our time.” And he will add: “Many centuries ago, Cimabue’s *Virgin* was paraded triumphantly through the streets of Rome. It might not be inappropriate, one day, to honour in the same way this painting which shines with the same sincerity and visionary splendor.” (Breton, 1965, 706).

Next come a drawing, a watercolour and two photos. Hervey de Saint-Denys depicted a dream in an evocative drawing: a painter and his model, a completely naked young woman, enter a bourgeois interior where a few people are at the table. The water-colour, *Intérieur ultra-martien* [Ultra-Martian Interior] (1899), is due to the medium Hélène Smith. The two photos, the *Palais idéal* [Ideal Palace] and the Tomb of the Facteur Cheval, in Hauterives, are accompanied by a 1907 statement by the visionary postman celebrating the dream: “All my ideas come to me in dreams, and when I work I always think of my dreams.” Finally, *Chez le coiffeur* [At the Barber’s], a drawing by Max Morise, might convey a macabre dream: using a cutthroat razor, the barber slices off a number of heads, which are swept into a corner, while the hats of the clients pile up on the hatstand. A similar drawing by Morise takes its place in the “Dreams” pages of the first number of *La Révolution surréaliste*: in a sort of morgue, a character becomes perturbed when an old man in uniform opens a numbered door sheltering a corpse;



a caption on the drawing—*Le conseiller municipal est étonné car le cadavre 8 vient de lui proposer qu’en temps de neige on remplace le sel qu’on jette sur la chaussée par de la suie* [The city councillor is astonished because corpse number 8 has just suggested to him that in snowy weather the salt sprinkled on the roads ought to be replaced by soot]—may explain his reaction. The iconography in *Variétés* could have been completed by two illustrations from André Breton’s *Nadja*: the photograph of a slumbering Desnos and *Le Rêve du chat* [The Cat’s Dream], a drawing by Nadja of a cat bound to the ground by a heavy weight and to the ceiling by a rope. We have also to mention three works by Valentine Hugo, *Rêve du 21 décembre 1929* [Dream of 21 December 1929] (Valentine in the claws of a bat and on the way to being drowned), *Rêve du 12 février 1930* [Dream of 12 February 1930] (a radiant Breton), *Rêve du 17 janvier 1934* [Dream of 17 January 1934] (a scintillating Valentine), plus *Le Rêve de Barcelone* [The Barcelona Dream] by Meret Oppenheim, a watercolour and collage of 1935.

(to be continued)