

Freudian Metaphor and Surrealist Metalanguage in Michel Leiris' *Failles*: The Unconscious and the Sea

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In descriptions of the Freudian model of the psyche (id/subconscious; ego/conscious; superego) and of the Freudian goal of bringing repressed ideas to the conscious' attention, the two most frequently used metaphors are:

- 1) that translating the psyche into a verticality, the id being the *low* or *deep* part of the psyche, as witnessed by the prefix "sub-" in "subconscious" (in German "*Unterbewusstsein*"), the conscious being a *higher* function, and the superego, as witnessed by the prefix "super-", (in German "*Überich*") a layer imposed on top of that¹
- 2) that of bringing to "the light" of the conscious elements hidden in "the darkness" of the subconscious.

These two initial metaphors (verticality and visibility), aided by the subconscious' polyvalent metaphorization as "depth", were further combined into the prolific metaphor of the psyche as *water*. In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, a work in which metalinguistic metaphor is generally avoided, Freud, in opposition to the subconscious' "depth", expresses the conscious as "surface" (*Oberfläche*), and then, as corollaries of this metaphor, describes repression as "submersion" (*tauchen*) and the conscious realization of formerly unconscious ideas as "emersion" (*auftauchen*, which refers specifically to emergence from water).²

When the Surrealists, having assumed the Freudian model of the unconscious, referred to their own quest to "raise" (the verticality metaphor almost inevitable in metalanguage describing the Freudian model) elements from the unconscious, the metaphor of the psyche as water is often used. To take the single example of Breton's *Vases Communicants*, the metaphor appears, at least metonymically, three times in nine pages:

[...le monde surréaliste] est fait des bulles troubles, déformantes, qui se lèvent à toute heure du fond marécageux, de *l'inconscient* de l'individu.³ (*italics his*)
...cette faculté fondamentale qui est de dormir, c'est-à-dire de *se retremper*, chaque fois qu'il est nécessaire, au sein de cette nuit surabondamment peuplée...⁴ (*italics mine*)

...en examinant de près le contenu de l'activité la plus irréfléchie de l'esprit [le sommeil], si l'on passe outré à l'extraordinaire et peu rassurant bouillonnement qui se produit à la surface...⁵

But in no other Surrealist poet is the metaphor of the psyche as water, or its specific variation, psyche as sea, so developed as in Michel Leiris, for the simple reason that no other wrote such consistently metalinguistic texts, many of the poems of his best-known collection, *Failles*,⁶ referring metaphorically to the process, once scientific, now poetic, of "raising" unconscious ideas to the conscious. In my demonstration of Leiris' use of this metaphor, I will begin with *Le Pays de mes rêves VI*,⁷ which, appearing towards the beginning of the collection, explicitly establishes the metaphoric rule of translation which will provide the key for decipherment of the metaphors informing the poems which follow.

Au cours de ma vie blanche et noire, la marée du sommeil obéit au mouvement des planètes, comme le cycle des menstrues et les migrations périodiques d'oiseaux. Derrière les cadres, une rame délicieuse va s'élever encore: au monde aéré du jour se substitue la nuit liquide, les plumes se changent en écailles et le poisson doré monte des abîmes pour prendre la place de l'oiseau, couché dans son nid de feuilles et de membres d'insectes. Des galets couverts de mots—mots eux-mêmes bousculés, délavés et polis—s'incrument dans le sable parmi les rameaux et coquilles d'algues, lorsque toute vie terrestre se rétracte et se cache dans son domicile obscur: les orifices des minéraux.

This entire prose poem is generated by the initial metaphor, in which both tenor (*unconscious*) and vehicle (*sea*)⁸ are presented to the reader in their metonyms, "marée du sommeil". Once the metaphor is given, it is extended into a code,⁹ by which metonyms of the tenor "unconscious" will be translated into metonyms of the vehicle, "sea". If unconscious: sea, then "night", (metonym of "sleep") will be "liquid", and by opposition, the day (metonym of "conscious") will be airy, restricted to land or sky. Since at night, dreams (unconscious ideas) "rise" to the consciousness, they are metaphorized as objects

rising from the sea, namely first as “oars”, then more fruitfully, as “fish”, to which are opposed the metonyms of “sky” (:conscious), “birds”.

Since this metaphor is based on only one ground (“rising”) and depends on an initial metaphor, it is not surprising that the metaphoric process of describing unconscious ideas as fish entails a warping of the fish’s stereotypical descriptive system (its sociolectic set of metonyms)¹⁰: though in the sociolect, by all stereotype, fish do not rise to replace birds, the needs of the present metaphor demand that they do so. This is a mimetic (=stereotypic) ungrammaticality¹¹ that at once indicates the presence of a metaphor (for since a literal reading defies mimesis, or stereotype, the reader must set it aside in favor of a metaphoric reading) and points toward the rule of decipherment.

After “oar” and “fish”, the final objects to rise from the sea are the “galets”, a word possessed of a precision unknown to its English equivalent “stones” or “pebbles”. “Galets” are stones that have arisen specifically from water, rounded and smoothed by the erosive action of sea or river, and thus are apt in this context for use as vehicles metaphORIZING unconscious ideas.

Yet once again, a tell-tale ungrammaticality belying a literal acceptance points the way to the metaphoric meaning of “galets”: the “galets”, arisen from the sea, are covered with words, words which at the end of the poem, the narrating “I” juggles to read the sentences formed by chance:

Puis les trois mots se formèrent et je pus les faire sauter dans mes mains avec d'autres mots que je possédais déjà, lisant au passage la phrase qu'ils composèrent...

The decipherment permitted by the sea code reveals this prose poem as entirely metalinguistic: words “rise” from the unconscious, by a technique akin to *l'écriture automatique*, and are then used to form poems. This is the same Surrealist process of poetic composition described by Leiris in his prose autobiography, *Biffures*, in which he discusses his method of writing the poetry of *Simulacre*¹²:

J'avais déjà tenté quelque chose d'analogue en prenant pour matière primaire, non des faits, mais des mots: substantifs, adjectifs ou verbes qui étaient ceux que j'aimais le mieux, les plus riches pour moi de saveur ou de résonance et qu'il me suffisait de réunir en phrases—après les avoir inscrits pêle-mêle sur une feuille de papier et ne les modifiant guère plus qu'il n'était nécessaire pour obtenir des propositions grammaticalement correctes—qu'il me suffisait, y ajoutant seulement les éléments indispensables de liaison, de

mettre au bout les uns des autres en me fiant aux seuls courants qui semblaient se former d'eux-mêmes et faire communiquer entre eux les différents îlots jetés sur le blanc du papier—qu'il me suffisait, dirai-je, de laisser se rejoindre et se nouer au gré de leurs affinités pour que chaque feuille hasardeusement semée de ces grains de langage donnât naissance à un poème.

Though in the passage from *Biffures*, the individual element is underscored (“mots...que j'aimais le plus, les plus riches pour moi de saveur ou de résonance”), *Le Pays de mes rêves* is, by its metaphoric system, more precise in indicating the source of the words to be arranged into poems: the *sea* of the unconscious.¹³

Intertextual aid: *Les Galériens*

Once *Le Pays de mes rêves VI*, appearing early in the collection, establishes the rule of metaphoric translation, the reader possesses the intertextual key which will the decipherment of metaphors in other poems from the collection where the rule is not explicitly presented (as it was with “la marée du sommeil”) and where the ungrammaticalities in the vehicles' mimesis, caused by conflict with the metaphors' unstated tenors, bring the Surrealist texts to mimetic incoherence.

One such poem, in which the reader must supply the sea code's tenor (the unconscious) intertextually is *Les Galériens*.¹⁴

Grignotées par les rats
nos chaînes peut-être tomberont en poussière
mais jamais celles de la passion sinistre dont nous sommes esclaves
charpentes vouées aux fers
à la tyrannie profonde des mots et des tatouages de hasard

In this the first stanza, the ungrammaticalities both blocking mimetic and indicating metaphoric reading occur in two places: whereas the rest of the stanza is consistent (grammatical) with mimetic stereotype of “galley-slaves” (*rats, chains, slaves, skeletons doomed to the fetters, tyranny and tattoos* in their acceptance of “branding”), the agents of their oppression are inconsistent (ungrammatical): *sinister passion, words and chance*. By their disqualification of literal reading, the ungrammaticalities direct the reader towards metaphor.

Metaphoric decipherment then entails the grouping of similars: since their role as oppressors are the same, there must be a connection between “passion”, “words” and

“chance”, a connection which will point to the unknown tenor of the now obviously metaphoric galley-slaves. The clearest connection between the three terms is metonymic, “Surrealism”.

This identification is confirmed intertextually by the strange marine specificity of “galley-slaves” which injects the sea code into the poem: since the sea is deciphered as the unconscious, then those who travel on the sea are those who explore the unconscious, or the Surrealists. But whereas any number of other metaphors might have been used to express the exploration of the *depths* of the psyche (such as sailors, pirates, submariners, divers, etc.), “galley-slaves” subordinates the metaphor to the service of a poetic theme: that of those who suffer from their exploration of the unconscious, or the Surrealists in the guise of “poètes maudits”, a role which, dating back at least to Ovid, gained notoriety with the Romantics, especially Baudelaire, and afterwards, with Rimbaud.

Les Poètes maudits: the dangers of the sea

The specific, Surrealist nature of this poetic suffering is presented, again in sea code, in Leiris’ *Une Nuit*.¹⁵

Une Nuit begins with the description of an angular house that “imprisons the grasses and drops of water” in two gardens locked by gates. This house is marked as metaphoric by the first verse, inconsistent with the mimesis of “house”, “A l’aube des sens” (“At the dawn of senses”), which immediately establishes the house metaphorically within the mind.

The now familiar sea code finally appears in the third stanza:

Parfois le sifflement d’une sirène
monte des bords louches du fleuve jusqu’aux fenêtres de cette bâtisse
anguleuse
et son cri pénètre de force les courtines
défonce les baldaquins dorés
puis s’effondre à bout de tout et coagule au creux des draps
nudité fixe

In this stanza, the “sifflement de sirène”, by its three ungrammaticalities, directs the reader towards its metaphorical value: first, it is a deformation of the clichéd expression “voix/ chant de sirène” (siren song), which renders the voice more aggressive: instead of the normal interpreting¹⁶ of enticing, the mermaid’s voice *attacks*. Second, though the source of the attack is explicitly named as “river”, mimetically mermaids (as opposed to nymphs or naiads) inhabit the sea. Third, the location of the attack, as shown by the specifying metonyms “courtines” and “baldaquin”, is the *bed*.

The mermaid's seeming misplacement in a river fulfils the same function as a *lapsus linguae*, redirecting the reader's attention to a hidden meaning. The intertextual sea code is introduced by its metonym "mermaid" and enables the reader to decipher the metaphor: the "voice" of the unconscious rises in sleep (the metonym of "bed"), despite its "imprisonment" by the ego's censor (the *high metal gates* of the first stanza), and its rise is an attack, in other words, it poses a danger.

The nature of this danger is specified in the last two stanzas:

Une grille de cordages laissera toujours filtrer l'acuité du son
Cette voix se moulant au creux de toutes les oreilles
se nichera dans les nids de termites
dans les trous de muraille
se répandra à travers les gouttières goutte à goutte comme l'eau
et grâce à elle toute la ville saura demain

que quand la lame des réalités matérielles aura fini d'user son
merveilleux fourreau de rêve
la maison s'écroulera
et qu'alors les dormeurs s'abîmeront
affreux noyés
dans la fondrière miroitante des antipodes viciés

The final stanza offers an explicit intratextual confirmation of the sea code's metaphoric reading: with "rêve" and "dormeurs", the unconscious is brought to the forefront, together with its watery metaphoric vehicles, "s'abîmeront", "noyés", and "fondrière miroitante". If the unconscious is a sea, then the dreamers have drowned in it: their conscious has been engulfed by the unconscious, or in the metaphors of the penultimate stanza, the structure of the ego has suffered *water damage, seepage* which has brought about its collapse.¹⁷

Yet the verses "que quand la lame des réalités matérielles aura fini d'user son merveilleux fourreau de rêve/ la maison s'écroulera" render more precise the cause of the conscious' disintegration: despite the fact that throughout the entire poem, it has been the unconscious to attack, here, the initial violence has come from the conscious, and more specifically, from the conscious' "tearing through" the unconscious. It is the conscious' attempt to penetrate the unconscious, or to bring together the two halves of the psyche which *should have remained separate* ("antipodes viciés"), that has been its downfall.

Sea Code and Syllepsis: *Le Chasseur de têtes*

This danger of the quest to probe the unconscious is represented in a similar way in the last of Leiris' poems I shall examine here, *Le Chasseur de têtes*.¹⁸ The title of this poem is a word-game: it does not refer to a hunter of heads, but a hunter *in* the head, a prober of the unconscious, or Surrealist. This syllepsis is brought to the reader's attention in the first stanza by the tell-tale ungrammaticality: the metaphorical head-hunter is not hunting heads, but deer, and the conscious' "infringement" on the unconscious is metaphorized as the hunting of deer in a sacred grove.

Incomprehensibly, except by intertextual aid, the metaphor suddenly switches from deer to octopi:

Cinq tentacules Cinq lames d'acier
Dans la rivière intarissable roulent des têtes coupées
celles des hommes qu'un joug fatal a décimés
dans une nuit de bataille où les menaces des sorciers
se confondaient avec le rôle des fleurs et le gémissement sourd des
écorces criblées d'entailles
Un continent fané s'émiettait dans la mer

With "tentacles", the sea code is again introduced metonymically, by the intercession of "octopus", and the choice of "tentacles", immediately restated as "steel blades", serves to express the danger of the sea/unconscious, much as the mermaid's whistle did in *Une Nuit*.

Though the code metaphorizing the guilty intrusion of the conscious into the unconscious has switched between the first and this the fourth stanza from "*hunting deer in a sacred grove*" to "*cutting down a sacred grove*" (menaces des sorciers, le rôle des fleurs, les écorces criblées d'entailles), the shift is readily understandable. Instead, it is the element that corresponds to neither a hunting nor a felling metaphor that provokes the most incomprehension: "dans la rivière intarissable roulent des têtes coupées/celles des hommes qu'un joug fatal a décimés".

Yet the connection of this metaphor with the sea code is assured in two ways: first, by the fact that the heads are rolling in *water*; and second, since this water, though specifically named "rivière", unmimetically contains "octopi", the metonym of "tentacules", which themselves were identified as the "steel blades" evidently used to behead the men. The "têtes coupées" is thus a syllepsis prepared by that of the title: where the head-hunter was hunting in the head, here the head-hunter has *lost his head*, in French, "*perdu la tête*". In other words, his conscious has been disintegrated by the forces of the unconscious he

himself unleashed and he has gone insane- in sea code, he rolls headless in the sea of the unconscious.

Once the sea code is established explicitly in the beginning of *Failles*, metonyms of the sea, most often tellingly inserted against the mimetic dictates of their immediate textual surroundings, serve as intertextual keys to the frequently metalinguistic significance of Leiris' poems. The constraints of time and space oblige me to omit further examples from *Haut Mal*, such as the Surrealists' metaphorization as pirates in *André Masson* or divers in *Le Chasseur de têtes*, of unconscious ideas as fish and sunken treasure in *André Masson* and *Les Galériens*, of the disintegration of the conscious by the unconscious as rotting in water and as the Great Flood in *Nuages*, as being lost at sea in *Chansons*, and as liquid erosion, water seepage and rust in *André Masson*.

In each of these poems, the sea code's tenor leaves traces of itself as ungrammaticalities in the vehicle's mimesis, ungrammaticalities which in the impossibility of mimetic reading, force the reader to read paradigmatically for a significance that explains the various aberrations. In its repeated intertextual value as a metalinguistic metaphor, the sea code provides an indispensable key to the understanding of a poet whose poetic works, dismissed by critics in favor of his prose autobiographies, are just now being discovered.

Notes

¹ Metaphors detected in Freud's work, namely the "archaeology" metaphor of "digging up" what is "buried" in the psyche (cf. Larsen, Steen F., "Remembering and the Archaeology Metaphor" in *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 2(3), 1987, pp.187-199) and the Acheron metaphor, taken from Vergil's "Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo", which posits the psyche as composed of higher and lower regions (cf. Starobinski, Jean, "Acheronta movebo" in *Critical Inquiry* 13, Winter 1987, pp.394-407) both stem from the verticalization of the psyche.

² Freud, Sigmund; *The Interpretation of Dreams*; Barnes & Nobles, New York, 1994 pp.85, 186, 260, 286, etc. In the original German, *Die Traumdeutung*; Studienausgabe Band II, Frankfurt am Main (Germany): Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1982; pp.122, 123 etc.

³ Breton, André; *Les Vases Communicants*; Paris: Gallimard, coll. Idées, 1955; p.152

⁴ *Les Vases Communicants*; *ibid.*; p.160

⁵ *Les Vases Communicants*; *ibid.*, p.161. Though *Les Vases Communicants* is in prose, Breton also uses the metaphor of the psyche as sea in poetry, such as, for example his *L'Etoile matinale* in *Constellations in Signe Ascendant* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Poésie, 1949,

1968) p.139: Elle dit au berger: «Approche. C'est moi qui t'attirais enfant vers ces caves profondes où la mer en se retirant gare les oeufs des tempêtes que lustre le varech, aux myriades de paupières baissées...» (She says to the shepherd: "Come closer. I'm the one who used to attract you when you were a child toward those deep caves where the sea, pulling back, sets the storms' eggs polished by kelp, in myriads of closed eyelids..." —my translation

⁶ Leiris, Michel; *Failles* in *Haut Mal*; Editions Gallimard, coll. Poesie, 1969.

⁷ Leiris, Michel; *Failles* pp.25-26

⁸ I will use the terminology coined by I.A. Richards in his article, "Metaphor" in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford U.P., 1936, 1965; p.96ff): in the metaphor, "Achilles is a lion", "Achilles" is the tenor, "lion" is the vehicle, and the ground, or perceived similarity authorizing the comparison, is "ferocious bravery".

⁹ I use *code* as the expansion of an initial metaphor by which corollary metonyms of the original vehicle are used to metaphorize metonyms of the original tenor. An excellent example of a code is to be found in Ronsard's *Amours de Cassandre* Ode CXX, where the initial metaphor is the traditional "love:hunt". Once this metaphor is established, metonyms of "love" are metaphorized by metonyms of *hunt*: *femme as fère sauvage, laisse as trait de bonheur, ardeur et le jeune age as chiens, violent courage as limier*.

¹⁰ A *descriptive system* is the set of metonyms considered in the sociolect to be "normally" (i.e. stereotypically/mimetically) associated with a particular sign. Cf. Michael Riffaterre; *Semiotics of Poetry*; (Bloomington & London: Indiana UP, 1978) esp. pp. 39-40 and Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington & London: Indiana UP, 1979) esp. pp. 76-82

¹¹ *Ungrammaticality* (or *cataphoresis*) is the pairing of signs which are not considered in the sociolect as compatible. Cf. Riffaterre, Michael; *Semiotics of Poetry*; Indiana U.P., Bloomington & London, 1978; esp. pp.2-6. For a discussion of ungrammaticality and oxymoron as constitutive of meaning in Surrealist semiotics, see Michel Billabraga, *Sémiotique du Surréalisme, André Breton ou la cohérence* (Toulouse: Presses du Mirail, 1995) and Marie-Christine Lala's concise summary thereof, "Surréalisme, sémiotique et constitution du sens" in *Mélusine* 18 (Lausanne: Editions de l'Age d'homme, 1998) 300-307

¹² Michel Leiris; *Biffures*; Ed. Gallimard, coll. L'Imaginaire, 1948; p.274

¹³ There is a trace, however tenuous, of the source of these words in the passage from *Biffures*, a trace afforded by the text's jarring metaphor: "les différents îlots jetés sur le blanc du papier". Though the metaphor would escape unexplained without the intertextual aid of the "sea" code, the single word "îlots", as an object rising from the sea, does identify the unconscious as the source of the "poetic" words.

¹⁴ *Failles* in *Haut Mal*, op. cit.; p.44-5.

¹⁵ *Failles in Haut Mal*, op. cit.; p.32-33.

¹⁶ Peirce, C.S.; *Collected Papers*; Harvard U.P., Cambridge & London, 1960; 1. 339: an interpretant is "a sign to which another sign gives rise". For example, an interpretant might be metonymic (the sign "ship" might give rise to the sign "sail") or metaphoric (the sign "lamp" might give rise to the sign "sun"). For a fuller taxonomy of interpretants see Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976) 69–71.

¹⁷ cf. Breton, André; "Sur Robert Desnos" in *Perspective cavalière*; Gallimard, 1970; p.170: "Durant des années, Robert Desnos s'est abandonné *Corps et Biens* (c'est le titre d'un de ses livres) à l'automatisme surréaliste. J'ai tenté, pour ma part, de le retenir, de l'instant où j'ai pu craindre que sa *structure individuelle n'y résistât pas*. Oui, je continue à croire que sur cette voie, passé outre à une certaine limite, la *désintégration* menace." (italics mine)

¹⁸ *Failles in Haut Mal*, pp.55-7.

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