

Linkings and Reflections: André Breton and His Communicating Vessels

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I hate the world and its distractions.
André Breton, *Les Vases communicants*.

Les Vases communicants, or *The Communicating Vessels* (1932), is an extraordinary book of possibility and impossibility. It wishes to confer, by its magical and yet controlled discourse, a constant expansion upon the world as we know it, through the incessant communication of everything as we experience and have not yet experienced it. At its center there lies the principal image of the dream as the enabling "capillary tissue" between the exterior world of facts and the interior world of emotions, between reality and, let us say, the imagination. The central image of communicating vessels is taken from a scientific experiment of the same name, where a gas passes from one side to the other: the passing back and forth between these two modes is shown to be the basis of surrealist thought, of surreality itself.

Personifying these modes are the two imagined figures of sleep and wakefulness, the sleeping one immobile at the center of the living whirlwind: "Removed from the contingencies of time and place, he really appears to be the pivot of this whirlwind itself, the supreme mediator," and the wakeful one immersed in that fog which is the "density of the things immediately perceptible when I open my eyes."¹ They represent the communicating vessels of interior vision and exterior fact, of night and day, "unreal" and "real."

The universe of the book is full of nomenclature, of detail, of time and place markers, of reference. De Chirico, Nosferatu the Vampire, Huysmans, Hervey, Marx, Feuerbach, Freud, and other heroes people the pages together with a running commentary on the "marvelous" of everyday life, including the relation between the dreamed and the found, in such places as gambling joints like the Eden-Casino, and some boulevards in Paris like the Boulevard Magenta.

"Human love is to be rebuilt like the rest; I mean it can, it must be built on new bases." This belief, like the relation between inner and outer lives,

links the present volume closely to *L'Amour fou* and to *Arcane 17*, which are, in the main, books concerning love and the problem of its relation to the outside world. The three books communicate with each other, with the manifestoes, and with *Nadja*, the great tale of the mad woman loved and abandoned.

Working through the Vessels

Among Breton's works, *Les Vases communicants* is the most "philosophical" and "political," in the strong senses of those terms. Upon its theories, the whole edifice of Surrealism, as Breton conceived it, is based. Without its support, the manifestoes and the critical essays, from the collection entitled *La Clé des champs* on, would have lacked scope as well as central focus.

That it has taken so long for these communicating vessels to reach more than a limited number of readers is no great surprise: this work has neither the tragic density of *Nadja* nor the intense lyricism of *L'Amour fou*. It is not centered on the work of artists and writers familiar to a wider public. It is unique unto itself, with its dreams, its high problematization of political comportment, its speculation as to the role of the writer and the artist, and its very deep melancholy.

What does this work desire, we might ask? What does an André Breton want?²² The answer is, as he says life is, impossible. He wants the things he loves not to hide all the others from him; he wants the strawberries in the woods to be there for him alone, and for all the others; he wants to take history into account and go beyond it; he wants, above all, to be persuasive, even as his style is progressively more difficult, his thought more unfamiliar. He wants Freud, Marx, Kant, alchemy, and the entire history of ideas to be summed up and available. He wants. . . .

And yet indeed the whole history of Surrealism is here, in these pages. With its heartaches and quixotic endeavors, its pangs of conscience and its genuine wish to communicate, the desire itself aimed at such an image as that of communicating vessels is, without qualification, without reservation, enormously moving. What Breton seeks, or tries to have us undertake, is the replacement of the center at the center, the replacement of the person at "the heart of the universe," where, abstracted from those daily events that would decompose integrity into fragmentation, the human personality itself becomes "for all the sorrow and joy external to it, an indefinitely perfectible place of resolution and echo" (p. 198). What endeavor more poetic? How to reconcile it with what we call a political reality?

The image of the communicating vessels was already present within the pages of *Surrealism and Painting* of 1928. It had to wait until *Les Vases com-*

municants to acquire its working out in relation to Marxist theory, and much more.

Defining, or, yet again, redefining Surrealism in these pages, after the unworkable and temporary definition based on automatic writing, Breton formulates the theory of the link (that will later be condensed into the image of the *point sublime*, connecting life to death, up to down, here to there . . .). "I hope," he says of the surrealist movement he is developing,

that it stands as having tried nothing better than to lay down a *conducting wire* between the far too separated worlds of waking and sleeping, of exterior and interior reality, of reason and madness, of a peaceful knowing and love, of life for life and the revolution, etc. (p. 116)

The very notion of the "etc." posed here seems to stretch out the linking notion into the wide spatiality of the text and the world beyond. Breton adds, troubled no doubt by the relation of the poetics of his movement to the politics of the day, by the gap between what we wish for and what we see, his strongest statement in defense of the experiment Surrealism wanted, at its best, to carry out:

At least we will have tried, even if in vain, tried in any case, not to leave any question without an answer and we will have cared about the consistency of the answers we gave. Supposing this terrain to have been ours, was it really of so little merit that we should have abandoned it? (p. 116)

Dream, he repeats, must be mingled with action, unlike the notion of some literary dreamers for whom the former world alone is suitable, and unlike the notion of some political thinkers for whom the pragmatic world alone counts. The true power, lyrical and efficacious, should result from a communication of one with the other. Thus the tripartite structure of the book: first, the case for the linking of the time and space of the dream to those of the world about us. Then, his illustrations, from his own experience, of the quite remarkable workings of "le hasard objectif" or objective chance as the visible and always surprising link of one world to the other, by chance and by some sort of interior necessity. With this is intertwined a sort of disquisition on the place of love in the universe, the revolutionary character of anti-bourgeois feeling as it takes on and conquers the platitudes of bourgeois existence. Just as important to note is that Breton's point of view about traditional religion is unqualified: religion has no place in this newly communicating universe. Humanity takes up the central place, and no mysticism will avail. The final part takes up the relationship of the individual to others, of the poet to other people, and of the revolutionary future to the present as we see it.

As for the dreams Breton tells, he is careful, even as he applies a sort of Freudian schema to them, to point out Freud's own weaknesses, particularly in separating the psychic from the material, and in his own case, stopping short his analysis. Breton shows, at some length, the relation of

his own dreams to everyday life, the similar structure in each, and how each works toward the "reconstitution" of himself, once the links are analyzed.

Persistently, the identical question recurs: how to justify the place we take up? how to work out one's position of freedom or – to some extent – solitude in relation to the coupled universe where, placidly, two by two, the others have all chosen others? ("One day in haste, and there was no more question of their being able to separate. No second thoughts" [p. 112]). The intense hatred of claustrophobia is made evident here and the isolation of the speaker at once proud and anguished ("I repeat I was alone" [p. 113]).

But again, the plurality so desired ("in which, in order to dare to write, I must at once lose and find myself") is problematic, precisely in its submerging of the self. Now the comradeship between the Surrealists is to replace that massing of the ordinary crowds because neither the prose of the everyday nor the poetry of dream suffices. Dream has to be replaced in everyday life, and life has to take on some of the qualities of dream. And he includes his optimism: "Resignation is not written on the moving stone of sleep."

And yet, "this time I live in, this time unhappily ebbs away, taking me with it." As Surrealism refuses to posit any end to its revolution, it sees itself in the future – but in the present, the work toward the transformation of the universe has not always the clearest of ways. Obscurity must play a part, even at the lyrically future end of this volume, where truth, with her hair streaming in light, appears at the dark window, to join the contraries, to have the vessels communicate, now and – in Breton's view – forever.

Of Justification: Breton, Freud, and a Pickle

. . . il y a là une porte entr-ouverte, au-delà de laquelle il n'y a plus qu'un pas à faire pour, au sortir de la maison vacillante des poètes, se retrouver de plain-pied dans la vie

(*Les Vases communicants*, p. 11)

(. . . there is a door, half-opened, on the other side of which just one step has to be taken, in leaving the shaky house of poets, to find oneself squarely within life.)

Involved in a book about dreams, and yet about daily life, persuaded that there is some communication between night and day, the mysterious and the "real," Breton concerns himself actively with the setting of his ad-

venture of the mind. He could have given to *Les Vases communicants* the subtitle that Kierkegaard gave to his brief and unforgettably complicated *Repetition*, that is, *An Adventure in Experimenting Psychology*. Breton's book sets its venturing, unerringly, between two key figures, the opening one, "the Marquis of Hervey-Saint-Denys, translator of Chinese poetry from the Tang period and the author of an anonymous work that appeared in 1867 under the title *Dreams and the Ways to Guide Them: Practical Observations*, a work that has become sufficiently rare for neither Freud nor Havelock Ellis – both of whom mention it specifically – to have succeeded in finding it" (p. 10), and the closing one, again Freud, this time in relation to himself.

From the opening to the concluding appendix, with an exchange between the founder of dream psychology and the founder of Surrealism, the communication establishes itself as being about work, dreams, and writing, about the writing of letters and of dreams and of a text that will be a linking one, arguing the importance of such links, their precedence and their following. The whole enterprise, the psychological-literary-personal adventure, is located in mind and world and text, at once modestly and knowingly, knowing its own importance, and staking out its claims with care, between its founding figures.

I want to look here at two moments of particular sensitivity, moments that deal with founding and feeling, and that turn on the issues of *justification*, of self and of the other, and of the relation between them. The first is the concluding moment, with the Freud-Breton exchange, nominally about another name, but really about the relation of Surrealism to Freud, of dreams to the dream-father, and his to his. Freud will bring up and bring up again the issue of justification (and the issue of fathering and its relation to his work).

The second, lying in the center of the work of Breton, is, again, about relations and justification, and is deeply troubling along both lines, as troubling, possibly, as it is honest. It will turn out to be about the issue of the room Breton, or any of us, takes up in the world, of necessity. Not about finding or founding a room of one's own, not about the space and time and means for writing – the sort of issue many of us are still dealing with – but rather about the general and specific justification for being here at all. What are we to do with our lives even as we make them into texts, albeit texts of the marvelous lived out? What role has the mind in the world? Of what importance are we to the Other, for whom our work may or may not be of some avail? Breton's central question, crucial as it is, could well be posed for us all.

Looking at Letters

The appendix, with its three letters from Freud, and Breton's response, after the exchange, shows in both writers an intense prickliness at work and in opposition. Both gentlemen protest a great deal, with both prides very much at stake. The entire controversy in a textually appended teapot, as it were, stirs up the issues of origination and self-analysis doubly. The tone of each correspondent speaks loudly indeed.

Freud's three letters, turning around the issue of Breton's having reproached him for not including the name of Volkelt, an earlier writer on the symbolics of dream, within his bibliography, are a case study in the style of rumination, done on a great scale, by a master.

The very tone of the letters is striking, from the beginning, and Breton is finally right to perceive them as playing out a sort of quiet revenge (*coup sur coup*)—already in the first letter, Breton is to rest assured that Freud will read him, will read his "little book" that he hasn't yet gone very far in. The book may be little, although its resonance is great, to this day, but this seems a rather severe way of putting someone in his place. Now the name, begins Freud, is found there, along with that of Scherner, whose book on the symbolics of dream (1861) precedes that of Volkelt of 1878: "I am entitled therefore to ask you for an explanation." But the next paragraph does a switch: "To justify you, I now find that Volkelt's name is, in fact, not found in the bibliography of the French translation" (p. 201). Here begins the tale of justification.

A few hours later, Freud is back: "Excuse me if I return again to the Volkelt affair." It may not mean much to Breton, he continues, but he is very sensitive to such a reproach: "And when it comes from André Breton it is all the more painful for me" (p. 201). Freud writes that Volkelt's name was mentioned in the German edition but omitted in the French edition, "which justifies me and in some measure justifies you as well, although you could have been more prudent in the explanation of that state of things" (p. 202). Was Breton asking for justification? The whole trial seems a bit heavy.

Actually, the French translator Meyerson wasn't guilty either, because the name was omitted after the third printing of the German edition. (Still, we are reading what many of us might think of as an obsession on Freud's part about this justification Breton is supposed to have wanted to have.) On travels the blame, now to Otto Rank, who then took over the bibliography and is thus responsible for the omission, however unwitting, says Freud.

Then Freud's third letter, thanking Breton for answering him in detail (you could have been "briefer, just saying 'tant de bruit'" [p. 201]), reads like yet more blame, and certainly a little rejection; but then Breton, author, we remember, of a "little book" in the eyes of Freud, was kind

enough to be considerate of what Freud calls "my special susceptibility on this point, probably a form of reaction against the excessive ambition of my childhood, luckily surmounted" (p. 203). Thus diagnosed, his rumination/obsession is explained, if not away, then at least into the daylight.

Freud ends by wondering exactly what the Surrealists (since they have manifested such an interest in *his* work) are up to. Now we can scarcely help noting the resemblance of Freud's seemingly peevish interrogation of the surrealist leader: "What does Surrealism want?" to the celebrated question phrased not so differently by the same master of psychoanalytic questioning: "What does woman want?" Indeed, to this question of Surrealism, Breton's answer could be supposed to have (already) been the manifestoes, the essays, but in particular this theory of communicating vessels. Freud read at least the first few pages of *Les Vases communicants*, but does not understand exactly what Surrealism intends, wants, means: "Perhaps after all I am not suited to understand it, I who am so far removed from art" (p. 204). Removing himself in this way – whether or not he considered himself so – from the world of "art" condemns Surrealism to be just there, in the world of art. Whereas Breton would have presumed it to be, would have demanded it to be, in the world as world. Precisely there is the issue, again, of justification, and thus an unavoidable one.

Quoting Freud in his reply to the effect that any forgetfulness is "motivated by a disagreeable feeling" (p. 205), Breton finds the whole thing symptomatic, particularly given the state of agitation manifested by the master. His further reflection on the difference between Freud's analysis of his own dreams and those he does of others leads him to the caustic comment which sums up his entire impression of the incident: "It still seems to me that in such a domain the fear of exhibitionism is not a sufficient excuse, and that in the search for objective truth, certain sacrifices are in order" (p. 206).

Here ends the odd exchange that concludes the volume on such a quirky note, and the praise of Freud's special *sensitivity*, as an homage rendered by one dream-obsessed writer to another, seems somehow to justify it within the realm of feeling, as within the realm of thought.

Pickles to Strawberries: Breton and the Others

In no other work of Breton, I think it safe to say, does the issue of the self and the other arise with such frequency, such force, and such problematic self-questioning, as in *Les Vases communicants*. That stands, to some extent, to reason, given the presiding metaphor and the overarching concern for the joining of one element and another, in the personal and in the conceptual dimensions.

Of course, the dreaming self is other to the thinking self, the emotional self to the rational self, the writing self to the living self. But the specifi-

cally bothersome issue that I want to take up occurs precisely in the space of a few pages at the very center of – at the very heart of – this all-important work.

The pages I am referring to are pages 102–14 in the 1955 printing, and they deal with the narrator's encounter of a young girl in front of a poster called *Pêché de Juive* (that title left somehow in suspense and not reflected upon), about whom he surmises a poverty (essential to him in his attraction to the opposite sex at this time, he says), and who reminds him first of a line from the loveliest poem of Charles Cros called "Liberty" ("Amie éclatante et brune"), a description he finds "insufficient and marvelous," and then, because of her eyes, of Gustave Moreau's watercolor called *Delilah*. After these three references to the world of "culture" – one perceived as a poster about blame, as it were, and two remembered, one with its words blamed for their insufficiency, as they fall short, and the other concerning the blameworthy *Delilah* with a power for seizure and desire – he then leaves the world of blame for the natural one. Here the feeling is of imminence rather than blame, and he speaks again of her eyes, but in their impression only, that of a drop of storm-cloud-sky-colored water falling on a body of calmer water and just touching it. This extensive description, continuing through the black shades first of India ink, then of an unutterable drabness in her clothing, before arriving at the sight of the perfect calf of her leg, reveals her as the source of further reflection; for she is in the vicinity of what Breton takes for the hospital Lariboisière, the maternity part. Thus, "the recognition of the marvelous *mother* potential in this young woman," and the linking of that to – the communicating of that with – his own desire to survive himself, is itself the source of the text. Blameless, in its origin.

The marvelous quality of the chanced-upon reflection on *origin*, giving birth to the text, brings to a head the continuing *émerveillement*, which climaxes in an extraordinary quest motif upon which she invites him – as damsel and wandering knight – to a charcuterie for some (above all things) pickles. Pickles, for she and her mother only enjoy meals accompanied by pickles. And this ordinary extraordinary detail somehow manages to reconnect the narrator with "everyday life" by an impossible-to-predict link, not totally devoid of lyricism:

Je me revois devant la charcuterie, reconcilié tout à coup par impossible avec la vie de tous les jours. Bien sûr, il est bon, il est supérieurement agréable de manger, avec quelqu'un qui ne vous soit pas tout à fait indifférent, des cornichons, par exemple. Il fallait bien que ce mot fût ici prononcé. La vie est faite aussi de ces petits usages, elle est fonction de ces goûts minimes qu'on a, qu'on n'a pas. Ces cornichons m'ont tenu lieu de providence, un certain jour. (p. 106)

(I see myself now in front of the store, suddenly reconciled – as if impossibly – with everyday life. Of course it is good, it is wonderfully delightful to eat, with someone who isn't completely indifferent to you, some pickles, for example. This

word had to be pronounced here. Life is also made of these little customs, is also a function of these minimal tastes that you have, or don't. These pickles were my stand-in for providence, one day.)

The naturalists (apart from their pessimism) were the only ones who knew how to deal with situations of that sort, the narrator reflects, and they were, for that reason, far more poetic than the symbolists, for instance. And this very poetry of the everyday, for him, sets the girl in just the situation *Nadja* was set in, on another street, in another work, with another fate. Life takes on meaning for him, again, as it had then, with her, and the idealization of which he is more than conscious then sets in for him, followed, of course, by the letdown which occurs even within the surrealist marvelous.

Some of the saddest words of all time appear here, hidden deceptively in the middle of a paragraph: "Now that I am looking for her no longer, I meet her sometimes. Her eyes are still just as lovely, but it must be recognized that for me she has lost her charm" (p. 111). Her eyes of the fifth and the twelfth of April were visible again, but the image of the female face tended to hold less value with them.

Occupied entirely by his solitude, he then walks on the banks of the Marne river, envying the weekday workers now resting on the grass, in easy couple-harmony. "Two by two they had chosen each other, one day, . . ." and had no regrets; occupied by office details or a walk or a movie, or some children, they were participators in "regular life," in its not particularly productive solidity, which didn't have to be discussed or examined: it remained unquestioned. And this solid resistance, unquestioning and unchallenging, is what makes up life, leading, like the preceding passage up to the pickle-summit, to its own plaintive exclamation with its implicit wonder: "C'est tout de même pour ces gens qu'il y a des fraises dans les bois!" (p. 113). For them, nevertheless, these strawberries in the woods, and that too, unquestionably true.

For me, continues Breton, what is the reason for everything? Were I a great philosopher, poet, lover, revolutionary, there would be some excuse for the room I take up, but as it is, "comment justifier de la place qu'on occupe devant le manger, le boire, le revêtir, le dormir?" (p. 114). Those who work deserve the room they take up; what do I deserve, exactly?

It is as if the pickles – that detail that gave its truth to the encounter with the sixteen-year-old who, finally, shared nothing in common with the narrator – as if they had met their match in the strawberries, giving their own truth to the Sunday outing from which the narrator is to be forever shut out. Neither pickles nor strawberries can be the detail that gives conviction to the writing-living life as he has lived it, and would live it through others. For they are always for someone else.

How indeed to justify the room taken up by any of us? That the passage

should contain in its midst the strong reference to mothering and engendering is not without importance here—for is it not this very question of *justification* that gives its point (its lyric, problematic point) to Breton's moral concern? If not, how can we justify his dwelling on justification?

He is never in an equal match with these female wanderers in his volumes, those who drift along, through, and on. But each leaves a trace, even in his eventual boredom ("Nadja held no more interest for me"), disappointment ("the female image tended . . . to have less value"), and surface forgetting ("I had, in fact, forgotten everything of her profile . . ."). Like so many incarnations of the passerby, these figures will be lost, idealized for a moment, and then no longer recognized, among the pickles and the strawberries finally as unavailable as they are.

Is it that wandering through the streets or elsewhere has to be earned, imitated, written through? Among all the ironies of this most complicated dream book, that of the male/female problematic working itself out through the detail of absorption, admiration, and refusal is the most available. For Breton is always outside in these texts, watching—toward the final image of the muse shaking out her golden hair at the window—when everyone is already outside, carrying out the poetic operation in full daylight. In that daylight, someday, details may be shareable, the common ones and those of luxury, from pickles to strawberries, when the social question is settled, and the other finds his, and our, place. If there is, as Breton says of today, "little room for the one who would, haughtily, trace the knowing arabesque of suns" (p. 113), there is, on the contrary, room for the one-only-*among-the-others*: "This cloud has to draw its shadow over the page I am writing on, letting this tribute be paid to the plurality in which, in order to dare to write, I have to lose and find myself" (p. 184). The world of art, from which Freud claimed to be so removed, cannot suffice for Breton's project, and he must therefore find another presence.

That passage of losing and finding could stand as emblematic of the whole enterprise of these vessels communicating across the space of a great solitude, which it is the effort of the volume to transcend, and of the reader to grasp. That is, perhaps, the way in which the place we take up, in the world and not just the world of art, can be—at least for the moment of reading—*justified*.

Notes

1. André Breton, *Les Vases communicants* (Paris: Gallimard, 1933), 187 and 188. This work will appear in an English translation by Mary Ann Caws as *The Communicating Vessels* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1988). All further references are to the Gallimard edition of 1955.
2. The reference is, of course, to Freud's question, taken up at the end of the essay.