

Repeat Offenders: Violence and Textual Economy

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André Breton is undeniably a pivotal figure in the development of Twentieth-century literature and art. Like a limited number of individuals throughout history, he possessed the ability to effect innovations in existing modes of thought and expression, not only through his own work, but through his influence on and orientation of others. As the self-appointed leader of the Surrealist movement throughout the latter's various transformations, he managed to instill in a number of writers and artists ideals which remain central to artistic expression today, if less radical: the belief in levels of reality existing beyond conventional, ultimately oppressive modes of perception and thought (most notably, in the unconscious), and the continual gesture of revolt necessary to reach these levels. And if the term "pivotal" might seem an overused one, we would suggest that it is appropriate here for its literal as well as its figurative sense. For the leader of Surrealism is equally, if not better known today for his tendency to turn against, eventually expelling from the group the very individuals he had drawn to it. Once his positions were pushed to the extreme (and they most often were), there was little room for differences of opinion or negotiation.

More importantly, for the present study, we, as readers and critics of literature often have a similar relationship with Breton. Despite an initial attraction to the impassioned, uncompromising tone of the various manifestos, many of us reach a kind of saturation point, at which we too feel turned away, questioning the ultimate integrity of the writer's project. If, as Mary Ann Caws has suggested, Breton's unique power of attraction lies less in the particular ideas

embraced by the writer than in the “intensity” with which his discourse moves through these ideas, in continual revolution, we would suggest that it is also to this level of the Bretonian text (and not the particular positions he holds at any given time) that the critical gaze should be turned if we are to better understand the “pivotal” nature of the writer’s work.¹ How might the unique affective force of such a discourse come to turn against the writer and his project—the attraction of new “revolutionaries?” At a time when the avant-garde gesture of revolt has become so ingrained in artistic expression that it is hardly possible as such any more, a convention itself, such a phenomenon would seem to merit close attention.

Mets un mot sur un homme, et l’homme frissonnant
Sèche et meurt pénétré par la force profonde;
Attache un mot vengeur au flanc de tout un monde,
Et le monde, entraînant pavois, glaive, échafaud,
Ses lois, ses mœurs, ses dieux, s’écroule sous le mot. (Hugo 31)

Put a word on a man, and the man, trembling,
withers and dies, penetrated by the profound force;
Attach a vengeful word to the flank of an entire world
And the world, dragging with it shield, sword, and gallows,
Its laws, customs and gods, collapses beneath the word.

J’ai voulu ravager mes campagnes intimes,
Des forêts ont jailli pour recouvrir mes ruines.
... L’horreur de trop d’amour et de trop d’horizon
Que pour moi voyageur font naître les chansons. (Desnos 30)

I wanted to ravage my inner countrysides:
forests sprang up to cover my ruins.
... The horror of too much love and of too much horizon
That for me, a wanderer, songs bring to life.

Pitié pour l’amant des homonymes. (Desnos 50)

Pity for the lover of homonyms.

For all of the excessive hyperbole which at times leads us to dismiss Hugo, the first citation reflects one of the poet's most dangerous legacies to modern poetry: the belief, not simply that poetic language can affect reality, but further, that it is capable of the most dramatic, and indeed violent transformations of the latter. This is not to suggest that such texts are literally dangerous. To our knowledge, none of André Breton's admirers actually fired into crowds, for instance—what he once formulated as the most basic Surrealist act: “L'acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolvers aux poings, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu'on peut, dans la foule” “The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd,” (*Manifestoes* 156, Seaver 125). Indeed, we would suggest that, on the contrary, the potential effect of such texts on actual events is more often diminished; that literary violence is ultimately a danger to itself, and the ideas it is intended to express. In close readings of “revolutionary” texts, we find that transgressive language often comes to undermine the production of new value for which it is employed, through what we would identify as an economic crisis in expression; overtaken by a kind of “inflation” in expressive force, such a discourse proliferates through a continual devaluation of . . . discourse (“Ce sont toutes les valeurs intellectuelles brimées, toutes les idées morales en déroute, tous les bienfaits de la vie frappées de corruption, indiscernables” “It is a matter of all intellectual values being persecuted, all moral ideas falling to pieces, all the benefits of life being condemned to corruption and becoming indiscernible,” [Breton in *Position* 19, Seaver 216]).

Before turning to these texts, however, we should point out that this phenomenon is all the more pertinent for being the result of another, more recent development in the identity of the modern writer, evoked in the plaintive lines that follow Hugo's confident assertion, above. If Surrealism to a certain extent actualizes the revolution conceived by the young Hugo, with its full-scale attack on those conventions which restrain authentic expression, why is Robert Desnos, the poet who in Breton's opinion most embodies this freedom, embroiled in an internal conflict—precisely where Surrealist doctrine locates a creative source liberated from external restraint (i.e. through l'“automatisme”)?² How do we explain this

“horror” of lyrical excess: (“L’horreur de trop . . . / Que . . . font naître les chansons” ‘. . . The horror of too much . . . / That . . . songs bring to life’), this ineradicable mass of “leaves” “J’ai voulu ravager mes campagnes intimes, / Des forêts ont jailli . . .” ‘I wanted to ravage my intimate countrysides: / forests sprung up to cover my ruins . . .’, where the poet supposedly “lets them go” as he produces them, according to Breton: “Il lit en lui à livre ouvert et ne fait rien pour retenir les *feuillettes* qui s’envolent au vent de sa vie” ‘He reads himself like an open book, and does nothing to retain the pages, which fly away in the windy wake of his life’ (*Manifestes* 44, emphasis mine, Seaver 29). Even Surrealism cannot escape a new form of oppression that arises in the modern era: the growing cynicism regarding the possibility of *any* authentic form of expression—even the most “intime.”

It is this almost neurotic tendency toward self-censorship which Jean-Michel Maulpoix in fact identifies as the distinguishing feature of the modern lyric, beginning with Baudelaire (“En résistant à l’effusion lyrique, il fait du lyrisme même un lieu critique” ‘In resisting lyrical effusion, he turns lyricism itself into a place of critique,’ 89); what Laurent Jenny, whose work on this subject will continue to guide our own, identifies as the “terror” of modern literature in general:

La terreur est ce mouvement trop familier où la pensée se renverse contre les signes qui la disent . . . Illusoirement ou non, nous avons conscience que ce que nous disons trahit, et même contredit, ce que nous «voulions» dire. Mais ce vouloir dire, nous ne pouvons le préciser sans à nouveau éprouver toute la perte qu’il y a à l’énoncer. Ainsi, l’espace de l’expression, irréconciliable à lui-même, est l’espace de la terreur. Dans ce qui s’énonce, en déça de tout contenu, *la terreur est déclarée*. (11)

Terror is that too familiar movement whereby thought turns back on the signs which express it. . . . Illusorily or not, we are aware that what we are saying betrays, contradicts even, what we “meant” to say. And yet we are unable to specify this “meaning to say” without experiencing anew all of the loss involved in enunciating it. It is thus that the space of expression, irreconcilable with itself, is the space of terror. In that which is enunciated, prior to any content, *terror is declared*.

modern writer, who is now embattled, not only with literary and social conventions, but with his very own utterances—even those, implicitly, with which he attacks those conventions. For this conflict can lead only to a discourse that must continually “wander,” reproducing itself in order to reach what it has not yet, and perhaps can never replace:

Or, ni la solitude du moi moderne ni sa volonté forcenée de maîtrise ne suffisent à établir la légitimité de son expression. Il nous faut donc nous contenter d’une parole sans fondation collective; insatisfaite, et errante, toujours en quête du geste décisif qui, forçant les signes, assurerait sa transfiguration. Hostiles à nos propres mots, nous voici entrés dans le temps de la violence et de la rage. (Jenny 16)

Now, neither the solitude of the modern subject, nor its desperate will to mastery are sufficient to establish the legitimacy of its expression. We must therefore content ourselves with a speech lacking any collective foundation; unsatisfied, wandering, continually in search of the decisive gesture that, forcing signs, would assure its transfiguration. Hostile toward our own words, we find we have entered the era of violence and rage.

In the following pages, I have attempted to show the modern poet “in” this endless quest—that is to say, in the very medium, or “matter” of language in which the latter takes place. Key texts, where Breton elaborates Surrealism’s esthetic and political position, reveal a crucial blind spot in the practice of avant-garde literature: an inability to recognize textual processes that not only fail to invest language with new value, but actually produce the opposite result: an over-production of the signifier itself. The “lover of homonyms” cannot prevent himself from continuing, and indeed exacerbating, the very tendency to excess he attempts to destroy.

Despite his generally anarchic tendencies, Breton clearly adheres to certain elements of the literary tradition—that myth of the poetic subject, for instance, in which the latter is alienated from society, singled out by destiny:

(le poète) a d’autant moins de chances de s’adapter (à la réalité sociale) que sa vocation de poète témoigne – selon Freud – du besoin impérieux de compenser un trouble important du développement psychique

qui mènerait autrement à la névrose. Il en résulte que cette révolte contre la « réalité » est chez lui constitutionnelle et . . . inconditionnelle.

(the poet) is all the less likely to adapt (to social reality) to the extent that his vocation as poet reflects – according to Freud – the imperious need to compensate for a significant disturbance in psychological development that would otherwise result in neurosis. As a consequence, this revolt against “reality” is constitutional and . . . unconditional for him. (Qtd. in Beaujour 27)

The above citation reveals that the stakes have been considerably raised, however. While the “proof” given for the poet’s special status, through Freudian theory, can be seen as simply a modern version of this myth, it is nonetheless significant for what it reveals about the poet’s particular agenda: as the language of the text reveals, Breton is determined to give an absolute status to the gesture of revolt (“constitutionnelle” “inconditionnelle”). Where the revolt of the Romantic poet was most often tempered by the basic moral values he shared with society,³ for Breton, it has become a “virtue”—or rather, the virtue: “Je crois à la vertu absolue de tout ce qui s’exerce, spontanément ou non, dans le sens de l’inacceptation” ‘I believe in the absolute virtue of anything that takes place, spontaneously or not, in the sense of non-acceptance’ (*Manifestes* 156, emphasis mine, Seaver 125). To thus equate the individual with absolute revolt becomes problematic when we consider a second aspect of Breton’s alienated poet: just as in (if not inherited from) the Romantic version of this myth, the very individual who is fundamentally other than the world he lives in, who has declared war against that world, is simultaneously figured as the redeemer of the latter.⁴ If the poet’s act of revolt is “constitutional,” absolute, this gesture ultimately serves society, and transforms its history: “le surréalisme ne tendit à rien tant qu’à provoquer, au point de vue intellectuel et moral, une *crise de conscience* de l’espèce la plus générale et la plus grave et . . . l’obtention ou la non-obtention de ce résultat peut seule décider de sa réussite ou de son échec historique” ‘more than anything else, Surrealism attempted to provoke, from the intellectual and moral point of view, an *attack of conscience*, of the most general and serious kind, and . . . the extent to which this was or was not accomplished alone can determine its historical success or failure’

(*Manifestes* 153, Seaver 123). Is such a position—as both anarchist and reformer—tenable? And if so, what end does such a discourse, at once absolute and seemingly contradictory, actually serve?

The oppositional structure central to the Surrealist project is perhaps less of a historical necessity, an extreme point of conflict that must be traversed for the “Aufhebung” of Western consciousness to take place, than a structure that makes Surrealist discourse possible in the first place.⁵ As Michel Beaujour suggests, in *La Terre et la rhétorique*, what is at stake here is not the transformation of humanity, as the first phrase of the following passage ironically states, but the key Surrealist gesture of “liberation” that such opposition makes possible. And more importantly, the *iterative* nature of this possibility (“une répétition rituelle du geste libérateur” ‘a *ritualistic repetition* of the liberating gesture’):

La transformation, de la condition humaine est ici en jeu. . . . Promesses d’une nouvelle ère née de l’*infraction d’un ordre*. Peu importe l’origine de cet ordre: dogmes religieux, évolution du psychisme humain, aliénation économique, ou régimes d’oppression politique. Il suffit que la situation soit ressentie comme un interdit pour justifier un sacrilège majeur, «dans des circonstances exceptionnelles, fondamentales», qui revêtent l’acte d’une dignité sacrale: «Le surréalisme part de là». À la suite de cette infraction initiale, le surréalisme se conçoit comme une répétition rituelle du geste libérateur, consacrant chaque fois la liberté de celui qui se livre «aveuglément» à l’automatisme.

The transformation of the human condition is at stake here. . . . Promises of a new era, born of the infraction of an order. The origin of this order is of little consequence: religious dogmas, evolution of the human psyche, economic alienation, or oppressive political regimes. It is enough that the situation is felt as a prohibition for it to justify a major sacrilege, “in exceptional, fundamental circumstances” which lend a sacred dignity to the act: “Surrealism begins here.” Following this initial infraction, Surrealism is conceived as a ritualistic repetition of the liberating gesture, each time consecrating the liberty of he who abandons himself “blindly” to automatism. (67)

What we would call into question, however, beyond the dubious “engagement” of this rhetorical gesture, is the latter’s efficacy *as a rhetorical gesture*. Without our even questioning the agenda of the

writer at this point, this particular source of Surrealist discourse appears problematic once we expect it to support, as Beaujour would seem to suggest it does, a “sustainable economy” of expression—and precisely as a result of its apparent fertility (i.e. the repeated gestures it makes possible). This becomes especially apparent when, rather than analyzing the broader, thematic structures of Breton’s writing, we observe these repeated “infractions” in the most basic units of a given passage—the individual words and series of words that constitute the text.

Early in the *Premier Manifeste*, for instance, Breton attempts to define the Surrealist project by distinguishing it from what he terms “l’attitude réaliste,” embarking on an extended description of the latter. While the passage begins by positing an absolute opposition, as in those analyzed above (“hostile à tout essor intellectuel” ‘hostile to any intellectual . . . advancement’), it quickly passes into a different, if related, discursive register—which we will henceforth refer to as the “invective”:

L’attitude réaliste . . . m’a bien l’air hostile à tout essor intellectuel et moral. Je l’ai en horreur, car elle est faite de *médiocrité*, de *haine* et de *plate suffisance*. C’est elle qui engendre aujourd’hui ces livres *ridicules*, ces pièces *insultantes* . . . s’appliquant à flatter l’opinion dans ses goûts les plus bas; la clarté confinant à *la sottise*, *la vie des chiens*.

The realistic attitude, . . . clearly seems to me to be hostile to any intellectual or moral advancement. I loathe it, for it is made up of mediocrity, hate, and dull conceit. It is this attitude which today gives birth to these ridiculous books, these insulting plays . . . assiduously flattering the lowest of tastes; clarity bordering on stupidity, a dog’s life. (18–19, emphasis mine, Seaver 6)

We first note, especially after underlining them, that the invective terms play a key role in the prosodic structure of the passage: appearing in pairs at the end of the phrases, these resonant terms clearly create accents, or instances of intensity in the text: “plate suffisance” => “pièces insultantes” => “confinant à la sottise.”⁶ These phonetic patterns are not of course solely responsible for this effect, but are playing on, amplifying the affective charge such terms produce on the semantic level; a concentrated effect that regular discourse cannot achieve in individual units of expression. As Timothy

Jay observes:

Cursing intensifies emotional expressions in a manner that inoffensive words cannot achieve. . . . Extremely powerful language (e.g., fuck you) expresses extremely powerful emotions. Inoffensive language (e.g., darn you) will not achieve a deep level of intensity; only a curse word will do it. Cursing's unique emotional shading is essential for the production and comprehension of deep emotional expressions. (137)

In a similar, though more complex analysis of this phenomenon, Julia Kristeva remarks:

There is nothing better than an obscene word for perceiving the limits of a phenomenological linguistics faced with the heterogeneous and complex architectonics of significance. . . . the obscene word mobilizes the signifying resources of the subject, permitting it to cross through the membrane of meaning where consciousness holds it, connecting it to gestuality, kinesthesia, the drives' body, the movement of rejection and appropriation of the other. Then, it is neither object, transcendental signified, nor signifier available to a neutralized consciousness. . . . By reconstituting them ("these jubilatory dramas"), and this on the very level of language, literature achieves it cathartic effects. (*Desire* 143)

And yet, shouldn't we be suspicious of these supposedly objective, theoretical texts, in encountering the same absolute language we have observed in Breton's writing ("Inoffensive language . . . *will not achieve* a deep level of intensity; *only* a curse word will do it. Cursing's *unique* emotional shading is *essential*"; "There is *nothing better* than an obscene word"; "it is *neither . . . nor . . .*")? Can any one type of discourse actually have such a status—entirely *other than* conventional discourses, enabling the subject once again to experience what "neutralized consciousness" is no longer capable of—or do such unequivocal valorizations point to the same concept of transgression we have suggested is problematic for Breton? More importantly: allowing that a given term can produce such an effect, can this level of expressive intensity be maintained when, as we find in Breton's writing, such terms are continuously *repeated*—and to such a degree they could be said to constitute the discourse itself, no longer "other than" anything else?

But the invective discourse involves another, more serious

problem, as Jenny points out. The transgressions of modern literary “terrorism” are in fact a result of the writer’s *inability* to effect the type of catharsis described by Kristeva, he suggests. Whether or not literature has ever actually been capable of producing such an event, it is precisely the absence of, or “nostalgia” for the latter, which motivates terrorist writing. And even more significant, from our perspective, not only is the invective enunciation incapable of fulfilling its intended purpose, releasing aggressive drives from the writing/speaking subject, but it tends to actually turn these drives back on the subject him- or herself:

... la parole implique le parleur toujours plus qu’il ne le croit. Les échanges d’injures enfantines le savent bien, qui s’exaspèrent sur un argument sans réplique: «Celui qui le dit y est.» Tant il est vrai qu’aucune insulte ne peut prétendre à l’énoncé pur, décoché comme une flèche, et dont le locuteur serait indemne. La destination des mots est incertaine. Avant d’atteindre qui que ce soit, ils ouvrent un espace où l’énonciateur lui-même est happé par l’effort de la représentation injurieuse. Les difficultés de la négation, qui doit poser son objet, avant de l’informer, sont du même ordre.

... speech always implicates the speaker more than he imagines. Those who exchange childish insults, finally becoming exasperated over an argument without reply, know this only too well: ‘I know you are, but what am I?’ To this extent it’s true that no insult can be claimed as pure enunciation, released like an arrow that leaves the speaker unscathed. The destination of words is uncertain. Before reaching anyone, they open up a space in which the speaker himself is sapped by the effort of the injurious representation. The difficulties of negation, which must posit its object before invalidating it, are of the same order. (Jenny 120)

And indeed, in looking more closely at Breton’s most polemical texts, we find that the iterative structure of such passages reveals not only a language that definitively fails to reach its “destination,” but, more problematic, a writer increasingly and uncontrollably “implicated” in the reproduction of this failure; something like the “tar baby” of Joel Chandler Harris’ famous tale, the invective discourse increasingly joins the writing subject to the hated object, only exacerbating, paradoxically, the desire to destroy the latter.

It seems appropriate that we find Breton himself identifying this very phenomenon in another writer. Following the dissen-

sion of Georges Bataille from the Surrealist group, Breton criticizes the excessive use of certain terms in the other writer's work—essentially what we have designated the invective: "Il est à remarquer que M. Bataille fait un abus délirant des adjectifs: souillé, sénile, rance, sordide, égrillard, gâteux, et que ces mots, loin de lui servir à décrier un état de choses insupportable, sont ceux par lesquels s'exprime le plus lyriquement sa pensée" 'It is to be noted that M. Bataille misuses adjectives with a passion: befouled, senile, rank, sordid, lewd, doddering, and that these words, far from serving him to disparage an unbearable state of affairs, are those through which his delight is most lyrically expressed' (*Manifestes* 218, Seaver 184). Breton's insight in identifying this economy of expression, and his simultaneous inability to see his own participation in the latter, is striking. For if we return to one of the passages cited earlier, we find that it is precisely through such language that the poet derives his own "lyricism." Once the possibility of the latter has been threatened by the opposition ("l'attitude réaliste . . . (est) hostile à tout essor" 'the realistic attitude . . . (is) hostile to any . . . flight'), Breton can then produce such a tone in the text—not through the positive, affirmative gesture associated with the lyrical, but through a repeated identification of what inhibits that gesture. In elaborating, reiterating his condemnation of this *other* discourse ("ces livres ridicules, ces pièces insultantes" 'these ridiculous books, these insulting plays'), it is not so much his enemy that produces a "degraded" language, as he claims, but Breton himself . . . as he "declaims": "*elle est faite de médiocrité, de haine, et de plate suffisance. C'est elle qui engendre aujourd'hui ces livres ridicules, ces pièces insultantes*" 'it is made up of mediocrity, hate, and dull conceit. It is this attitude which today gives birth to these ridiculous books, these insulting plays').

This blind spot in the writer's insight—identifying "degraded" modes of expression and simultaneously reproducing them—suggests a largely autonomous, self-generating process of composition (and it should be remembered that, being expository and polemical in nature, these particular texts are not intended as "automatic writing"). In another passage, where Breton even more explicitly identifies this process of devaluation, we again observe his own text perpetuating the very language he critiques. The finality of each hyperbole is betrayed by the enthusiastic pronouncement of "filth"

that follows . . . which in turn incites another global curse:

. . . le même cérémonial extérieur sous lequel se distingue tout de suite la survivance du signe à la chose signifiée. Ce sont *toutes* les valeurs intellectuelles *brimées*, *toutes* les idées morales *en déroute*, *tous* les bienfaits de la vie frappées de *corruption*, indiscernables. La *souillure* de l'argent a *tout* recouvert. Ce que désigne le mot patrie, ou le mot justice, ou le mot devoir nous est devenu étranger. Une *plaie béante* s'ouvre sous nos yeux; nous sommes témoins qu'un grand mal continue à se faire, auquel il ne nous appartient tout d'abord que de mesurer notre participation.

. . . the same outer ceremony beneath which it is immediately obvious that the sign survives the thing signified. It is a matter of *all* intellectual values being *persecuted*, *all* moral ideas *falling to pieces*, *all* the benefits of life being condemned to *corruption* and becoming indiscernible. The *contamination* of money has covered *everything* over. What is designated by the word fatherland, or the word justice, or the word duty has become foreign to us. A *gaping wound* opens before our eyes; we are witnesses of the fact that great evil continues to be perpetuated, and our first task is merely to measure our participation in it." (*Position* 19, emphasis mine, Seaver 216)

The inherent contradiction of the poetic "terror" becomes visible here, more than ever; the "gaping wound" 'une plaie béante' which most threatens the integrity and vitality of language is in fact here, in *this* text, between the latter's stated, moral project, and the actual language of degradation that progressively appears there, as if unbidden ("un grand mal continue à *se faire*" 'great evil continues to *be perpetuated*'). Breton continues:

. . . *cet affreux désir de moribund*: ici, l'on bénit les *chiens* . . . un peu plus loin on cherche, contre un homme que l'abîme des contradictions sociales, plus traître pour lui que pour un autre, a poussé à commettre un délit ou un crime, à réveiller *le vieil et sordide instinct de lynchage des foules*. Tout cela entretenu à plaisir par une *domesticité avide*, pour qui c'est devenu un but que de *fouler aux pieds*, chaque jour un peu plus savamment, la dignité humaine. On cherche à obtenir de toutes parts une résignation morne, à grand renfort de *niaseries* – récits et spectacles. Les notions logiques les plus élémentaires ne parviennent pas même à sortir indemnes de cet assaut de *bassesse*. . . cet *idiot*, doublé sûrement d'une *canaille* . . .

... *this frightful delirium of a dying man*: here *dogs* are being blessed ... a bit farther on they are seeking to awaken *the old and sordid instinct for mob lynching*, against a man whom abysmal social contradictions, more treacherous for him than for another, have pushed into committing a misdeed or a crime. All this wantonly supported by a *greedy imposition of servitude*, whose aim it has become to *trample* human dignity *underfoot*, each day a bit more knowingly. People seek on all sides to bring about a dismal resignation, with the help of many bits of *foolishness*—recitals and spectacles. The most elementary logical notions do not manage to escape this onslaught of *baseness* unharmed. ... *this idiot*, who was also doubtless a *scoundrel* . . .” (Position 19-21, emphasis mine, Seaver 216-17)

Isn't the writer guilty of the very perversity he is busy condemning in the bourgeoisie (“cet affreux désir de moribond” ‘this frightful delirium of a dying man’)? Hasn't he already given up the one right he claims (“il ne nous appartient tout d'abord que de mesurer notre participation” ‘our first task is merely to measure our participation in it’), further opening this wound by *not* measuring his participation, despite himself, in the economy he condemns?

Inconsistencies in Breton's argument itself, while certainly worthy of attention—the essential equivalence between the violence the writer condemns, for instance (“l'instinct de lynchage des foules” ‘the old and sordid instinct for mob lynching’) and that which he promotes (“le surréalisme . . . n'attend encore rien que de la violence” ‘it still expects nothing save from violence’ *Manifestes* 156, Seaver 125)—concern us less than do processes that accumulate what would seem unnecessary, if not unwanted, qualifying “material.” Most interesting here is how the vindictive mob attacked by Breton overtakes his own text, *within* the text, reproducing itself on all levels of language—the “foule” ‘to mob’ returning, phonetically, in “fouler” ‘to trample,’ and semantically, in the more derogatory equivalent “canaille”;⁷ its degenerate and essentially empty desire — “le vide” ‘the void’ — generating and constituting the text that would refute it: “à réveiller le vieil et sordide instinct . . . des foules” ‘to awaken the old and sordid instinct . . . of mobs’ => “domesticité avide” ‘greedy imposition of servitude’ => “fouler au pieds . . . savamment” ‘to trample . . . more knowingly’ => “doublé sûrement d'une canaille” ‘who was also doubtless a scoundrel.’

The most telling example of this phenomenon, however, ap-

pears in what is probably Breton's most violent, transgressive statement: the famous "revolver" passage, cited in our opening remarks. Already, in the lines that precede the act itself, the now familiar "absolute" language ("révolte *absolue*") indicates where the stakes of Breton's discourse are highest; where all existing values must be resisted and undermined: "le surréalisme n'(a) pas craint de se faire un dogme de la révolte absolue, de l'insoumission totale, du sabotage en règle, et . . . n'attend encore rien que de la violence" 'Surrealism was not afraid to make for itself a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination, of sabotage according to rule, and . . . it still expects nothing save from violence' (*Manifestes* 156, Seaver 125).⁸ The use of such language here might initially appear a fairly innocuous, if somewhat excessive, rhetorical device, the repetition of the hyperbolic terms creating a tension or anticipation, to which the following image then responds, defining, concretizing the text's claims: " . . . rien que de la violence. L'acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolvers aux poings, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu'on peut, dans la foule" ' . . . nothing save from violence. The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd' (*Manifestes* 155, Seaver 125). But this "lead-in," with its seemingly definitive conclusion, has significant consequences for the larger economy of expression here, eventually undermining the force of the entire passage.

First, we find the same shift in discursive registers identified in preceding examples, from a totalizing, abstract language to an emphatic, degrading one: "Qui n'a pas eu, au moins une fois, envie d'en finir de la sorte avec le *petit* système d'*avilissement* et de *crétinisation* en vigueur . . ." 'Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the *petty* system of *debasement* and *cretinization* in effect . . .' The structure of this passage is particularly revealing: if the central statement ("L'acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste . . ." 'The simplest Surrealist act consists . . .') between the absolute and invective passages is in fact a demonstration or proof of Surrealism's claim to absolute revolt (and indeed, what form of violence is more absolute than arbitrary murder?), what need is there of a second "attack?" It is as if the absolute language and the absolute act it leads to, far from establishing the value of

the writer's position, only intensifies the need to express or prove the latter—which would explain the iterative quality of the invective discourse, observed above: the “foule” ‘crowd’ begins to reproduce itself at precisely that moment the absolute discourse claims to annihilate it.

The inability sufficiently to express the absolute nature of his revolt leads Breton so far as to attack, or at least threaten . . . his reader (!): “Qui n’a pas eu, au moins une fois, envie d’en finir de la sorte avec le petit système d’aviilissement et de crétinisation en vigueur a sa place toute marquée dans cette foule, ventre à hauteur de canon” ‘Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level.’⁹ While it could be argued that this final gesture in fact reflects the ultimate integrity of Breton’s revolt, pushing the ideal of anarchy to its limit, I would suggest that it reveals, on the contrary, the ultimate fatality of such a discourse. For the most fundamental discursive structure necessary to communication is jeopardized here—the addressee is alienated, not simply through the latter’s assimilation to the mob targeted by the text, but also by the larger problem of expression manifested in this gesture: in observing how such passages originate, ostensibly, in an objective reflection on society, while concluding in emphatic, absolute subjectivity (Breton has eliminated the possibility of our holding any position other than his own), aren’t we forced to question the writer’s most basic intentions concerning the creative act? Was the desire for personal catharsis the only (if unconscious) end of the “terrorist” act from the beginning, whether it produces or destroys? Even if no one is left listening?

Notes

1 “Breton remained faithful to an image of himself as revolutionary and of Surrealism as a total and permanent revolt against accepted judgments and habits. Through the most obvious inconsistencies, this fidelity lends an undeniable unity to all his work” (10); “It is partly this intensity of feeling that convinces him (rightly) that he can speak to and be heard by all the young people who *refusent le pli*, that is, who refuse to take the crease

of ordinariness, to be molded according to the worn-out ideas of family, country, and religion that it is the Surrealists' purpose to subvert . . . (26).

2 "Aujourd'hui Desnos parle surréaliste à volonté. La prodigieuse agilité qu'il met à suivre oralement sa pensée nous vaut autant qu'il nous plaît de discours splendides et qui se perdent, Desnos ayant mieux à faire qu'à les fixer" 'Desnos speaks Surrealist at will. His extraordinary agility in orally following his thought is worth as much to us as any number of splendid speeches which are lost, Desnos having better things to do than record them' (*Manifestes* 44, emphasis mine, Seaver 29).

3 I am thinking principally of the Christian or Classical values of the "triumvirate": Hugo, Lamartine and Vigny.

4 A conception that can be traced to the early work of Hugo: "(To his) emphasis on forms of subjectivity, Hugo . . . in his first collections of poetry . . . contributed to the motif of the poet-magus preaching in the desert, a motif he would later link to a cosmic visionary poetry of which he became the uncontested master," (Gaudon 647).

5 Despite that Breton claims to want to effect precisely the opposite: ". . . il existe un certain point de l'esprit d'où la vie et la mort, le réel et l'imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l'incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d'être perçus contradictoirement. . . . il serait absurde de lui (l'activité surréaliste) prêter un sens uniquement destructeur, ou constructeur: le point dont il est question est *a fortiori* celui où la construction et la destruction cessent de pouvoir être brandies l'une contre l'autre" 'Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. . . . it would be (absurd) to define Surrealism solely as constructive or destructive: the point to which we are referring is *a fortiori* that point where construction and destruction can no longer be brandished one against the other' (*Manifestes* 154, Seaver 124).

6 Such structures can be found throughout Breton's work: "Nous combattons sous toutes leurs formes l'indifférence poétique, la distraction d'art, la recherche érudite, la spéculation pure. . . . *Tous les lâchages, toutes les abdications, toutes les trahisons possibles ne nous empêcheront pas d'en finir avec ces foutaises*"; "Il avait assurément bien mérité du monde bourgeois, dont cette idée de responsabilité encore implantée dans l'opinion, si peu claire qu'elle soit, reste seule à paralyser l'odieux appareil répressif" 'We combat, in all forms, poetic indifference, the distraction of art, erudite research, pure

speculation. . . . *All the desertions, all the abdications, all the betrayals possible will not prevent us from putting an end to this bullshit*"; "He was certainly worthy of the bourgeois world, with its idea of responsibility that, still firmly rooted in opinion, and however unclear, *alone continues to paralyze the odious machinery of repression*," Breton, *Position* 159, emphasis mine.

7 An ideal word choice for Breton's discourse, since it denotes both "dogs," one of his preferred invective terms, as witnessed in previous citations ("la vie des chiens" 'a dog's life,' "ici, l'on bénit des chiens" 'here dogs are being blessed'), and the multitude of "others" he despises: "CANAILLE: Ramassis de gens méprisables ou considérés comme tels. => pègre, populace, racaille," "CANAILLE: Gathering of people who are contemptible, or considered as such. => underworld, rabble, riffraff," (*Robert*). It is also significant that this term reflects a certain class consciousness that is hardly in accordance with the poet's political position (among the antonyms listed in the *Robert*, we find: "aristocratie" 'aristocracy,' 'convenable' 'proper,' and "distingué" 'distinguished'), and that, as an adjective, it denotes, "Vulgaire, avec une pointe de perversité," 'Vulgar, with a touch of perversity.'

8 The following citations, unless otherwise noted, are from the same page.

9 A similar apocalyptic climax appears at the end of the *Seconde Manifeste*: "Qu'il (l'homme) use, au mépris de toutes les prohibitions, de l'arme vengeresse de l'idée contre la bestialité de tous les êtres et de toutes les choses . . . (!)" 'Let him, in spite of any restrictions, use the avenging arm of the idea against the bestiality of all beings and of all things . . .' *Manifestes* 221, emphasis mine, Seaver 187.

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