

THE AUTOMATIST MOVEMENT OF MONTREAL

*Towards Non-Figuration in Painting,
Dance, and Poetry*

Ray Ellenwood

“... il faut sentir vraiment autre chose dans la matière verbale que de plates similitudes logiques pour pouvoir vibrer à la poésie.”
— [Claude Gauvreau]

WHEN *Refus global* went on sale in Montreal on 6 August 1948, it was a pivotal moment for the group which produced it. Only a few months earlier, they had been dubbed “les automatistes” by a local journalist and the name stuck, appropriate or not. Although the lead manifesto was written by a painter, Paul-Emile Borduas, it was signed by fifteen other people who were active in various artistic pursuits and Borduas’ manifesto was only one part of a substantial publication which included photographs of paintings and people, as well as eight other texts, among them three short dramatic pieces by Claude Gauvreau and an essay on dance by Françoise Sullivan.

*Refus global*¹ was a squaring of accounts in many ways. Borduas’ major text was a broadly political statement after the European mode, calling for a revolution in sensibility, condemning a Quebec society which he found repressed and repressive. Public reaction in 1948 was almost entirely focussed on the lead manifesto and its social commentary. Not surprisingly, interest in *Refus global* as a primary document of Quebec’s “quiet revolution” has continued over the years. I would like to concentrate, however, on the Automatists as a group of artists, predominantly but not exclusively painters, who sought to define themselves not only in opposition to an academic establishment but also in contrast to related branches of modernism such as Surrealism. Their sense of difference came to be based more and more clearly on what might be called (even in dance and poetry) processes and levels of non-figuration.

In Quebec, where most of the critical study of the Automatist movement has been done, there is quite a clear division between the historians of art and literature

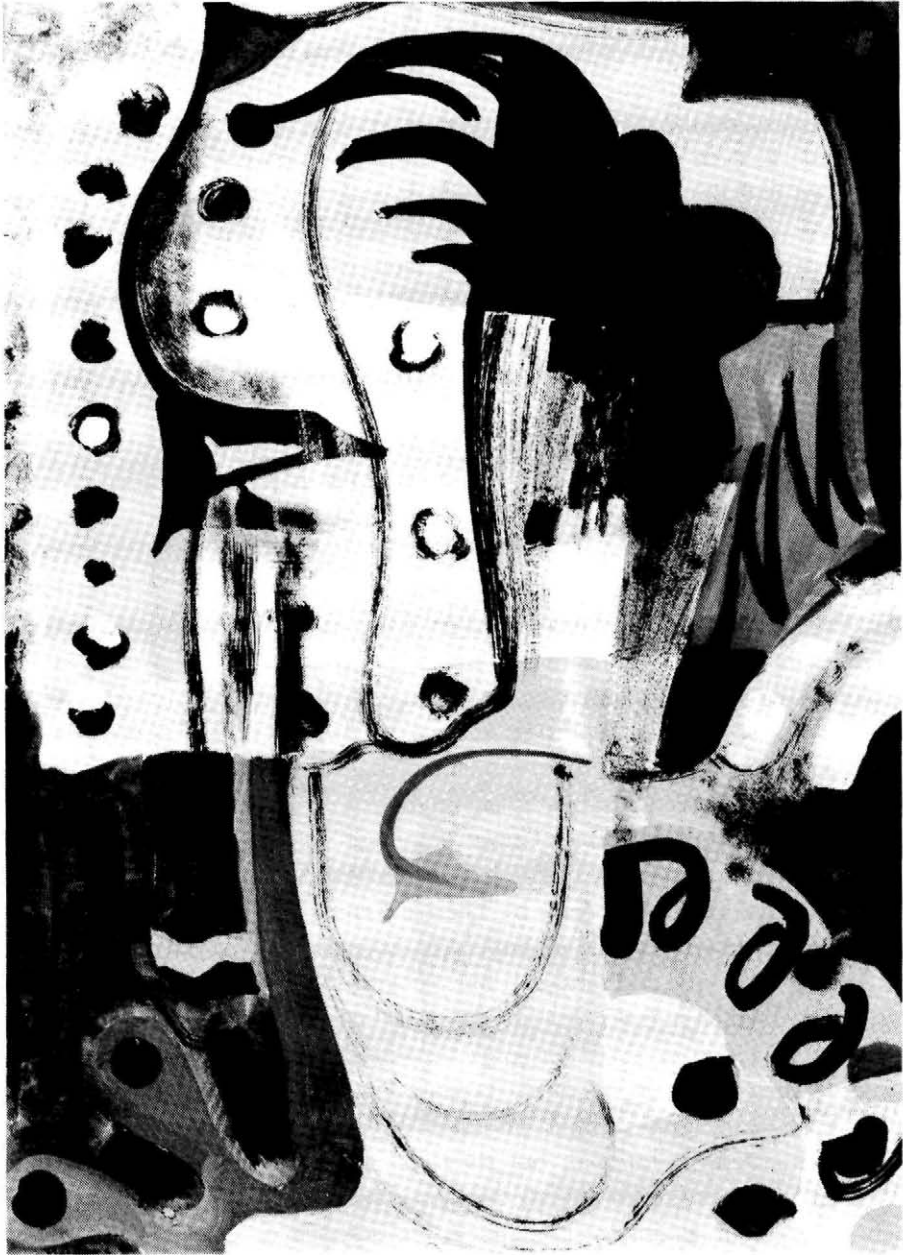
studying the group. A number of monographs and exhibition catalogues have been published which talk exclusively about the painters, especially Borduas and Riopelle;² and when painters are being discussed, their writings are quite naturally studied in relation to the artists' biography or to their painting. This has been the case with the texts by Borduas which appeared in the Automatist manifesto *Refus global*³ and elsewhere, but also with the writings of other painter-theoreticians such as Fernand Leduc.⁴ If the focus is on literature, attention shifts mainly to the poet Claude Gauvreau with a glance in the direction of other signatories of *Refus global* such as Thérèse Renaud, or fellow-travellers such as Rémi-Paul Forgues, Gilles Hénault, or Paul-Marie Lapointe.⁵ Painting then becomes part of the general background.⁶ And while going their separate ways, the historians of Automatism in painting and literature have ignored dance and performance almost entirely.⁷ Yet the group which produced *Refus global* very deliberately put their energies into an inter-disciplinary publication, and I would argue that the different expressions of Automatism must be seen as related.

Visual Arts

To over-simplify a long and complicated story, the history of Automatist non-figuration begins with a series of gouaches exhibited by Borduas in Montreal in 1942, which he called "Surrealist." He had produced about sixty of them in a short period, and each was originally entitled "Abstraction" followed by a number. In fact, as he himself later recognized, the paintings were more Cubist than Surrealist and indeed, as François-Marc Gagnon has pointed out, they are not even technically abstract.⁸ Nonetheless, they were an important change from Borduas' previous work, a first step in the direction of non-representational art and recognized as such by him and by the young people who began to seek his company at this time. Here is how Borduas described the process of their creation in a conversation with the art critic Maurice Gagnon.⁹

I begin with no preconceived idea. Faced with the white sheet, my mind free of any literary ideas, I respond to my first impulse. If I feel like placing my charcoal in the middle of the page, or to one side, I do so with no questions asked, and then go on from there. Once the first line is drawn, the page has been divided and that division starts a whole series of thoughts which proceed automatically. When I use the word "thoughts" I mean painterly thoughts: thoughts having to do with movement, rhythm, volume and light, not literary ideas. Literary ideas are only useful if they are transformed plastically. . . .

It follows that the work of art must be produced in a constant state of becoming so that instinct, from which the song flows, may express itself continuously as the work is being executed. The painter's song is a vibration imprinted on matter by a human sensibility. Through it, matter is made to live. Therein lies the source of all the mystery in a work of art: that inert matter can be brought to life.



PAUL-EMILE BORDUAS, *Portrait de Mme. B.*, gouache, 1942.

There is plenty of evidence to show that this process of automatic drawing was influenced by what Borduas had read of French Surrealist theory, particularly as expressed by André Breton. But his emphasis on painterly qualities as opposed to "literary" ideas, on the sheer materiality of painting as opposed to pictorial image-making, mark, even at this early date, a difference between his sense of artistic automatism and Breton's, a difference which became clearer as time went on.

It is no accident, however, that Borduas and the group forming around him (his own students from the École du Meuble, along with others from the École des Beaux-Arts and their friends) were often called the Montreal Surrealists. Their abrasive attacks on academic realism were in keeping with the mood of French Surrealism, and their works of the early forties, especially their drawings, often present the same kind of otherworldly, yet still obviously figurative imagery that one sees in drawings by Max Ernst or Juan Miró, for example. Limited space and resources do not allow me to give many examples here, but I have chosen as illustrations three works which I consider representative of different, and changing, tendencies.

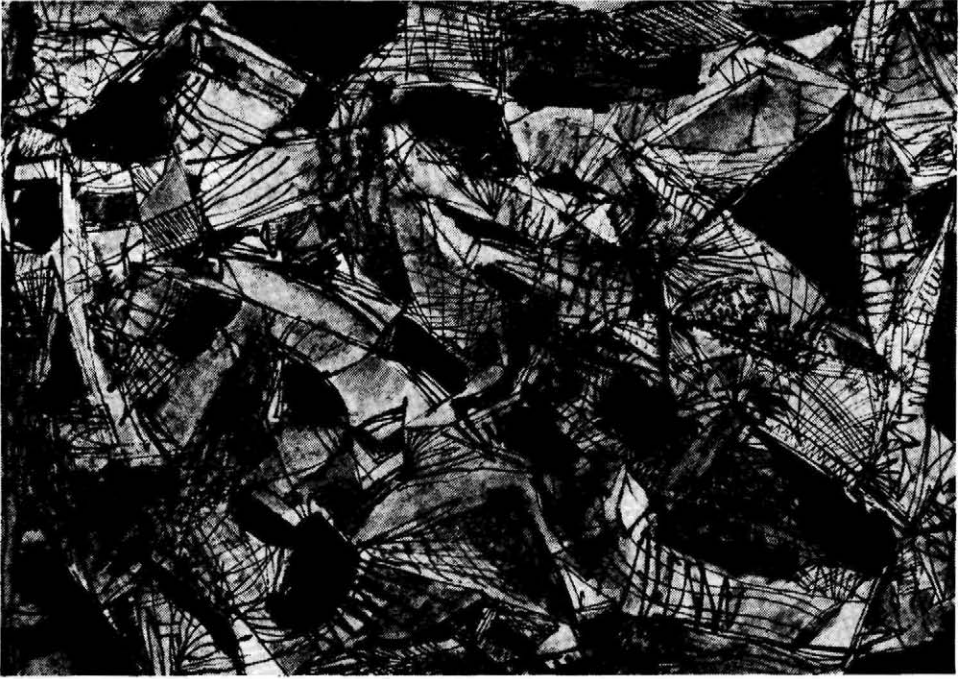
The first example is one of Borduas' gouaches of 1942, entitled "Abstraction 20" and later "Portrait de Madame B." Like all of the series, it is obviously non-representational, therefore abstract in that very general sense. However, as François-Marc Gagnon points out, even the placing of the drawing on a vertical sheet of paper leads us to "read" a portrait and we still have clear indications of a figure against a background, of outline, modelling, light, and shade, even though the figure might not be recognizable. Space relations may be ambiguous in this work, but they are still implicit, as in a Cubist painting.

In illustration number 2, a drawing by Jean-Paul Mousseau done in 1945 and used to illustrate a book of poems by Thérèse Renaud,¹⁰ we can see an automatic drawing clearly in what would be popularly recognized as the Surrealist tradition. The figure is grotesque and fantastic, but recognizably biomorphic and set against a background which suggests receding space, light, shade, and volume. "Surrealist" imagery of this kind persisted for some time in the work of the Automatists, especially in their drawings, no doubt because line lends itself to outline, hence to depiction of shape and volume. Automatist paintings of the mid-forties were becoming less representational, but they still often retained a sense of figures against a background, even though the figures might be nothing more than large "taches" of colour against an undefined, limitless space, as in Borduas' famous *Sous le vent de l'île*.

As a contrast, note the drawing in illustration number 3, done by Mousseau in 1948. Clearly, the sense of foregrounded figure, receding perspective, outline, and volume have been eliminated. We retain a sense of various depths, mass, light, and dark, but the impression is much more of a two-dimensional, all-over design. This



JEAN-PAUL MOUSSEAU, *Untitled*, ink drawing for Thérèse Renaud's *Les sables du rêve*, 1945.



JEAN-PAUL MOUSSEAU, *Untitled*, coloured ink, 1948.

is the direction in which Automatist painting was moving at the time of *Refus global*. The group had decided that Surrealist painting was too “literary” and that they must go beyond it into a more radical non-figuration. Fernand Leduc had actually written in a letter to André Breton, a few months before the publication of *Refus global*:

Imagination liberated by automatism and enriched by all the gifts of Surrealism can finally submit to its own transformational power in order to organize a totally new world of forms, conceived outside of any figurative, anecdotal or symbolic reminiscence. All that remains . . . is a human link with the essence of diverse elements of the cosmos. Space-time relationships are no longer found between images, but actually within the object itself, which gives rise to secrets of a new morphology.¹¹

Although Leduc’s statement has an almost mystical quality not necessarily in keeping with the thinking of other members of the group, his comment on the need for a new morphology was echoed throughout the *Refus global* document, particularly in the essay by Bruno Cormier, “A Pictorial Work is an Experiment and an Experience,” and in the two other texts (besides the lead manifesto) by Borduas.

In a short piece entitled “About Today’s Surrealism” Borduas began by acknowledging, “The Surrealists showed us the moral importance of non-preconceived

acts,” but then went on to accuse them of having become too “intentional” in their work. It should be understood that, in a number of places throughout the manifesto, the word “intention” is used pejoratively to stand for everything that is non-spontaneous and self-interested. More specifically, in “Comments on Some Current Words,” Borduas gave definitions of different kinds of automatism, clearly implying that his group had progressed beyond Surrealism:

Mechanical Automatism:

Produced by strictly physical means such as folding a painted surface, scratching, rubbing, dripping, smudging with smoke, gravitation, rotation, etc. Objects made in this way show universal plastic qualities (the same physical laws control the materials) but reveal little about the personality of the author. On the other hand, they make excellent paranoiac screens.

Phyctic Automatism:

In literature: writing with no control of the thought processes. During states of particular sensitivity, has permitted the incredible prophecies of modern times: Surrealism. Has contributed greatly to a forward leap in understanding of the creative process.

In painting: mainly based on memory. Dream memory: Dali: remembrance of mild hallucinations: Tanguy, Dali; remembrance of all kinds of chance events: Duchamp, etc. Because memory is involved, interest focuses more on the subject treated (idea, analogy, image, unexpected association of objects, mental connections) than on the real subject (the plastic object, appropriate to the sensual properties of the material used).

Surrational Automatism:

Unpremeditated writing in plastic matter. One shape calls up another until a feeling of unity is achieved, or a feeling that to go further without destruction is impossible.

During the process, no attention is paid to content. This freedom is justified by the conviction that content is inevitably linked to form: Lautreamont.

Complete moral independence with regard to the object produced. It is left intact, reworked in places or destroyed according to the feeling it arouses (partial reworking is almost impossible). Attempt to arrive at a conscious plastic awareness while the writing is going on (perhaps more exactly ‘a state of alertness’ — Robert Elie). A desire to understand the content once the object is finished.

Hoped for: a sharpened awareness of the psychological content of any form, of the human universe as it is made from the universe as such.¹²

Of special note here is the distinction Borduas makes between psychic automatism, which he associates with Surrealism, and surrational automatism, which he associates with the Montreal group. That distinction is related to a second important one: between the “subject treated” and the “real subject.” A Surrealist painting, however much it might undermine our usual habits of seeing, still uses its

signs to refer to something beyond itself, to a reality which may not be that of our everyday experience but is nonetheless an illusion of a world outside the bounds of the canvas. When he comes to define "Picture," Borduas has scornful words for spectators who rely on this referential quality in painting:

The plastic reality, the only reality of the work, remains hidden under a mass of illusions: woman, chair, smile, dress, etc.; unknown, untouched, unseen either in detail or in totality. Only the illusionary side of the picture is perceived; and only because it is familiar.¹³

Paintings produced by what he calls *surrational automatism* offer none of this illusionary quality. They refer to nothing but themselves, like a pebble. As Claude Gauvreau put it seven years later:

Surrational painting is the most concrete painting there is — because it does not dissimulate its reality behind abstract screens of similitude, resemblances, illusions, definable regularities. It is matter, it is nothing but matter, it is human sensibility materialized, it is the concrete *par excellence*.¹⁴

This comment was made, in fact, at the time of an acerbic dispute between Borduas and some of his ex-disciples over the kind of non-figurative painting they should espouse. Some, such as Fernand Leduc, were moving towards what has been called, in the American context, *colour field* or *hard-edged abstraction* whereas Borduas favoured the direction of Jackson Pollock and *abstract expressionism*. But that's another story.

Dance

Françoise Sullivan's "Dance and Hope," published as an integral part of *Refus global*, is very much in tune with the document as a whole.¹⁵ From her opening sentence, "More than anything else, dance is a reflex, a spontaneous expression of intense emotion," it is clear that her main concern is not going to be with "figuration" — not with the narrative or representational qualities of dance. She reminds us that dance begins in ritual and argues that academic dance, too concerned with spectacle and illusion, loses its "poetic foothold in reality."

Here, as in Borduas' comments on painting, "reality" is based in the form itself. Sullivan's notion of dance is radically concrete. It is not rationalist, since she puts a great deal of emphasis on dream and unconscious expression, but she is concerned with the way unconscious impulses work their way out through the weight and mass of the body moving in space — through the "materials" of dance.

... the dancer must liberate the energies of his body through movements which are spontaneously dictated to him. He can do so by putting himself in a state of receptivity similar to that of a medium. Through the violence of the forces at work, he may even reach a trance-like state and make contact with the points of magic.

Energy causes the need, need dictates the movements. Because the motor

phenomenon and the concept are inseparable, they lose none of their value and efficiency.

This is how we can penetrate the mystery of where emotion is located in the body, and we will learn how that special tension is born which can fully express an emotion.

Through automatism, the dancer rediscovers in his body these points and tensions, and as he follows his own individual impulses and dynamisms, his work goes beyond the individual towards the universal. Emotion governs everything, not only centering on determined points in the human body, but launching that body into time, space and gravity. . . .¹⁶

This tendency to seek immediate, concrete expression with little or no concern for a traditional, mediating “figurative” content is clearly analogous to the direction Sullivan’s painter friends were taking. And if we look at the kind of works which Sullivan produced for a dance recital shared with Jeanne Renaud on 3 April 1948, we can see a variety of resulting forms. There were eight dances in all, but I will only discuss a few which I have seen re-performed.¹⁷

Jeanne Renaud’s¹⁸ *Déformité* is the most clearly anecdotal of this set of dances. It is an interpretive piece based on her first experience, as a young woman, of the fascination and terror of New York City.¹⁹ In a long but quite flexible tube dress, the dancer mimes a person walking, looking, reacting until she curls on the floor in a fetal position. There is no music. This is not narrative in the same sense as “classical” ballet, and the dancer’s movements are certainly not Bolshoi, but *Déformité* remains clearly referential. A slightly more ambiguous referentiality can be seen in Françoise Sullivan’s *Dualité*, in which two dancers (Sullivan and Renaud in 1948, accompanied by the music of Pierre Mercure, who was associated for years with the Automatist group, though not a signatory of *Refus global*) begin back-to-back, turning across the stage, and then commence a series of movements which suggest separation and confrontation, sometimes tender, sometimes aggressive. For Sullivan, the two dancers represent two parts of one personality; for Renaud, two people interacting. What we have is a depiction of psychological states, rather than a story line, and I would suggest that this might be seen as analogous to “surrealist” automatism in painting.

As an illustration of the collaboration mentioned earlier, I should note here that one dance on this programme, with Sullivan and Renaud performing together, was based on a poem by Thérèse Renaud which was read at the same time by Claude Gauvreau.²⁰ The last line of the poem gives the dance its title: “Moi je suis de cette race rouge et épaisse qui frole les éruptions volcaniques et les cratères en mouvement.” Insofar as the improvised movements of this dance are referential, they are a response to the disorienting “surrealist” imagery of the poem.²¹

Another collaboration, this time visual, can be seen in *Black and Tan Fantasy*, which Sullivan danced to the music of Duke Ellington in a fascinating costume by

the Automatist painter Jean-Paul Mousseau.²² The costume, which Sullivan has preserved, is worn over a black leotard, and is made of burlap and rope, the burlap painted with coloured abstract designs. It has a cape that billows when the dancer runs, a kind of bodice and short skirt and what might be called a pantaloone on one leg. Rope netting runs down the other leg and rope is tangled over the dancer's head. The costume evokes nothing beyond itself. It does not suggest "princess" or "shepherdess" any more than the dance suggests a narrative. The dance involves very little vertical movement, virtually no leaping and spinning, but much seductive movement of the arms, neck, shoulders, and hips, erotic and comic at the same time. Twice, the dancer stands facing the audience and simply moves her eyes as extravagantly as possible. Sullivan explained that much of what they were doing at this time centred on learning to use other parts of their bodies than a classical training had taught them.

But the one piece which in my mind best illustrates Sullivan's remarks in *Refus global* is *Dédale*, which she danced alone without music. The dance begins and ends with the slow swinging of one wrist, then the arm and then the upper torso. The torso swings, turns, and spirals until the dancer is executing a series of quite violent whipping, pendulum swings of the upper body, accentuated by turning with the feet. It is very active, almost violent, vertiginous and very reminiscent of what Sullivan says in "Dance and Hope" about the need for the dancer to put herself into a kind of trance through movement. Here, of course, there is not even the seductiveness of *Black and Tan Fantasy* (which may still be seen as figurative because of that element). *Dédale* is completely non-figurative, pure movement with no "meaning" outside the parameters of dance.

Let me make clear at this point that there is no value judgment implied in my assignment of degrees of figuration to these paintings and dances. Françoise Sullivan also produced one of Canada's most ambitious and successful "figurative" ballets: her *Rose Latulipe*, based on Québécoise folk tales, which was shown on television across the country in 1953. But from the point of view of anyone interested in the modernist experiments of Automatism, it is much more interesting to know that in June 1947, on the beach at Les Escoumins in the Gaspé, Françoise Sullivan did the first of an intended series of four outdoor dances, each dedicated to a season. The summer offering at Les Escoumins was filmed by her mother, but the film has been lost. Fall and Spring were apparently not performed, but evidence of a dance in the snow, done at Saint-Hilaire just before Sullivan wrote "Dance and Hope," exists in the photographs of Maurice Perron.²³ A film of the same dance, made by Riopelle, was also apparently lost. Dance improvised out of doors is not unfamiliar any more, but as François-Marc Gagnon²⁴ has pointed out, it was almost twenty years before modern dance in Montreal caught up to Sullivan's experiments with performance space.

Poetry

The three dramatic objects published in *Refus global* by the young poet, Claude Gauvreau, were part of a series of twenty-three eventually published under the title *Entrailles*.²⁵ One of them, "Bien-être," was actually performed on 20 May 1947, with the help of four signatories of *Refus global* and friends. The public's reaction to the spectacle was certainly stunned, and Borduas later stated that, for him, it was a kind of litmus test of the authenticity of friends in the audience.

Once again, the three plays published in the manifesto may be seen as representing a gamut of non-figuration, not only in their stage qualities but in their language as well. "Bien-être" [whose title I have translated as "The Good Life"] looks superficially like some kind of domestic bourgeois drama as it presents us with a couple of newlyweds at home and apparently follows them through some years of their lives. The stage directions begin quite conventionally:

The interior of a house, at once slightly austere and slightly weird in proportions. To the left, almost in the center, a closed door that leads to another room of the house. A man and a woman enter, both wearing wedding clothes. The man wears black gloves.²⁶

But from the opening lines there is a dislocation of action and speech. The lines spoken may have a metaphoric connection to what is happening on stage, but they seldom refer to it directly. Here are four lines from the beginning, and two from the end, of the man's opening speech:

THE MAN: Hands in the abyss making leaves. That's a wedding.
The cup running over with love like seaweed on the porch.
A stream of clouds dives into the hearts: king-fisher.
Wreaths in cheeks, peace sculpted in the worried profiles of existence.
[...]
I feel the clenched repentance of solitude. Clear voices, mauve-scented soups-tureens. Ideal! Idea. Ideal: Pure Zeal.

The woman's "reply" goes as follows:

My belly, cradle of life and consecrated urn. Spheres affiliated in the arch of aged autumn. Powder of kisses in the damp ditches of white gardens.
Versicoloured hysteria.
The sublime fraction of golden Armenian curls.
Entrance and procession of children.
Arbitrary farandole in the yellow brick paths.²⁷

The action (including the mysterious death of the woman while an ominous theme is played on a piano) unfolds arbitrarily and is not advanced, prepared for or even necessarily commented on by the dialogue. It is fantastic, absurd, and disturbing in a way that would be recognized by lovers of Dali and Buñuel's film *Un chien andalou*. I would equate it with the "surrealist" drawing by Mousseau

(illustration 2). We know that what we are watching remains a figurative echo of the “real world” despite its distortions, non-sequiturs, and unexpected juxtapositions. Just as in Françoise Sullivan’s *Dualité*, however much the action may deny us a conventional story line, it imitates recognizable human relations in some way.

The same kind of dislocated figuration is evident in the language of Gauvreau’s play, showing all the qualities of the “Surrealist image” which, as described by André Breton in the *First Manifesto of Surrealism*, links elements together unexpectedly and irrationally to give the coveted spark. This kind of image works through conventional structures, surprising us not grammatically or phonetically, but lexically. Nothing disturbs us about “The cup running over with love” except that it is followed by “like seaweed on the porch.” We have the double incongruity of love like seaweed and seaweed linked with porch, very much in keeping, for example, with images one might find in Breton’s *Poisson soluble* (which was appended illustratively to the *First Manifesto*), or Paul Eluard and Benjamin Peret’s *152 Proverbes mis au gout du jour*. And it is also similar in technique and effect to the poems of Thérèse Renaud’s *Les sables du rêve*, published in 1946. If we examine the lines to which Jeanne Renaud and Françoise Sullivan improvised their dance, we notice once again that the structure of the sentence is conventional, and the shock comes entirely from the placing of unexpected lexical elements.

In her published reminiscences, entitled *Une mémoire déchirée*, Thérèse Renaud speaks of how she had been struck by Paul Eluard’s image, “blue as an orange” :

... for me it was literally a bolt of lightning, a kind of release, a catalyst for a type of writing that was ready to be born. Starting with Eluard’s image, I realized that it was possible to create a poetic image while expressing a counter-truth. And I started to write short poems which were made up of incoherent images but expressing a reality that was very painful for me.²⁸

This sense of liberation from conventional constraints is, as we have seen, what Borduas credited the Surrealists with giving to Automatism.

But, just as the Automatist painters saw themselves as going beyond the literariness of Surrealist non-figuration, so Claude Gauvreau believed he surpassed the type of Surrealistic image we have seen in “Bien-être.” The last of his three dramatic objects published in *Refus global* was entitled “The Shadow on the Hoop” and it was, as the stage direction informs us, a “Monologue of the shadow cast on a hoop by a leaping acrobat.” The monologue goes on for two pages and ends with this brief paragraph, as I have translated it:

Agroupine. Almah palm the pinch chireeps, the algaesia of the planks sings at the top of its glass under the melodious spell of the siphon.

Obviously, the “action” of this “play” has cut all ties with *mimesis* and one has nothing to grasp but the language itself, just as we have nothing to “recognize” in

some of the Automatist paintings of this period. But we are also confronted with words whose strangeness arises, not only from their juxtaposition, but from their very form. They are now lexically enigmatic, though we can usually assign them a grammatical place in the sentence and though we may guess at their possible meaning. Gauvreau moves in and out of what we might call “figurative” language in these early versions of experiments that would eventually lead to poems like “Crodziac Dzegoum Apir” which (defying translation) begins:

Beurbal boissir
 Izzinou kauzigak — euch bratlor ozillon
 kek-nappregue
 Sostikolligui — hostie polli fili
 Mammichon — ukk kokki graggnor
 Leuzzi mottett²⁹

To understand what is going on here, we will need to have recourse to theoretical statements which Claude Gauvreau made in a series of 17 letters to Jean-Claude Dussault, beginning in December 1949.³⁰ After some cautionary remarks about the absolute need for spontaneity on the part of both poet and reader, Gauvreau launches into his definition of the poetic image and its four subcategories (not necessarily exclusive). From the beginning, he obviously refuses to restrict his definition to semantics. A poetic image results when there is “the association, abstract words, concrete words, letters, sounds, etc.” Clearly, this is not the traditional definition of a poetic image as a pure description of sensual impressions or of metaphor and metonymy based on lexical qualities and referentiality.

In discussing the first sub-category of image, the “image rythmique,” Gauvreau once again locates “meaning” outside the lexical, placing great emphasis on sound, which he insists has connotation in itself, since “all sound is onomatopoeic.” Seeking analogies, he turns to other arts, suggesting, “I would compare [the rythmic image] to colour in painting; I would also compare its role (perhaps not so aptly) to that of the bass in a jazz orchestra.” The unstated danger is that he might equate poetry too closely with music, with pure sound, so he takes care to argue that these verbal sounds have a particular value:

The rhythmic alterations in a succession of letters or combination of letters is in itself a power of suggestion and evocation, it is in itself a power to establish (unassisted) a climate which will refer to any one of the senses. . . .

When he makes the statement, “Words or letters do not constitute the image; they are the complex analogy of a simple reality,” I take it that he means words and letters do not *convey* analogies, they *are* analogies for a purely mental “simple reality,” which exists (for the poet) *before* any signs are written or spoken. When he goes on to say that “Poetry, therefore, is always working through analogy” it is an analogy “which could never be translated by a simple conventional sign,”

and it is defined as “an adequate equivalent to the original psychic ambiance.” This is direct communication of a psychic ambiance, therefore, without the mediation of any conventional system of signs, without figuration, without reference to anything other than itself and the state which engendered it. The rhythmic image is distinguished from pure sound by its function as a conveyor of analogy. But this onomatopoeia is not merely “a simplistic imitation”; it occurs “every time, a bit of reality (noumenal or phenomenal), or a psychic climate, can be grasped by means of a verbal rhythm.”

The second category of image, which Gauvreau calls the “image mémorante” need not detain us long because it is essentially the traditional metaphor, or, as he puts it rather scornfully, “the imagistic substance of a poetry which is content to establish relationships of comparison or metaphor between its diverse constituent elements.” This is to be compared with the next category, the “image transfigurante,” which is the kind found in Surrealist poetry. Here the metaphoric linkage is not self-evident or logical, but results in a combination of elements which transforms them, as sodium and chloride are transformed in becoming sodium chloride. But even though he considers this a more advanced form of image, used by himself and other Automatist poets, Gauvreau insists on de-emphasizing the figurative quality of these images. He insists on the concreteness of the words, and once again, he draws on painterly terminology :

Syllables, words are *values, tinctures*, they are not the lackeys of some nonexistent abstract monster. . . . Paintings and poetic texts are realities in themselves — realities comprehensible through direct contact.

It is important for Gauvreau to make this point because his next and last category of image, the “image explorée,” leaves the reader few associations to grasp. This image he sees as his personal contribution to surrational Automatism and a step beyond Surrealism.

We are talking about an explorational image when the constituent elements of a single new element are no longer immediately discernible by an analytic process. I would add that there is an explorational image when the present state of psychoanalysis will not permit that science — unless by some laborious operation of which there has been no example to date — to discover the latent content in the poetic object.

Examples of explorational images can be seen in the poem by Gauvreau already quoted. He insists that they are not like the pure and “abstract” sound poems of the French Lettristes, who never get beyond what he calls the rhythmic image. They have, for him at least, an emotive power (their *significance?*) which he believes can be immediately appreciated by any unprejudiced mind.

Steve McCaffery sees a constant and unresolved tension in Gauvreau’s explorational poems : on the one hand, there is “a *scrambling* of signifiers, a decomposition

of their letter elements and a reconstitution in extreme, unfamiliar groupings"; on the other hand, the elements of the poems, with their arrangement on the page, spacings, hyphenations, and French accents still remind us of words in conventional syntax.³¹ McCaffery also points out that Gauvreau surprisingly (especially considering his interest in painting and drawing) never experimented with the graphics of the written word, as other concrete poets have. But I believe Gauvreau's methods were very deliberate.

For Borduas and Gauvreau, at least before 1955, the Automatist image in paint or words was distinct from the Surrealist by its non-figuration, but also distinct from the abstraction of someone like Mondrian because of its spontaneity and expressiveness. Borduas, in resisting the two-dimensional and colour-oriented painting of the Plasticiens, and Gauvreau, in resisting pure sound and graphics, may have been trying to retain the vertiginous energy of *Dédale* in their works.

NOTES

- ¹ The most accessible complete French text is in the catalogue *Borduas et les automatistes: Montréal 1942-1955*, catalogue of the Musée d'Art Contemporain (Montréal, 1972); my translation is published as *Total Refusal/ Refus global* (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1985). All translated quotations are from the latter edition.
- ² To name only a few: François-Marc Gagnon's *Paul-Emile Borduas, biographie critique et analyse de l'oeuvre* (Montréal: Fides, 1978); Guy Robert's *Riopelle* (Montréal: Editions de l'homme, 1970); *The Presence of Paul-Emile Borduas*, special number of *ArtsCanada*, Nos. 224-25 (December 1978-January 1979). See also *Borduas et les automatistes, Montréal 1942-1955* and another catalogue, *Françoise Sullivan, retrospective* (Québec: Ministère des Affaires culturelles, 1981).
- ³ See *Paul-Emile Borduas, Ecrits/Writings 1942-1958*, a bilingual edition edited and translated by François-Marc Gagnon with the aid of Dennis Young (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art, 1978).
- ⁴ See "Fernand Leduc peintre et théoricien du surréalisme à Montréal" by Bernard Teyscedre, published in *Les automatistes*, a special number of *La Barre du jour*, Nos. 17-20 (January-August 1969), or see the very important collection of Fernand Leduc's writings, edited by André Beaudet, entitled *Vers les îles de lumière* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 1981).
- ⁵ See *Les automatistes* where, incidentally, Forgues, Hénault, and Lapointe are included while Thérèse Renaud is not.
- ⁶ Thus, in Jean Fiset's *Le Texte automatiste* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1977), *Refus global* is studied from the point of view of rhetoric with virtually no mention of painting and in the illustrations to Jacques Marchand's *Claude Gauvreau, poète et mythocrate* (Montréal: VLB Editeur, 1979), paintings are seldom shown.
- ⁷ Exceptions are François-Marc Gagnon in his preface to the album of photographs of Françoise Sullivan's *Dance dans la neige*, and André Bourassa who, besides his study *Surréalisme et littérature québécoise* (Montréal: l'Étincelle, 1977), translated by Mark Czarnecki as *Surrealism and Quebec Literature* (Toronto: Uni-

- versity of Toronto Press, 1984), which includes an important section on Automatism, has also written articles such as “Vers la modernité de la scène québécoise (II) Les contre-courants, 1901-1951,” in *Pratiques théâtrales*, Nos. 14-15 (hiver-printemps 1982), 3-31.
- ⁸ See Gagnon’s *Paul-Emile Borduas, biographie critique et analyse de l’oeuvre*, especially Chapter 7.
- ⁹ A two-page typescript dated 1 May 1942, preserved in the Borduas archives of the Musée d’Art Contemporain, Montréal.
- ¹⁰ *Les Sables du rêve*, published by Les Cahiers de la File Indienne in 1946 and re-published by *Les Herbes Rouges* in 1975.
- ¹¹ In *Vers les îles de lumière*, p. 82.
- ¹² *Total Refusal*, pp. 46-47.
- ¹³ *Total Refusal*, p. 50.
- ¹⁴ “Qu’est-ce que l’automatisme?” in *L’Autorité*, 29 May 1954.
- ¹⁵ Sullivan did both painting and dance at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Montréal, but was concentrating on dance at this period, having studied for a year in New York. Since 1959, her attention has returned to sculpture and painting.
- ¹⁶ *Total Refusal*, pp. 113-14.
- ¹⁷ The program for the original recital is in Françoise Sullivan’s file at the Musée d’Art Contemporain in Montreal. These dances were performed by young dancers, coached by Sullivan and Renaud, for documentation on video by a Toronto-based group called Encore! Encore! on 4 May 1986. Incidentally, to reinforce my point about separating disciplines, these performances took place at the same time as an important exhibition of Automatist painting at the Galerie Dresdnere in Toronto, entitled *Automatism Then and Now*. The media made no connection, the public for the two events was entirely different, and Françoise Sullivan was not even included in the Dresdnere show, though she is now very active as a painter.
- ¹⁸ Jeanne Renaud was the youngest of three sisters who had important roles in the history of Automatism. The eldest, Louise and Thérèse, signed *Refus global*; Jeanne did not, perhaps because she was considered too young.
- ¹⁹ Many of my comments on these dances are based on remarks made by Jeanne Renaud and Françoise Sullivan at the time of their 1986 re-performance in Toronto.
- ²⁰ For the Encore! Encore! video re-performance, Sullivan played the recorded voice of Thérèse Renaud reading the poem.
- ²¹ See *Les sables du rêve* published in *Les herbes rouges*, No. 29 (August 1975).
- ²² For pictures of this costume, see my English translation of *Refus global*, p. 111, or the catalogue *Françoise Sullivan, retrospective*, p. 18.
- ²³ See the luxury folio of these photographs, *Dance dans la neige*, 1977.
- ²⁴ “Avant-propos,” *Dance dans la neige*.
- ²⁵ Republished in the massive *Oeuvres créatrices complètes* (Montréal: Parti-Pris, 1977). For my translation and discussion of these plays, see *Entrails* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1981).
- ²⁶ *Total Refusal*, p. 69.
- ²⁷ *Total Refusal*, pp. 69-70.

²⁸ Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 1978, pp. 199-200.

²⁹ From *Etal mixte* (1950-51), see *Oeuvres créatrices complètes*, p. 244.

³⁰ Fragments of these letters have been published in magazines, notably in *Les automatistes*, pp. 344-61 (my translations are from that publication). A critical edition is now being prepared by André Beaudet, whose conversation has been a great help in my meditations about Gauvreau's poetry.

³¹ See his essay "The Elsewhere of Meaning" in his new book, *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-86* (Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986).

HOW TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IS HAPPENING IN SOUTH AFRICA

John Baglow

(melting snow,
irregular
dark of the earth)

(indelible
ink on the
crisp linen)

(elegant
candles, their
wicks blazing)

(neighbours for tea,
nervous
small talk)

(light in its
evening
prism)

(words
on the paper
like shadows)