

Lost in translation: Notations on certain titles of Blanchot's works in relation to Breton ... and Bataille

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I

Blanchot qui est si près de certaines des austérités surréalistes ...

(Georges Bataille, 'Maurice Blanchot ...,' *Gamma: Lire Blanchot* I, nos. 3-4, 1976)

A Andre Breton, avec lequel je n'ai jamais cessé d'être uni profondément au-delà des amitiés faciles, Georges Bataille.

(Georges Bataille's dedication in *Les Larmes d'Eros*, 1961, to André Breton)

Le surréalisme, c'est autre chose. On en finirait pas d'en parler.

(Maurice Blanchot to Vadim Kozovoï, 26 August 1983)

In 1997, Laurent Jenny published in the journal *Critique* 'Mauvais rêve: Blanchot surréaliste,' the first of two articles devoted to the relationship of Maurice Blanchot to surrealist thought; the second article, 'Blanchot, théoricien du surréalisme,' would appear shortly afterwards in the *Cahier de l'Herne* (1998) issue devoted to André Breton.¹ The tone of Jenny's writing can very well be captured as an expression of some surprise and irritation, even, that Maurice Blanchot – friend of Georges Bataille, Blanchot, the secret prince of post-Liberation Parisian thought, model for Jacques Derrida, Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy and Sarah Kofman, admired of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault² – this Maurice Blanchot should not only have written extensively on surrealism but, indeed, aspects of his very conception of writing may be in dialogue with Breton and surrealism. This holds above all where Blanchot allows to be seen, inescapably, what was evident to the generation of Jules Monnerot, René Daumal, Gustave Roud, Julien Gracq, namely that surrealist experience, from its early and developing engagement with psycho-analysis and Hegelian thought, could scarcely be intelligible without some conception of the work of the negative, even where surrealism's practice is to be understood as one of affirmation. It is not after all an accident that the range of thoughtful responses to surrealism should encompass Foucault and Deleuze, let us say, with Monnerot, the Nietzscheans, as well as Blanchot, the unfaithful Hegelian – surrealist affirmation is, as Antoine Compagnon says of Julien Gracq in relation to surrealism, 'Un *oui*, mais – dernier trait antimoderne de Gracq – un *oui* qui n'est pas optimiste.'³ For Jenny, Bataille – and by implication Blanchot – in reviewing the



publication of Monnerot's *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*, 'esquisse une réévaluation du surréalisme.'⁴ In fact neither Bataille nor Blanchot - nor Gracq - does anything of the kind.

II

Pour André Breton, 'En Attente entre voir et dire' avec reconnaissance, avec affection, avec espoir. Blanchot⁵
(Maurice Blanchot's dedication in *L'Attente, l'oubli*, 1962, to André Breton)

Jenny's response points to what can only be called a resistance to surrealism, and therefore repression. This repression of surrealism, it is telling to note, is one that is more characteristic of the contemporary secondary academic audience rather than writers, philosophers, or artists, where all reading, all interpretation must of necessity, as with Kofman, be one that approaches its subject at an angle, a *bias*.⁶ Since repression cannot be intentional – and it is not my aim here to examine the unconscious motives of certain actors in this subject – there is one small but interesting way in which the repression of surrealism, and with it the name of Breton, can be notated, and that is through a consideration of certain titles of Blanchot's works.

Consider, then, *La Part du feu* (1949, containing 'Réflexions sur le surréalisme,'⁷ the review of Monnerot's *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*): in a book devoted to Blanchot's political activity, Philippe Mesnard, comments, in a perfectly matter of fact way, that the part of the experience of negativity, '[Cette] part de soi – la part coupable - , résidant au creux de son propre oubli [... cette] part qui, là, est propre à Blanchot, à son propre feu, a pu trouver dans l'expression [...] la "part du feu" qui lui vient de Bataille, la réponse, toujours provisoire, d'un apaisement certain [...]. En retour, le titre de *La Part du feu* adresse un signe d'amitié à Bataille.'⁸ For her part, Charlotte Mandell, in her translator's note to *The Work of Fire (La Part du feu)* explains why she chose 'the work of fire,' rather than the 'fire's part.' Where Mesnard will foreground a biographical link to explain 'la part du feu,' Mandell will adduce a claim of rhetoricity:

The original title of this collection of essays is *La Part du feu*. The most literal, simply verbal translation would be 'the part of fire.' But the word 'part' has, as in English, the two meanings of 'division of some whole' and 'role,' as in play. It has further senses of 'advantage,' 'political party,' and others. So we might begin by thinking of The Role of Fire, the Work of Fire, and so on. But then we reflect that *feu* also has a range of meanings broader than the English 'fire.' It can mean 'light,' 'lights' (as in traffic lights, tail lights), 'signal flares,' the 'warmth' of feelings or of someone's prose style, the frenzy of someone's piano playing. Now we start thinking of the Role of Light, Signals, Flares, the



Side of Light; we are caught up in a tangle of speculations about illumination, work, taking sides, destruction (for fire does destroy what it briefly illuminates), signs and signals, various self-consuming artifacts.⁹

It is by no means clear to me that all of the connotative range indicated by Mandell would be historically applicable to Blanchot's title *La Part du feu*, but it could be shown that in English poetic language since the Elizabethan the range of terms adduced by Mandell – warmth, destruction, self-consuming illumination, signals, etc – has been long available and is by no means redundant in modern idiomatic English. One has only to think – for an example – of the common rhyme of *fire* with *desire* in Shakespeare (Sonnet 44) and Sidney (“O Lord, how vain are all our frail delights”) or the powerful, dense play of *light*, *night*, *sight*, and *shadow* in Shakespeare's Sonnet 43.

Without, though, questioning the direction of Mesnard's interpretation of the friendship between Bataille and Blanchot, and without the need to pursue the value of Mandell's *preference* for *work* over *part*, it remains that the expression *la part du feu*, as is only too clear from Blanchot's 1966 essay on *Nadja*, is both an idiomatic as well as an enigmatic expression in Breton's *Nadja*: ‘N'empêche que s'il faut attendre, s'il faut vouloir être sûr, s'il faut prendre des précautions, s'il faut faire au feu la part du feu, et seulement la part, je m'y refuse absolument.’¹⁰ *Faire la part du feu* is the idiomatic expression for to consent to a small sacrifice in order to avoid a larger one; but *faire au feu* ... introduces a changed register, a moment of density to reflection which cannot go unnoticed by Blanchot. The question is partly one of intertextuality, but it is also one of the *work* of reference, for not only is Breton's name repressed – that is, the intertextual element – but so too is the nature and *kind of work* of metaphor common to Bataille, Breton and Blanchot elided, and thereby also the kind of world that could respond to such work of reference – the part to the whole, the part in the process, the fragment, motion.

Indeed, it is worth noting, since it can scarcely be merely accidental, just how many of Blanchot's titles, from the emergence of the post-journalist Blanchot in 1943, evoke, echo and perlaborate surrealist and Bretonian titles and utterances:

Faux pas (1943): the title of the inaugural work of the emergent Blanchot. Though, again, the everyday, colloquial register of this expression (in English as well as French) must be acknowledged, it cannot be ignored how powerfully this same colloquial register is invoked in an early surrealist Declaration to Society: ‘Qu'elle fasse attention à ses écarts, à chacun des *faux-pas* de son esprit nous ne la raterons pas.’ (*Déclaration du 27 janvier 1925*) – and it is to be found again in Breton's *Le Message automatique* (1933), (*Point du jour*, 1935).



Le Livre à venir (1959): toward the close of *Les Vases communicants*, Breton invokes, as a figure of the *communauté* and *la Révolution à venir*, the *poète à venir* alongside the *fenêtre noire*.¹¹ Just as Blanchot, after May '68, will allow himself to speak only of a *negative* utopia, likewise Breton, in *Les Vases communicants*, will insist – and Blanchot will cite Breton – on 'cette autre nécessité non moins impérieuse qui est de ne pas voir dans la Révolution à venir une fin.'¹² The simplicity of the expression bears considerable weight, since not only the *poète à venir* is implicit in it, but so too would be the temporality of the future, and with it the care (*Sorge*) of Heideggerian thought.

Le demain joueur (1966-67): when, in a reflection which is also a meditation on Nadja, Blanchot comes to write his essay on *l'avenir* of surrealism, that is, the future modality distinctive to the manner of opening made possible by surrealist experience as well as that mode of what is yet to come (*à venir*) foregrounded by surrealism as encompassed in surrealism's future, he chooses as title *Le demain joueur*, an expression from the *Second manifeste du surréalisme*, a dense and enigmatic expression the choice of which shows what a fine ear Blanchot possessed. This essay with its title is re-published as the penultimate chapter of *L'Entretien infini* (1969). The passage of the *Second manifeste* from which this phrase comes, which shows as clearly as possible the way in which surrealism as conceived by Breton concerned the articulation of the activity and risks of thought, indeed, the fragility of recommencement, reads as follows: 'Il est normal que le surréalisme se manifeste au milieu et peut-être *au prix* d'une suite ininterrompue de défaillances, de zigzags et de défection qui exigent à tout instant la remise en question de ses données originelles, c'est-à-dire le rappel au principe initial de son activité joint à l'interrogation du demain joueur qui veut que les coeurs «s'éprennent» et se déprennent.'¹³ Just as it should not be a surprise that Blanchot's ear should have picked out this expression and this passage on the necessity for thought always to be a *thought of recommencement*, one can see why the surrealist group L'Archibras and journal of the same name, simultaneously with, but independent of, Blanchot, should have used the same expression as part of the title for an internal document, namely, 'Pour un demain joueur,' bearing the significant sub-title: 'Résolution intérieure destinée à enrayer la formation des poncifs et à interdire la formation des dogmes dans le Surréalisme.'¹⁴

Le pas au-delà (1973): to the title of Breton's *Les pas perdus* (1924), Nadja had replied, 'Il n'y en a pas' – for there are always traces – which would thus, in the work of the negative, open movement to *le pas au-delà*, which is yet an *au-delà* '[qui] soit dans cette vie.'¹⁵

L'Écriture du désastre (1980): in subtly engaging the transition between the given in daily life and the imposed horror of the apparently exceptional that changes the conception of measure – *Le désastre*, opens *L'Écriture du désastre*, 'ruine tout en laissant tout en l'état' – cannot avoid



Breton's recognition through the encounter with Nadja of a 'temps [du] désastre irréparable,' which affects the part 'la plus humainement définie.'¹⁶

Du merveilleux: in 1947, Blanchot published 'Du merveilleux,'¹⁷ in part a review of Pierre Mabillet's *Le Merveilleux* (1946) which provided the occasion for Blanchot to reflect upon the status and kind of experience and mode of being that the surrealists understood by *le merveilleux* – an experience the character of which, as Mabillet insisted, is one of 'épreuve et de tension'¹⁸ – as well as the way in which *le merveilleux*, once brought to the attention by the surrealists can be understood as bearing a life of its own. Hence the opening sentence of the essay reads: 'Depuis le temps où André Breton écrivait: «Le merveilleux est toujours beau», le merveilleux a fait son chemin.'¹⁹ Christoph Bident, in his superb intellectual and spiritual biography of Blanchot, will go so far as to make of this essay a key moment, along with the *La Part du feu*, in the development of a distinct critical position by Maurice Blanchot in dialogue with surrealism: the relationship between language and revolution, the questions of community, the refusal to see in communism – or the Revolution – anything but a preparation – at best – for the ground of liberty, of the things that matter. Bident, in other words, does not present Blanchot's relationship to surrealism – and the name of Breton – as a surprise, as something to be accounted for. On the contrary, Bident sees surrealism as making something possible for Blanchot, initially, as with Bataille and Gracq, against Sartrean existentialism, hence Bident's comment: 'Cette réhabilitation du surréalisme [in the post-World War II period] accompagne l'affirmation de plus en plus brillante et profonde d'une théorie littéraire qui implique des prises de positions politiques, esthétiques, philosophiques et critiques d'une fermeté toute nouvelle.'²⁰

III

Les signataires de la présente communication s'élèvent contre l'exploitation dont sont l'objet de différents côtés, singulièrement depuis Mai 68, les noms d'Antonin Artaud, de Georges Bataille et d'André Breton.

Qu'avec plus ou moins de rigueur ou de naïveté certains cercles intellectuels tentent de tirer à eux des pensées fortes, sur lesquelles ils éprouvent le besoin de s'appuyer, avant même souvent d'en avoir aperçu toutes les nuances, c'est là sans doute un phénomène généralement admissible, inévitable en tous cas. Il n'est pas tolérable en revanche qu'ils en viennent à réduire ces pensées à jouer un rôle tactique dans les actions polémiques où leur volonté de croissance les entraîne.



(*Communication au sujet d'Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille et André Breton, Marguerite Bonnet, Robert Antelme, Michel Leiris, Dionys Mascolo, March 1971*)²¹

Finally, there is one crucial incident that makes clear that Blanchot's relationship to and with surrealism was of a spiritual, thoughtful nature, and that is the common authorship with Dionys Mascolo and Jean Schuster – one of the executors of Breton's literary estate – of the *Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie* (September 1960), frequently referred to as the *Déclaration des 121*.²² Leslie Hill, in his exceptional study, *Maurice Blanchot, Extreme Contemporary* (1997), has addressed the bad faith motivating the *méconnaissance* of Blanchot's political trajectory, but I should like to conclude this set of notations with a suggestion – to which I shall return in further studies – which is this: surrealism is the condition, the means by which Blanchot was able to re-think his political and literary practice of the 1930s. A surrealist such as Philippe Soupault had no difficulty in admiring a monarchist Roman Catholic such as Georges Bernanos precisely because Bernanos was not a conformist; just as Gracq could relate that Breton was indeed more than able to appreciate the greatness of Paul Claudel's poetry – which should not have been such a surprise.²³ The apparent triumph of liberal democracy has not made one of the key questions of the 1930s redundant – a question, I would dare say, which links a Pope John Paul II (i.e. Roman Catholic social philosophy) with, say, a Guy Debord (i.e. the avant-garde as a spiritual phenomenon born of the inter-war years), namely: Is democracy distinct from capitalism or an unwitting vehicle for capitalism? It is by no means obvious in these times of ecological threat, the immoral waste of wealth and the idolatry called the spectacle that this matter has been settled. There are many things at issue in the understanding of Blanchot's inner relationship to surrealism and the inter-war years, not least that it is through Blanchot's reading of surrealism – Antonin Artaud, René Char, Leiris, Bataille and Breton – the *culture* of surrealism – which is also to say, Romantic and post-Romantic philosophical *thought* – that surrealism becomes *available* for certain of the key thinkers of the post-World War II generation: Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Michel Deguy, but also Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe. To get at, indeed to assume the availability of this situation requires a reading that is at once historical and philosophical, and often, as with Kofman, indirect.²⁴



¹ Cf. Laurent Jenny, 'Mauvais rêve: Blanchot surréaliste', *Critique*, 603-604, August-September 1997 and Laurent Jenny, 'Blanchot, théoricien du surréalisme', *Cahier de l'Herne: André Breton*, Paris 1998, 405-412.

² Consider the following note by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy: 'Since we have been asked – and to be mysterious about this would be frivolous – the itinerary of one of us (J.-L. N.) runs through Esprit and the CFDT, whilst the other (Ph. L.-L.) for a long time found himself in accord with the positions of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and, for a while, of *The Situationist International*.' Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Opening Address to the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political', *Retreating the Political*, London 1997, n.3, 179. See Jean-Luc Nancy, 'André Breton', a suite of three prose poems written on the occasion of Breton's death in 1966 and published in *Esprit*. This suite of poems has been recently translated by Michael Stone-Richards and Julien Lenoir as 'André Breton', in *Detroit: Imaginary Cities*, Spring 2007, 146-147.

³ Antoine Compagnon, 'Julien Gracq entre André Breton et Jules Monnerot', *Les Anti-modernes*, Paris 2005, 402. This chapter of Compagnon's book is a development of an earlier study, 'Evaluations du surréalisme: de l'«illisible» au «poncif»', which appeared in the same issue as Jenny's second Blanchot and surrealism essay which appeared in *Cahier de l'Herne: André Breton*, 72, Paris 1998. One could scarcely believe that the two articles address the same subject, the same field, the same periodicity.

⁴ Laurent Jenny, 'Mauvais rêve: Blanchot surréaliste', *Critique*, 603-604, August-September 1997, 663.

⁵ In *André Breton, 42 rue Fontaine: Livres, vol. I*, Calmels Cohen sale catalogue, Paris 2003, 59. Blanchot's 'entre voir et dire' could here be interpreted as an allusion to the form of Orpheus and Eurydice – which, at the risk of stating the obvious, is also to realize that Blanchot interpreted (grasped?) the *fundamental relation* between Breton and Nadja as a modern Orpheus and Eurydice.

⁶ Cf. Sarah Kofman, *Lectures de Derrida*, Paris 1984, 50.

⁷ Originally published as 'Quelques réflexions sur le surréalisme', in *L'Arche*, 8, August 1945.

⁸ Philippe Mesnard, *Maurice Blanchot, le sujet de l'engagement*, Paris 1996, 87.

⁹ Charlotte Mandell, 'Translator's Note', *The Work of Fire*, Palo Alto 1995, ix.

¹⁰ André Breton, *Nadja*, Paris 1928, 206.

¹¹ André Breton, *Les Vases communicants* (1932), Paris 1955, 170, 171.

¹² André Breton, *Les Vases communicants*, 161.

¹³ André Breton, *Second manifeste du surréalisme* (1929/30) in *Oeuvres complètes*, I, Paris 1988, 801.

¹⁴ Cf. Collective, L'Archibras, 'Pour un demain joueur: Résolution intérieure destinée à enrayer la formation des poncifs et à interdire la formation des dogmes dans le Surréalisme', Paris, 10 May 1967, in José Pierre, ed., *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives*, vol. 2. 1940-1969, Paris 1982, 259-263.

¹⁵ André Breton, *Nadja*, 172.

¹⁶ André Breton, *Nadja*, 154.



¹⁷ Maurice Blanchot, 'Du Merveilleux', in *L'Arche*, 27-28, May 1947, reprinted in Christoph Bident and Pierre Vilar, eds, *Maurice Blanchot: Récits critiques*, Tours 2003, 33-45.

¹⁸ Maurice Blanchot, 'Du Merveilleux', 38.

¹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, 'Du Merveilleux', 33.

²⁰ Christophe Bident, 'Critique littéraire, 1945-1948', in *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible*, Seyssel 1998, 243.

²¹ In *Lignes*, 33 (*Avec Dionys Mascolo*), March 1998.

²² The text of the *Déclaration*, along with Jean Schuster's notes relating to the composition of the text, can be found accompanied with detailed historical commentary in José Pierre, ed., *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives*, 205-208 (see note 14); Bident offers detailed discussion of the circumstances leading to the composition of the text in *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible*, 391-402. Clearly an important remaining chapter of surrealism yet to be written is that concerning Jean Schuster's relationship to Blanchot, Mascolo and Michel Leiris – and through Mascolo with the group of friends at the rue Saint Benoît – i.e., Duras, Anthelme, etc. Cf. Jérôme Duwa, 'Du Surréalisme historique au surréalisme éternel: remarques sur les revues *l'Archibras* et *Coupure*, 1967-1972', in *La Revue des revues*, Paris, 34, 2004. J. Duwa's doctoral thesis *Les Batailles de Jean Schuster: défense et illustration du surréalisme (1947-1969)* contains further information and analyses on Schuster's role in this affair as well as on his role in the surrealism of the post-World War II period up to the dissolution of the movement in 1969 with the *Quatrième chant* (in *Le Monde*, 4 October 1969).

²³ Soupault observes: 'Il était, je le savais déjà, catholique militant, provocant, d'action française. J'étais prêt à le détester, Et réciproquement. J'étais athée et d'extrême-gauche. A désespérer. Pourtant, immédiatement, nous sympathisâmes. Et je sais pourquoi. Nous étions tous les deux et d'abord anticonformistes.' Philippe Soupault, 'Georges Bernanos', in *Profils perdus*, Paris 1963, 74. One could also compare the young revolutionary anarchist Simone Weil's response to Bernanos in a similar light, cf. Simone Weil, 'Lettre à Georges Bernanos' (1938), *Oeuvres*, Paris 2001, 405-409. Finally, Gracq comments on Breton: 'Breton avait tout de même non pas deux vies, mais deux aspects assez différents. Il y avait l'homme qui apparaissait chaque jour à six heures du soir devant le groupe; et puis il y avait celui qui avait des relations personnelles en dehors de toute préoccupation officielle, si l'on peut dire [...] Il m'était arrivé aussi de rencontrer Breton à des tables neutres, chez des gens qui nous invitaient ensemble. C'était un autre Breton, qui n'était pas tenue par le dogme; il parlait plus librement. On pouvait le faire parler de Paul Claudel par exemple, qu'il appréciait – ce qui aurait été difficile devant le groupe.' Michel Murat, 'Conversation avec Julien Gracq sur André Breton', *Cahier de l'Herne: André Breton*, 19.

²⁴ These notations come out of a talk '*Autour des marges: Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and the philosophical intelligence of surréalisme*,' delivered to the philosophy, poetry and religion section of the Harvard Humanities Center, Harvard University in February 2005. This lecture on Derrida and surrealism, delivered as an act of homage, will be a chapter in the book *Surrealism and the Negative Work of Culture: André Breton, Maurice Blanchot and the Philosophical Intelligence of Surrealism* (forthcoming).

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