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Breton's Last Words and the Surrealist Aesthetic

Breton's last words, uttered during his final trip to Paris by ambulance from his country house at St. Cirq la Popie in September 1966, returned to a fundamental surrealist question—"Quelles sont les véritables dimensions de Lautréamont?" He was doubtless referring to the foundational surrealist aesthetic principles of desire, surprise, and juxtaposition linked to objects based on Lautréamont's famous phrase: « Beau comme la rencontre fortuite d'un parapluie et d'une machine à coudre sur une table de dissection. » Breton had been thinking about this image for at least four years before the 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism," when he wrote the play "Vous M'Oublierez" with Philippe Soupault, which featured an umbrella and a sewing machine as characters. Man Ray provided this frontispiece photograph of a sewing machine wrapped in burlap for the first issue of the surrealists' inaugural journal, *La Révolution surréaliste*, with the comical title, *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse* (Lautréamont's given name). Over a decade later in *L'Amour fou*, Breton again confirmed: « Les 'beau comme' de Lautréamont constituent le manifeste même de la poésie convulsive. » (*L'Amour fou*).

Croatian poet Radovan Ivsic (1921-09) relates Breton's last words, this final question, in a 2015 posthumous memoir of friendship that takes as its title a request made by Breton in his final weeks: *Rappelez-vous cela, Rappelez-vous bien tout*. Ivsic recounts his twelve-year friendship with Breton in the memoir, including Breton's last weeks, and chronicles the events that first led him to Breton's door in 1954. He situates Breton's last words within two contexts—Breton's personal aesthetic, and his friendship with Ivsic and the Czech painter Toyen

(1902-1980). First, Ivsic introduces Breton's personal aesthetic with his description of their first meeting:

Il est quatre heures. Je suis devant la porte d'André Breton qui vient lui-même d'ouvrir. J'entre non pas dans un atelier mais dans un espace où tout vit d'une intensité silencieuse. Aujourd'hui disparu, ce lieu est resté inoubliable pour ceux qui ont eu la chance de la voir. S'il en existe des photos ou des prises de vue, aucune image ne peut traduire l'ébranlement que je ressens à pénétrer pour la première fois dans cette forêt de présences : petites ou grandes statues polynésiennes, mélanésiennes, masques eskimos, poupées hopi, objets trouvés... [sic]. De proche en proche se réveillent les forces dont les uns et les autres sont chargés. Ce n'est plus qu'un échange de frémissements et d'échos multipliés par leur proximité. Et quand bien même j'ai l'impression de regarder à peine autour de moi, mon attention allant d'abord à André Breton, je perçois combien tout respire dans le grand calme où j'avance.¹

Entering Breton's apartment, Ivsic enters a new world of objects, a "forest of presences," that despite the "exchange of stirrings and echoes," emits a great calm. He sees Breton's collection as « une sorte de manifeste pour affirmer la 'vraie vie' et, par là même, tenir à distance les forces mortifères du siècle. Comme si chaque objet, acquérant de la présence des autres une nouvelle signification, irradiait jusqu'à faire rempart contre tout ce qui risquait d'en amoindrir la portée » (38). The objects together through their placement create a syntax akin to Breton's poems and poetic prose. They speak eloquently of the aesthetic of surprising juxtaposition Breton prized that James Clifford links directly to Breton's love of collecting non-Western objects of the type found in museums of ethnography of Breton's era: "Ethnography cut with surrealism emerges as the theory and practice of juxtaposition."²

The second important context for Breton's last words was the desire he expressed to spend his final weeks in the company of two friends from Eastern Europe, Ivsic and Toyen. Ivsic and Toyen were the friends Breton asked to stay close to him when he sensed he was dying in the final days of August and early September 1966, even as he tried to disguise this fact from his wife, Elisa. Breton told Ivsic and Toyen individually that he would die when the *mairie* of

St. Cirq la Popie was fully demolished as part of the town's renovation that summer. Sure enough, on September 27, the day Breton was transported by ambulance to Paris with Elisa in the front seat next to the driver and Ivsic at his side, Toyen, who had stayed behind, reported seeing that the old *mairie* had indeed been fully demolished that day. The night before, Breton had had a premonition and had given Ivsic his checkbook and the keys to his Paris apartment. As Ivsic was about to go out the door (when he was on the *seuil*), Breton announced: « Et maintenant, le rideau va tomber » (92). Ivsic and Toyen were the only ones in Breton's circle who had lived behind the Iron Curtain: « nous avons d'abord en commun d'être les seuls parmi les surréalistes à connaître pour l'avoir vécue, la réalité des régimes communistes derrière le rideau de fer » (Ivsic 48). Toyen remained insistent that Ivsic record what they had witnessed during Breton's final days, including the activities they had engaged in together. When she herself was dying in 1980, by chance in the same hospital to which Ivsic had delivered Breton 14 years earlier and coincidentally tended by the same doctor, Ivsic noted: « S'en trouvent reliées les deux sources d'ombre que j'ai partagées avec Toyen, la forêt d'Europe centrale s'approfondissant dans ces nuits de septembre 1966 autour d'André Breton » (105).

Ivsic's memoir, *Rappelez-vous cela, Rappelez-vous bien tout*, stands in response to Breton's invocation to *remember everything* about those final weeks, including Breton's sense of his own impending death. Breton confided in Ivsic and Toyen his worry about losing his ability to think clearly, for example:

Je ne me retrouve pas, me dit-il. Je suis extérieur à ma pensée. ... Rappelez-vous cela, rappelez-vous bien tout. Au milieu de la nuit, je ne sais plus qui je suis, je ne suis pas moi-même. Puis, quand je me réveille, je suis André Breton. Je prends une feuille de papier, et j'écris : 'Je m'appelle André Breton, j'habite 42 rue Fontaine, Paris.' Mais ensuite, je ne peux pas dormir. (88-89)

One of Breton's last requests that late August-early September was that Ivsic photograph objects recently discovered by Breton, including a stone star that Ivsic would eventually recommend as suitable for Breton's tomb in Batignolles cemetery. Breton also insisted that the assembled group play a game together involving objects: each participant had to close his or her eyes and draw the first object to come to mind, followed by the second object, eyes still shut—without lifting the pencil from the page, creating a kind of immersive experience of the object. Their shared appreciation for objects was clearly important to Breton. Ivsic appreciated Breton's intentional creation of a space in his Paris apartment in which a sense of wonder prevailed. Indeed, Breton's style of collection paralleled that of the baroque collectors of European Cabinets of Wonders or Curiosities, who also sought to put their collections together in such a way as to render the visitor "dumbstruck," as Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park explain in their 1998 study of the history of wonder:

The strategy of display piled one exception upon another, provocatively subverting or straddling the boundaries of familiar categories. . . . Stuffed with singularities, they astonished by copiousness as well as by oddity. Collectors did not savor paradoxes and surprises, they piled them high in overflowing cupboards and hung them from the walls and ceilings. The wonder they aimed at by the profusion of these heterogeneous particulars was neither contemplative nor inquiring, but rather dumbstruck.³

For Breton and the surrealists, things had inner lives—what Breton would call their psychological function—based on the fact that what most attracted Breton were things that had been turned away from their original function, like the Polynesian and Melanesian statues and Pacific Northwest Coast masks to which Ivsic refers. These had been created for specific spiritual functions that within Breton's collection had been turned towards the more secular aesthetic function of inspiring awe and intellectual stimulation for Breton and his lifelong study of the impact of wonder on the human imagination.

Breton and Ivsic's shared appreciation for objects may also be found in the work of another Eastern European surrealist from "the forests of Central Europe," the Czech filmmaker Jan Svankmajer who, coincidentally, around the time of Breton's death, made a short film, *Historia Naturae, Suita*, released in 1967, that visually crystallizes Lautréamont's aesthetic, to which Breton referred on his last day. The incongruous juxtapositions and the way Svankmajer renders them in images that use the cinematic camera to evoke a sense of three-dimensionality echo Breton's final question to Ivsic: « Quelles sont les véritables dimensions de Lautréamont ? » Svankmajer's film argues visually that surrounding oneself with wondrous things in the manner of Lautréamont's aesthetic and Breton's apartment can create an *experience of wonder* that embodies the surrealist aesthetic.

Svankmajer already thought of himself as a surrealist in 1967 *before* joining the Czech and Slovak group in 1972. "Surrealism has taught me many things," he explained in an interview from 2012.⁴ "It developed my perception of imagination, instilled in my mind that there is only one poetry, no matter which means we use to express it," he continued. Svankmajer shared with Breton a belief in the lives of objects: "These are only 'live' objects, full of substances, memories, and emotions, which have gone through a ritual." (Interview 103). In an essay he wrote about collecting, Svankmajer affirms: "the objects of my desire seek me out," reflecting Breton's notion of objects as psychoanalytically capable of revealing to a person his or her own most intimate desires.⁵

The opening titles of *Historia Naturae, Suita*, show how Svankmajer credits the baroque creators of "cabinets of wonder" for originating the kind of collecting he and Breton prized. "I will always prefer a cabinet of wonders to a museum," he explained in the 2012 interview. "After leaving it, we are transformed," he continued. "Museums are objective, a cabinet of

wonders is subjective. Museums are organized rationally; a cabinet of wonders is organized emotionally,” a feeling confirmed in Breton’s case by Ivsic’s initial response to Breton’s studio. The film’s initial credits are set against black and white sixteenth-century Arcimboldo portraits of people made completely from objects, including fruits and vegetables. These images are followed by a still taken from from the title page of a book by baroque collector Basilius Besler, in which Besler portrays himself welcoming his reader-viewer-visitor into his collection (1622). What follows over the eight-and-a-half minutes of film are eight segments in which species are presented in animated sequence with accompanying music: aquatilia, accompanied by a foxtrot; hexapoda with a bolero; pisces with blues; reptilian with a tarantella; aves with a tango; followed by mammalia with a minuet; simiae with a polka; and finally homo with a waltz. Each short section ends with a clip of a male human mouth taking a bite until the final section in which the skeleton of a human takes the last bite.

Consumption marks the human, for Svankmajer, who presents here an unvarnished view of human beings as living Arcimboldo portraits, creatures made up of the objects we consume, alongside other creatures that we may eventually also consume, who are as lively and animated as we human beings are. Svankmajer’s film presents creativity as nourished literally by consumption and digestion, showing a continuity between humans, animals, and objects, suggesting that conscious identity works somewhat like Arcimboldo portraits do—as an amalgam of what we eat, see, appreciate, and collect—everything that is taken in physically, psychically, experientially and emotionally, and then digested, consumed. By imbuing objects with so much energy, Svnakmajer blurs the distinction between the animate with the inanimate, sentient and non-sentient beings, an idea that was key to Bretonian thinking. This liveliness of the objects in Svankmajer’s film is further underscored by the dance music that accompanies the

animated sequences. The things in the film resonate *together* through montage and work on the viewer like the “forest of presences” collected by Breton in his studio. Svankmajer’s film confirms the surrealist aesthetic based on the liveliness of objects inspired by Lautrémont. The film serves as a kind of answer to Breton’s final question—Lautrémont’s veritable dimensions are three dimensional, lively, and a reflection of the human condition.

Ivsic explains how Breton became briefly disoriented during the ambulance ride to Paris, but when the driver stopped for a short rest by the side of the road, Breton was able to get out of the ambulance, walk across the road, and sit down:

C’est alors qu’il me regarde et demande :

« Quelles sont les véritables dimensions de Lautrémont ? »

Je ne sais pas encore que ce sont les derniers mots qu’André Breton va prononcer.

Il se tourne vers l’ouest, les yeux fixés sur le soleil orange qui va bientôt se coucher et disparaître derrière le rideau de nuages noirs qui barrent l’horizon. Puis, il s’assied à même la terre au bord d’un talus près de la route, continuant de regarder en silence le soleil déclinant. Dans mon souvenir, je suis saisi par le calme grandiose de ce moment : tout est silencieux et à deux pas de moi, immobile, un grand sage indien scrute les immenses espaces qui s’étendent devant lui. (96-97)

Ivsic sets the scene for Breton’s last words with reverence for the man he characterizes as *un grand sage indien*, immobile as a totem as he watched the sun setting on his final day. Ivsic portrays Breton as alive and contemplative in the resonating way of the statues in his apartment, buzzing with their past lives and their proximity to others like themselves, while at the same time he presents Breton as having already acquired the stillness he will achieve in death.

Ivsic adds drama to the scene in an effort to convey his sense that Breton was thinking again about the liveliness of objects, on the one hand, and of what that meant in terms of his own impending death, on the other. This commingling of a sense of self as a being about to become the object one becomes in death together with a lifelong intellectual curiosity about objects is illustrated in Svankmajer’s short film. Svankmajer allows what is dead and what is alive to co-

exist, united by the analogy of the baroque collection, which both Svankmajer and Breton replicated in twentieth-century cabinets of curiosities in their own private living spaces.

In the first “Manifesto,” Breton was clear about his desire to recapture the lost sense of wonder from childhood. He understood wonder as a cognitive process, in the medieval and early modern way that Daston and Park explain in their history: “As theorized by medieval and early modern intellectuals, wonder was a cognitive passion, as much about knowing as about feeling” (15). Wonder, *le merveilleux*, explicitly lies as the other foundation of Breton’s surrealist aesthetic: « Tranchons-en : le merveilleux est toujours beau, n’importe quel merveilleux est beau, il n’y a même que le merveilleux qui soit beau » (OC1, 319). With his last question about Lautréamont juxtaposed with the explicit return to thinking about objects in his final weeks at St. Cirq Lapopie, Ivsic shows how Breton reconciled the marvelous, with its element of surprise, and the object, imbued with incongruous, desiring liveliness as defined by Lautréamont. Breton’s final days with his Eastern European friends, as described by Ivsic, and in a serendipitous way, as illustrated by Svankmajer, shed light on his lifelong questioning of the nature of the human condition. Even in his final hours Breton remained focused on experiences that inspire wonder—the fundamental question of the nature of surrealist aesthetics, friendship, and the simple beauty of a quiet roadside sunset.

Notes

¹ Radovan Ivsic, *Rappelez-vous cela, Rappelez-vous bien tout* (Paris : Gallimard, 2015) 35.

² James Clifford, “Ethnographic Surrealism,” *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988) 147.

³ Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998) 273.

⁴ Eoin Koepfinger , “‘Freedom is becoming the only theme’: An Interview with Jan Svankmajer” *Sampsonia Way* (5 June 2012).

⁵ Jan Svankmajer, “Cabinets of Wonders: On Creating and Collecting,” trans. Gabriel M. Paletz and Ondrej Kálal, *The Moving Image* 11.2 (Fall 2011): 103-05.