

THE MAGRITTE POEMS
AN INTRODUCTION by Javant Biarujis

*tin painted impossible greens we all knew meant grass —
meant, was not. Illusion wasn't part of the game.*

— Gerald Burns

The poems presented here by Mark Young are a response to the paintings of his beloved Belgian painter, the Surrealist René Magritte (1898–1967). Young, born in New Zealand, and having made Australia his home since 1969, long-time, and erudite editor of *Otoliths*, is a prolific poet of great standing, with more than seventy publications to his name. The language of the poet in this collection hosts free verse everywhere, from puzzles-as-poems, such as “Memory (1948),” which resembles Lewis Carroll’s nineteenth-century doublets, as described in *Vanity Fair*, to chessboards (“The Loftiest Game”), to collaged form guides (“COUNTRY RACING / ROCKHAMPTON,” “Magritte”), to the chant of Surrealist techniques, such as automatic writing, and collage, to prose poetry, to poems that look like market surveys or online auctions, and blogging (“Confiture de Cheval” — horses are recurring motifs, “The Torturing of the Vestal Virgin,” *etc.*), to numerous experiments with typography (“An Advertisement for Norine (Lord Lister variant),” “Querelle des universaux,” “The Night Owl,” *etc.*). This makes reading Young’s poetry very engaging. But poet and painter, are they the same thing? Are their aims the same? Young shows in his poetry that he is not merely being descriptive of Magritte’s work, though he sprinkles the common images of the bowler hat, the apple (trees), leaves (trees again), clouds, birds (in trees), horses and their bells, the smoker’s pipe, mirrors, windows, the sea and sky, *etc.* Magritte’s hats were contemporaneous, painted in an era they were worn, not like today when you hardly see a hat (maybe a baseball cap, worn as intended, or inverted — here Young is able to get mention of Donald Trump in). Some words or images are immediately associated with their artist, such as “calligramme” with Apollinaire, “*duende*” with Lorca, the bowler hat with Magritte, “readymade” with Duchamp, *etc.* They’re like signatures or shorthand. Magritte, and consequently, Young, employ the *bilboquet* often as a symbol. The dictionary definition of *bilboquet* is a cup-and-ball game, but it has also been identified as a bowling pin or even baluster in the case of Magritte, whereas Young makes use of the ambiguity here by suggesting it is a type of bird early on in his poetry, before going on to describe it as chess pieces, “phallustrades” (“The

Married Priest”), and something that floats, like a duck, I suppose. However, the important thing to note is, it’s all a *game*. (“Décalcomanie,” the title of a poem in this collection, is also a game favored by the Surrealists, one that relies on chance, and is, ironically, stochastic; ironic, for etymologically, “stochastic” is “skillful with one’s aim.”) Flemish painters painted the same thing as Magritte did (Magritte was primarily a painter, however, he also wrote), but just as Magritte saw what they saw but through a new lens, so too does Young in his poetry. “The Married Priest” illustrates all of Magritte’s obsessions (a deliberately repetitive vocabulary, a rhetorical device):

Over & over. Re-
peating the images.
Replaying them, the
same, a different
game. Con text

Young ends on “the apples / might wear a mask” in this poem. The repeated images may be in “homage” to Magritte’s “limited palette,” *i.e.*, constraints, although Young uses all the modernist, and postmodernist devices available to him. Barthes claims that the “obsessive would experience the voluptuous release of the letter,” the epistemology of “the words / that hide behind the words be- / hind the mask” (“Le Masque Vide”). Young’s sense of mystery is like Magritte’s, at once familiar yet strange:

The sorcery
lies in an operation rendered
invisible by the simplicity
of its result — “The Two Mysteries (2),” using the
postmodernist technique of sourcing the text from *This Is Not a
Pipe* by Michel Foucault (Young dedicates “The Betrayal of Images
(2)” to Foucault), and *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette* by Florence
Hartley (published in 1860).

Young also likes to make the familiar unfamiliar, as when he mixes up aphorisms or common sayings (“which came first, the / candle or the eggs,” “La Veillée,” or “Beauty is in the eye of the bullholder,” “Pour devenir un fort soldat / To become a strong soldier (1918)” — “prosodic rhythms, of [quoted] truisms” — Barthes). Just as Magritte plays with semiotics, so does Young — Magritte’s most famous work is *The Betrayal of Images*, perhaps because of the

words “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*” (I even saw “CECI N’EST PAS UN PALAIS” graffitied on a factory wall in Potsdam), repeated in an English version. The differentiation between the object (signifier) and the representation of that object (signified):

Sweet Jesus. *Le fils de l’homme*
as a skateboard. What would
Foucault have made of this,
especially since the constructors
insist *ceci n’est pas un skateboard?* — “Skate / parked / bored,”

and

Ceci n’est pas
une pipe. N’est
pas ceci aussi. Only
the painting is /
what it claims
to be. Is a
painting. Is
a painting of
a pipe. Or in
this case also
a painting of
a painting of
a pipe. — “The Two Mysteries (1)”

Young sometimes circumscribes Magritte; *The Son of Man* is a Magritte title that Young has used in his poem. Magritte says, “Here we have the apparent visible, the apple, hiding the hidden visible, the person’s face” — in case we don’t see the Apollinarian connection with the symbol of the apple, he spells it out in words; as Young says in “The Music Lesson,” “in / part a kind of signifier.” Magritte used words and images in his work of the late 1920s — he listed eighteen points of significance about relationships between word and image, the seventh being apposite to Young: “A word can take the place of an object in reality.” The apotheosis of this is *The Betrayal of Images*. The reason language works is *agreement* — we agree that this fruit is an apple (in English, *pomme* in French, *yabloko* in Russian, *ringo* in Japanese, *etc.*). Young disrupts this agreement in order to heighten language, make us sit up and take note. The

shock of language. In “Elective Affinities,” we see Young’s and Magritte’s “systematic search for ‘affinities’ between objects”:

A civil
celebrant, Magritte,
a union-
maker, who brings
disparate things
together &
creates an arc
that leaps the
gap between
them. On
one hand.
On the other.
Relationships
exist, affinities
not always ob-
vious. & yet so
obvious. Such
as that which he has
elected to display
here. But sparks
still fly. So might
the egg if
re-
leased
from the cage. — “Elective Affinities”

Marriage as an affinity. Interstices. Enjambment. The line or hyphen that leads one astray; a *trait d’union* is the French for hyphen, where “union” is used ambiguously:

The male	There it
flower	encounters
breaks off	the female.
& rises	
to the	Birds
surface of	grow.

the water.

The use
of hyphens with adverbs is redundant
unless an identical adjective exists.

Late-blooming sun. — “Le Trait d’union”

Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text* (the pleasure of writing, its rules, its grammar — “Some *trompe- / l’oeil*. Much grammar,” “The Marches of Summer”), asks if “today’s writer [is not] the residual substitute for the beggar, the monk, the bonze: unproductive, but nevertheless provided for[.] Analogous to the Buddhist sangha.” Early in Young’s career, he worked in the Japanese embassy in Wellington — you can see the Japanese influence in “The literal meaning of *jan / ken pon*, the Japanese equi- / valent of rock, scissors, paper, / is ‘beginning with stone’” (“The Gradation of Fire”), the mantra in “Meditation” (“*I go for refuge in the Sangha*”). or the mention of Hokusai (master printmaker), and Yoshitsune (samurai) in “La Cascade.” Young is exploring “the *deceptive* nature of literature” (Barthes, with emphasis in the original). As Barthes (again) says, “text itself is atopic.”

Popular culture, mass culture, social media, the Internet age, computers, consumerist jargon, production, globalization, news headlines, are Young’s material for his poetry, in this book, and in many others. They add to the drama, and they are a new way of seeing. His poetry abounds with references to Amazon, the Apple Store, eBay, Photoshop, KFC, McDonald’s, Starbucks, Snapchat, Windows, AI, the Oscars, Sherlock Holmes, Miley Cyrus, The Poynter Sisters, Harrison Ford, James Dean, Gameboy, YouTube, Helen Mirren, the films *Brazil*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Eyes Wide Shut*, Fellini, Alfred Hitchcock, Twentieth Century Fox, Frank Sinatra, Fred Astaire, Gloria Swanson, Led Zeppelin, the songs “I Am What I Am,” “It’s Raining Men,” “Summertime,” “Time after Time,” *etc.* (including the snatch “*Voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir?*” from Lady Marmalade), Leonard Cohen, k. d. lang, Michael Jackson, Gérard Depardieu, Radiohead, The Rolling Stones, robots, Prince Charming, *The Art of War*, Irving Berlin, Sean Connery, David Bowie, Marlene Dietrich, Iggy Pop, Ursula Le Guin, Samuel R. Delaney, Lee Harvey Oswald, QR-codes, COVID-19 (just once), the Titanic, Yoko Ono, and Kim Kardashian. Everything is fair game, even Science Fiction. The (pseudo-)science of “La Gravitation Universelle,” or quoting Simone Weil (“All the / natural movements of the soul / are controlled by laws analogous / to those of

physical gravity," "The State of Grace"), or "a Foucault test us[ing] interference patterns produced by a knife edge / to determine the deviation of a mirror from its ideal shape / Foucault the first to show how a pendulum can track Earth's rotation / mechanisms acting during human sleep" ("An End To Contemplation," where Foucault is not Michel but Léon). Barthes calls it "the knife of value" or "the zero of the signified." The truism of "Returning to the Moon is the key to humanity's long-term future in space" ("Clear Ideas"), yet every syllable in Young's poetry is essential. He uses simple language to discuss complex ideas, even when the vocabulary may be hit or miss (he refers to his lecture "Stochastic Acts" in "La Cascade," his version of *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, but in such a casual way typical of his writing, where readers may or may not pick up on his associations: "A massive earthquake. A tropical cyclone. A picture of Hokusai. Stochastic acts"). The typical Young device of mixing science with popular culture: "Lotka & Volterra, with the ratio of yin to yang determining who is / x & y in the differentiated equation" ("The Spy"), or "This is a piece of the old Atomium, in the Delft University of / Technology" ("This is a Piece of Cheese," dedicated to Yoko Ono). Young also luxuriates in the pleasure of paronomasia: "I took my troubles / down to Mme / Gorgon. Zola" ("Le Philtre"), "Ceci est un morceau de fromage," "La Marchande de Sable" (Le Marchand de Sel or The Saltseller was an anagrammatic nickname Marcel Duchamp had for himself), "condom/inium" ("La Belle idée"), "archi- / texture" ("The Song of Love"), "Bored games" ("Checkmate"), "In this fromage to / Jacques Louis David" ("Madame Récamier de David (1)"), "the bland leading the / bland" ("Le Masque Vide"), etc.

Lewis Carroll was in the mind of Magritte as well as Young, who often undercuts his subjects with the absurd: "Alice, Albert / Einstein, & Annie / Edson Taylor, the first / person to go over / Niagara Falls in a / barrel" ("Perpetual Motion (1)"), or

Given a list
of words. Asked
to repeat them
back. A test
for veridical
memory. Eye,
reflection, looking-
& cheval-glass,

sky. Alice. All
synonyms of. Or.
Associated with.
Not included. Her
initial answer. The
thought made
visible. Mirror. — “The False Mirror (2)”

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was beloved by the Surrealists. Young's disruption of syntax is a similar declaration of a way of seeing. While other poets explore the humor in the juxtaposition of high and low culture, Young always remains ironical.

While the vocation, the art of the artist is in the present, even when painted or composed long ago, the reader or viewer is always in the future. Sometimes the art itself is in a further future, even if the reader or viewer cannot accept it as such. (A future that is always unfinished, like life itself: “[Composition on a Sea Shore]” is the only poem that is deliberately left unfinished at the end, in future time, like life itself.) However, Young addresses the future in several of his poems: “The Window (2),” “L’Avenir” (The Future), “Clear Ideas,” “The Listening Room (1958),” “The Future of Statues,” “The Threatened Assassin,” “Fortune Telling,” “The Denizens of the River,” *etc.* There were those when photography was a new art who said about painting, “Why bother? Photography can reproduce the landscape just as well, if not better.” (The same can be said today of artificial intelligence.) Both may coexist — it's the imagination that is paramount, and critical; the rest is just mechanics.

For more than a century, the dream has been considered legitimate pabulum for the artist. While many people see landscape or the city as the place of creativity or the imagination, rather than seeing a single artist, others see that image, and imagery belong to artists, poet and painter alike (what Baudelaire called the “cult of images”). But it is true that the Muse, Mnemosyne, belongs in the past rather than the future. Ambrose Bierce, in his *Devil's Dictionary*, defined imagination as “A warehouse of facts, with poet and liar in joint ownership.” A warehouse of images, moreover.

We lose ourselves in the imagination, inspiration, and *daimon* of the artist — imaginary scenes or historical scenes, scenes how the artist imagined they appeared, abstractions, repetition. We investigate the interior of ourselves. We go for a walk, which inspires us to paint, to write, to make permanent that which is not. Magritte, like many artists, including Niek Kemps's

ambiguity/obscurity, was trying to say when he painted a version of *The Birth of Venus* that, like Benjamin, and Goethe before him, beauty is not a covering, the shell, not even Venus personified, but an essence. A transformation takes place. That is what Young is trying to capture.

The circularity of nature: landscape, panorama, trees, forest, sky, the sea, *etc.* Nature has to be transformed, either physically, when we make cities, human constructions, *etc.*, and in art, where it is a type of mimesis. Barthes said, reality is “suspended between,” where Bachelard saw the philosophy of imagination as an adjective, *i.e.*, as part of grammar, as part of language. Charles Bernstein, speaking as a poet, and conscious of what Adorno had to say about history, said it was important not to aestheticize, symptomatize, territorialize or ideologize imagination but, as part of imagination’s circumference, its creativity, to essentialize it. Young uses language, spectacle, imagination, knowledge, insight, invention, memory, curiosity, character, and poetry in order to transfigure the baseness of life, its vulgarities, its violence, its ugliness; he transcends them with language. The difference between imaginary and imagination. The transitivity, and performativity of imagination. While the painter may produce optical illusions (in person, Magritte’s attire is iconic, sculptural; in painting, it is symbolic, semiotic), the poet produces poetical allusions. Just as Magritte used objects out of context in his paintings, Young does so with words. In “Le Prisonnier,” he explains: “It’s probably something I / learnt from — copied from? — / Magritte, the giving of titles that bear no relation to the item in question.” Paradoxically, putting inspiration into practice is the ordering of chaos. Inspiration is light, the sun, reflection. It is a game. It is an artifice. Young addresses environmental issues in his latter poems. He adopts Coleridge’s “secondary imagination,” *i.e.*, dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create.”

Young explains in “The Month of the Grape Harvest (2)” that

Anything can be
connected to anything else —
that’s an underlying principle
of hermetic semiosis

This is not merely a homage to a painter. Young articulates Magritte’s experience in “The Great War I”; he is indirect in his pacifism, but direct in his condemnation of colonialism. He mixes Magritte’s biography (his wife, Georgette, the suicide of his mother, *etc.*) with his own autobiography (mention

of “Magritte in North Queensland”, his age, his father, “Stochastic Acts”, and a fondness for detective fiction, which he shared with Magritte, with dedications to Dashiell Hammett and Jo Nesbø; Fantômas, that charming criminal eluding justice). “Cicerone,” his longest poem in the collection, is hardly autobiographical, however, for it is Incan in nature; Machu Picchu, its citadel, the site of the priest as well as the poet. In “Clear Ideas,” Young says “The sea is its avatar” — “its” could be human endeavor, such as going to the moon. He concludes by asking in “Checkmate,” “Am I his avatar?” You be the judge.

— Javant Biarujia

South Yarra, July 26, 2024