

TRAJECTORY

OF

PASSION

He (the poet) rises up against everyone, including those revolutionaries who adopt an exclusively political stance, thereby arbitrarily isolating politics from the cultural movement at large, and who advocate the submission of cultural activities to the accomplishment of the social revolution.

Benjamin Péret, *La Parole est à Péret* (1943)

The quotation comes from Péret's introduction to an anthology of American native myths, in which the surrealist poet voices his hope that poetry might become — like the shared mythology of a tribal society — an idiom accessible to the masses. If there is to be a realization of Ducasse's injunction that 'poetry must be made by all', writes Péret, it follows that it must be stripped of its artifices and snobberies and rendered available to everyone. Simultaneously, all men must be freed by social revolution of the oppressions of class society.

In the meantime, Péret admits, the poet finds himself rejected by society. He must therefore exert himself and speak out in words of authentic feeling. In so doing he will carry out an act of revolutionary proportions, smashing the ivory tower and communicating through that which is most profoundly shared by all men. But at the same time as he strikes a blow for the revolution, he must take care not to let his language become contaminated by a concern for its merely political connotations. He must, insists Péret, remain true to his own deep meanings and not allow his work to be channelled in the direction of superficial propaganda or publicity.

Péret's remarks are situated historically, at a time when he was becoming aware of the servile functionalism to which poetry was being reduced in the French Resistance: his tract *Le Déshonneur des poètes* (1945) was to be a more explicit attack on those who place art in the service of political expediency and thereby degrade it. Propaganda poetry in the name of nationalism is anti-surrealist, Péret maintains. An authentic poem, on the other hand, is one which releases a breath of true liberty; it is not reducible to a mediocre cause, but swells forth in anticipation of the effective liberation of mankind on an international scale.

While circumstances today and in the country in which we are living are different, we would find it hard to disagree with Péret. We are now faced with a situation in which it is no less a matter of politics being infiltrated by fellow-travelling artists who coyly sport their political badge as a variant on the foppish flower of aestheticism. Elsewhere we see politics infiltrating art and reducing it to the level of a consumer product. This is often achieved by subtle modes of recuperation whereby the state machinery contrives to annex those expressions of revolt which might in other circumstances undermine its authority: by encouraging certain forms of dissent, by even paying for them, the state empties them of their force and meaning. They become counterfeit tokens, flimsy as cardboard.

In Britain, we are surrounded by mechanisms which take all too good care of us. The welfare state looks after our bodies and seeks also to look after our brains. Where artistic creativity is concerned, the authorities

seek to make of it a commodity that can be controlled or even marketed. The creative act is the individual's instinctive right. Yet the definition of creativity as a function of the social system is an immediate annihilation of that right. The subsidies lavished on an artist by the Arts Council of Great Britain are handed over in the name of free expression: but the money he receives will act as an invisible frame running right round whatever he makes to ensure that its meaning is assimilated within the commodity system. Even if the work itself is not literally marketed, it is still 'wrapped' in a capitalist definition and therefore valued under the terms of that system. This is part of a process we call cultural imperialism.

To create in a revolutionary spirit must therefore be to refuse all pseudo-approval or support from that which seeks to divert the current of authentic energy. The poet must be a special sort of moralist, never collaborating with the enemy, anxious lest his work slip into zones where recuperation might become possible. Today we have to accept the historicization of the Dada revolt, its retrieval as a respectable museum-piece. We can watch sections of the *haute bourgeoisie* queuing up to gawp at the spectacle of their own duplicity in the films of Buñuel. Just a few weeks after the May Events of 1968, one could purchase on the Paris boulevards a memento of those Events in the form of a 'certified cobblestone', inscribed like a holiday souvenir. Already *revolt* had become *spectacle*.

We wonder if it is inevitable that the full original impact of an act of protest should be subject to the processes of time, and eventually fall prey to recuperation in some form or other. Against this possibility, the revolutionary artist must strive to maintain a space of authenticity in which his message will remain defiant to the maximum. Péret remains one of the rare poets whose work continues to stick in the throats of the recuperators. His watchword, to which he remained faithful throughout his life, should — today more than ever — be the watchword of all genuine poets: 'I won't eat of that bread.'

Surrealism and Situationism explored the possibilities of fighting against cultural imperialism by the use of *détournement* — procedures of subversion which turn society's own weapons against itself by inserting rebellious new meanings into the glossy capitalist text. The inscription of a graffito on a publicity poster in such a way that the original beguiling meaning gives way to something acute and revolutionary, can be an effective means to tear through the bland dressing of contemporary media and disclose the quivering body of instinctual as distinct from mechanical pleasure.

The problem for revolutionary art is to be at once sabotage and sharing, a gesture of popular complicity which undermines Authority. The graffito in particular represents a marvellous symbol of anarchist art: produced anonymously and as if by an invisible hand (have you ever seen the graffitist in action?), the graffito is the spontaneous expression of a joy or a despair in which all may participate, and its language of immediacy cuts through the phoniness of official expression. It is true that even graffiti have been framed by the reigning culture in the form of expensive photo-albums: yet in the moment of the original act, the graffito can be that 'creative nothing' (Stirner) whence everything worthwhile utters itself.

Herbert Marcuse has written that 'the rupture with the continuum of domination must also be a rupture with the vocabulary of domination.' The vocabulary we pursue is that of the poetic, be it verbal or visual or other. It is the breath of air, the corrosive cocktail, the libertarian impulse in its fully-proved state. Artaud wrote that 'the spirit of profound anarchy is the very basis of poetry.' All authentic expression of secret desires becomes collective in the moment of utterance, and this expression then takes on the character of a unanimous voice. The surrealist voice seeks to build castles on the gap between subjectivity and objectivity, and to develop its space, the space of the future, upon the difference — purely provisional — between the poem made by one man and the poem made by all. The model for authentic communication is that of the spontaneous fusion of subjectivities at the barricade or in the lovers' bed. 'Revolutionary thought cannot but be amorous' (Annie Le Brun).

We cannot deny that, as in 1943, we live in a society where everything militates against poetry being taken seriously by the masses. We can only hope that we are on the right track in engaging in a poetic adventure which seeks to create a new reading, a new perception of the world. And this true poetry we seek must not be inaccessible to those who really need it. Meanwhile we suffer at the hands of the cultural mandarins who busy themselves with subsidizing, infiltrating and otherwise diverting the true impact of the poetic: in Britain certainly, poets tend to be creatures of the dominating system, and their elitist language is the aesthetic counterpart of the droning speeches of contented Parliamentarians. The idea of a *convulsive* image in a poem — of a line that might *change someone's life* — is impossible to entertain in the context of contemporary British writing. Frothy banality, rural sentimentality, self-reflexive sexual morbidity, syntactical cobwebs, — such are the admissible modes of literature, ones which crowd out the true voice which *transcends* literature and speaks to us in that tone of intimacy that alone can command our unhesitating allegiance. 'It is as if I were lost and someone suddenly came to bring me news of myself' (André Breton).

It is only to be expected that the reigning social system should endeavour to suppress originality in the arts. Less obvious perhaps is the fact that, as the history of Surrealism has shown, political parties on the Left are appallingly ignorant of experimental art forms and, where they do take heed of what is going on, tend automatically to reject artistic activities which are not directly tailored to propaganda purposes as being a luxury, either irrelevant or downright reactionary. Breton found in the thirties that the French communists were incapable of understanding the proposition that there might be a meaningful analogy between artistic and political rebellion. The subsequent Stalinist celebration of the doctrine of Socialist Realism bore out the sense that the Soviet State was incompatible with free expression in the arts: its despicable treatment of Osip Mandelstam among so many others registers the horrifying extent to which a police apparatus will exert itself to throttle originality and individual thought. As Mandelstam himself ruefully observed: 'Poetry is respected only in this country — people are killed for it.'

As surrealists we believe in a poetry which will stand in its own right and yet be partner to the cause of social revolution. In a profound sense, the revolutionary and the poet cannot be separated anyway. For what is

poetry if not a revolutionary activity, what is revolution if not a poem in action? We maintain that the true poem is one which will change perceptions and thus contribute to the changing of material conditions in the real world. The inventions of a new language — 'accessible, one of these days, to all the senses' (**), as Rimbaud put it — must take its place on the revolutionary calendar on a par with all the other urgent operations of change. Occulted and enigmatic it may seem for the present, yet one day this language of lyricism, this language of praxis, will open up to all as a transparent flower.

Thus the poetry we seek cannot but be anarchist. It spells the formidable collapse of the structures which determine our present mentality and lull us into imagining that the monotony of our everyday lives is somehow 'natural'. The poet, writes Péret, is the integral non-conformist who stands at the extreme point of the cultural advance, striking out with all his strength so as to 'smash the barriers of habit and routine which keep on springing up'. His poem does not mince its words in the machine of monopoly rhetoric. Instead it rises on dragonfly wings in the morning of the metaphor, unlocking the gate in the city wall to reveal the fertile horizons of desire. Like the bolt of William Tell, like the bomb of Emile Henry, like the Vendôme column at the hands of Courbet, its passionate trajectory carries it straight toward the integral expression *and* realization of liberty. And as Artaud said, 'all true liberty is black'.

M E L M O T H

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* This text is to appear in the new Italian quarterly *Anarchos*, which had asked us to comment upon the quotation from Péret concerning the artist's role in the revolutionary movement.

** It is by no means certain that Ducasse's oft-quoted 'Poetry must be made by all' refers to *all people*. The context allows us to read the dictum as referring to *all the senses*, in echo of Rimbaud.