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Marie-Claire Barnet, Eric Robertson and Nigel Saint (ed.), *Robert Desnos, Surrealism in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford, Bern etc.: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 69-108.

Paper delivered at the Desnos centenary conference, Institute of Romance Studies, University of London, 17-18 November 2000.

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Andrew Rothwell

‘Robert Desnos parle surréaliste à volonté’¹

In the space of barely five years, from one manifesto to the next, Robert Desnos went from paragon to pariah of Surrealism. His adulation in 1924 was orchestrated by André Breton, as was his public excommunication from the movement in 1929. Breton returned many times, in articles and interviews throughout his life, to what happened in between, and it is his account of the rupture that has dominated subsequent histories. It has also, however, powerfully conditioned the reception of Desnos, virtually obliging us to read his works, and particularly the crucial volume *Corps et Biens* which he published in 1930 to re-affirm his surrealist credentials, as reflections in the fairground mirrors of Bretonian Surrealism. Desnos of course entered that hall of mirrors of his own accord, assiduously courting the Parisian Dada group before and after his military service in Morocco (1920-21).² While he presumably did not seek what was to become, in Michel Murat’s words, a ‘relation littéralement dévorante’³ with André Breton, he was intensely gratified by both the attention he received from the group and the central role Breton ascribed to his creative powers in the maturing of Surrealism. It was undoubtedly because Breton had invested so much in Desnos in 1924 that his excommunication of him in 1929-30 was so violent and complete. Yet from Desnos’s point of view, the public investment that established him as a pillar of Surrealism could only be repudiated by an act of hypocrisy. Hence the heartfelt hyperbole of his claim against Breton in the ‘Prière d’insérer’ for *Corps et biens*: <70>

Corps et biens est l’histoire par l’exemple de toutes les innovations poétiques des dernières années, le chef d’œuvre, au sens propre, de la poésie surréaliste aussi bien qu’un bilan...⁴

Not only, asserts Desnos, does his book exemplify all the poetic inventions that define Surrealism, it is the original masterpiece by which the journeyman movement has proved itself, and the illustration of all its achievements. Such a sweeping attempt to evacuate Breton from his own movement was clearly destined to fail.

Significantly, Desnos here presents the whole of his heterogeneous volume as surrealist, from the early Rimbaud-influenced odes of *Le Fard des argonautes* and *Ode à Coco* (1919),

¹ Breton, 1988, 331.

² Desnos gives his own account of his attempts to break into their circle in ‘Dada-Surréalisme-1927’ (excerpted in Desnos 1999, 34-39).

³ Murat 1988, 28.

⁴ The complete text is given in Dumas 1980, 591-2, Dumas 1984, 149, and Desnos 1999, 589.

through the language-game texts of *Rrose Sélavy*, *L'Aumonyme* and *Langage cuit* (1922-23) and the frustrated love poetry of *A la mystérieuse* and *Les Ténèbres* (1926-27), to the regular verse of *Sirène-Anémone*, *De silex et de feu* and *Le Poème à Florence* (1929). For Breton, on the other hand, only the language-game texts and the love poems counted as surrealist, the others being either literally not worth mentioning (the early odes) or a retrograde betrayal of surrealist principles (the 1929 group). More recent commentators have followed his positive valuation of the 'surrealist' texts and either more or less apologised for the rest, or sought in them elements of the *merveilleux* with which to bolster Desnos's credentials as an orthodox Surrealist. Yet Breton's dichotomy was always motivated by an external ideological and historical agenda and by tacitly falling in with it, generations of critics have narrowed and distorted our appreciation of the full range of Desnos's writing. Against such limiting readings the poet's 'Prière d'insérer' stands as a powerful, if largely unheard, protest.

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Avant: Saint Robert

Breton's regard for Desnos's work was always selective: he appreciated only those texts which he saw as products of the discourse of the Unconscious. In the fifth of his radio interviews with André Parinaud in 1952 (subsequently published as *Entretiens*) he looks back at late 1922 and the first half of 1923 as a golden age for his group, when a 'très grand regain' of automatic writing meshed with a communal fascination for 'l'activité onirique' in an effervescent 'collectivisation des idées' – though, he notes with some understatement, 'des rivalités surgiront plus tard'.⁵ In the following interview he states unequivocally that the theoretical positions he developed soon afterwards in the *Premier manifeste du surréalisme* were based on automatic writing and the experimental *sommeils* (begun in September 1922) of which Desnos was the supreme exponent:

Les déclarations théoriques du *Manifeste* reposent non moins sur [les 'expériences du sommeil'] que sur les spéculations auxquelles a conduit le recours de plus en plus étendu à l'écriture automatique. Il se passe de toute autre base de soutènement.⁶

Breton welcomed in the *sommeils* a new vehicle, comparable in its effects to the first experiments in automatic writing of 1919-20 (notably *Les Champs magnétiques*), for liberating the discourse of the Unconscious, a 'voie mystique sans doute [...] tendue vers la récupération des pouvoirs originels de l'esprit'.⁷ In his essay 'Entrée des médiums', which appeared in *Littérature* in late 1922,⁸ he credits the sleep experiments with having put the group back on the 'steam-swing' of automatic writing.⁹ Like it, he writes, they liberate an <72> 'automatisme psychique' which generates 'ce murmure qui se suffit à lui-même', 'cette dictée magique', 'la précieuse confidence' which is 'la voix [...] de notre inconscience'.¹⁰ The awed tone in which Breton writes here (still, of course, very close to the event) about the Desnos:

⁵ Breton 1973, 76-7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 82-3. Published separately by Simon Kra on 15 October 1924, the *Manifeste* was initially intended as a preface to the automatic texts of *Poisson soluble*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸ *Littérature*, n.s., n° 6 (1 nov. 1922). See Breton 1988, 273-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 275. There is a clear parallel between this terminology of *dictation* and that used in the *Premier manifeste* to describe the 'pensée parlée' (Breton 1988, 326) of *Les Champs magnétiques*: 'nous, qui ne nous sommes livrés à aucun travail de filtration, qui nous sommes faits dans nos œuvres les sourds réceptacles de tant d'échos, les modestes *appareils enregistreurs* qui ne s'hypnotisent pas sur le dessin qu'ils tracent...' (330).

les plus blasés, les plus sûrs d'entre nous demeurent confondus, tremblants de reconnaissance et de peur, autant dire ont perdu contenance devant la merveille.¹¹

On the one hand, the phraseology of 'Entrée des médiums' directly anticipates key moments of the *Premier manifeste*, including the famous definition: 'SURREALISME: n. m. Automatismes psychique pur ...',¹² or: 'le merveilleux est toujours beau, n'importe quel merveilleux est beau, il n'y a même que le merveilleux qui soit beau';¹³ there is thus a continuity between this essay and the founding text of 1924 of which it is like an early, partial draft. Yet on the other, it also looks back to what Breton had, he says, regarded as the now closed era of *Les Champs magnétiques*: having lost interest in automatic writing ('je m'en désintéressais complètement')¹⁴ because of the increasing intrusion of conscious elements, he and his friends had experimented with *récits de rêves* (too dependent on memory) before discovering once more, in the *sommeils* of Desnos and others, the real key to 'cet autre côté', 'la vraie vie'¹⁵ that was the Unconscious.

The acknowledged role of Desnos the *sommeilleur* in the early history of Surrealism was therefore to have bridged the gap between the instinctive automatism of *Les Champs magnétiques* and the fully-theorised movement that emerged from the *Premier manifeste*: <73> 'Desnos apporte à Breton un point d'appui qui lui permet d'objectiver la notion, jusque là inconsistante, du surréalisme'.¹⁶ It is, then, not surprising that during 1924 Breton should have presented Desnos as the surrealist *par excellence*. In the *Premier manifeste* itself he is singled out for special praise among those who 'ont fait acte de SURREALISME ABSOLU':¹⁷ responding rhetorically to his own provocative assertion on the previous page that 'Nous n'avons pas de talent ...', Breton defines his special contribution:

Demandez à Robert Desnos, celui d'entre nous qui, peut-être, s'est le plus approché de la vérité surréaliste, celui qui, dans des œuvres encore inédites et le long des multiples expériences auxquelles il s'est prêté, a justifié pleinement l'espoir que je plaçais dans le surréalisme et me somme encore d'en attendre beaucoup. 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 que de les fixer. Il lit en lui à livre ouvert et ne fait rien pour retenir les feuillets qui s'envolent au vent de sa vie.¹⁸

In addition to *Nouvelles Hébrides* and *Deuil pour deuil*, the footnote lists the title *Désordre formel* under which Desnos intended to publish together *Rose Sélavy*, *L'Aumonyme* and *Langage cuit*. Though the project was never realised, it is clear that for Breton the common denominator between these works was that they were all automatic products of the poet's Unconscious, and they are held up in support of his belief that the direct verbalisation of unconscious thought ('suivre oralement sa pensée') to which he had aspired since *Les Champs magnétiques* was now directly and reliably attainable. Thanks to Desnos, there was now a mechanism for generating such 'automatic speech' whose manifestations possessed the properties of a *language* ('Desnos *parle surréaliste*') which, in a proliferation of 'discours

¹¹ Ibid., 276.

¹² Ibid., 328.

¹³ Ibid., 319.

¹⁴ Ibid., 275.

¹⁵ Breton 1973, 88.

¹⁶ Murat 1988, 15.

¹⁷ Breton 1988, 328.

¹⁸ Ibid., 331 (Breton's emphasis).

splendides’, could open up a ‘vérité surréaliste’. This, Bretonian, <74> reading of the texts of *Désordre formel* in particular has conditioned their critical reception for decades.¹⁹

The notion of a language of the Unconscious, in which its repressed creativity finds an outlet for the unmediated expression of its own hidden *vérité*, was a fundamental tenet of classical Surrealism, after Freud. It was first theorised and set in historical context by Breton in another article of late 1922, again devoted substantially to the phenomenon of Robert Desnos. ‘Les Mots sans rides’²⁰ was published in *Littérature* in December 1922, accompanied by 137 ‘Rose Sélavy’ aphorisms and Desnos’s drawing *La Ville aux rues sans nom du Cirque cérébral* (a title rich in overt surrealist associations).²¹ In it Breton traces back to Rimbaud the origins of a new poetic language culminating in what Marguerite Bonnet calls the ‘équations verbales’²² of Desnos’s ‘Rose Sélavy’. It was Rimbaud, he claims, who first practised the poetic ‘chimie’ in which words were ‘purified’, their elemental components isolated and then combined in new ways to test their reactions. ‘Voyelles’ was the first step along a road in the course of which ‘on détournait le mot de son devoir de signifier’, poets gradually learning the lesson that ‘l’expression d’une idée dépend autant de l’allure des mots que de leurs sens’ until, with the advent of automatic writing, only their *allure* (which might be glossed as rapidity of delivery, but also instant impression and sound associations) mattered at all. Marcel Duchamp’s six original ‘Rose Sélavy’ puns published in *Littérature* n.s. 5 (1 October 1922) mark, for Breton, the final stage in the emancipation of words from conventional meaning: ‘On les avait vidés de leur pensée et l’on attendait sans trop y croire qu’ils commandassent à la pensée. Aujourd’hui c’est chose faite...’. Breton sees in Duchamp’s aphorisms a ‘rigueur <75> mathématique’ which distances them from the vulgar humour of the *contrepèter*: they are, he writes, ‘ce qui depuis longtemps s’était produit de plus remarquable en poésie’. Desnos’s much more fluent and varied outpourings, with the added bonus of a mode of production ‘proving’ their origin directly in the Unconscious (‘qui dicte à Desnos *endormi* [...]?’),²³ are for Breton the decisive flowering of ‘une activité qu’on ne soupçonnait pas encore’. As he stresses in the closing lines of ‘Les Mots sans rides’, however, the importance of this ‘activity’ lies not on the ludic surface of Desnos’s word-play texts, but at the deeper level of what they reveal about the mind:

Et qu’on comprenne bien que nous disons: jeux de mots, quand ce sont nos plus sûres raisons d’être qui sont en jeu. Les mots du reste ont fini de jouer.
Les mots font l’amour.

These exemplary texts of *Désordre formel* are thus firmly enrolled, via a word-play of Breton’s own on ‘jeu/jouer’, into the surrealist automatic agenda of exploration of the erotic. But this redirection of their ludic quality into a ‘higher’ purpose has an added advantage for Breton, for it distances Desnos from the equally ludic strategies of linguistic subversion employed at the same time by Dadaists including Tristan Tzara to destroy the conceptual and

¹⁹ An exception is Steven Wispur who reads these texts as evidence of ‘le grand dilemme du surréalisme: [...] le choix entre une métaphysique de l’expression et une tout autre conception du langage’ (Wispur 1987, 101), arguing that they are more closely related to Dada than Bretonian Surrealism.

²⁰ Breton 1988, 284-6.

²¹ For details of the republication of the ‘Rose Sélavy’ texts in *Corps et biens*, see Marguerite Bonnet’s introductory note to the article (Breton 1988, 1310-12).

²² Breton 1988, 1311.

²³ He avoids pronouncing on Desnos’s claim that his brain was telepathically connected to Duchamp’s, ‘au point que Rose Sélavy ne lui parle que si Duchamp a les yeux ouverts’, but points out that in a normal waking state Desnos is incapable of producing the aphorisms.

linguistic ‘ tiroirs du cerveau ’ which they denounced as the cause of social oppression.²⁴ By providing a ‘ deeper ’ explanation for Desnos’s word-plays, Breton hopes to avoid the vexed question of influence and debt, his major strategic concern at this period being to dissociate himself and his nascent movement from their Dada origins.

Breton’s insertion of Desnos the *sommeilleur* into the canonical lineage of surrealist precursors and pioneers supports Marguerite Bonnet’s contention that ‘ sa réflexion sur le langage dérive donc, <76> incontestablement, de ces jeux de Desnos sur les mots ’.²⁵ Two years later that theory of language was fully formed, with its own section of the *Manifeste* beginning assertively: ‘ Le langage a été donné à l’homme pour qu’il en fasse un usage surréaliste ’.²⁶ Desnos is not mentioned because Breton has by now drawn more general conclusions from the ‘ special case ’ he was writing about in ‘ Les Mots sans rides ’, but the terms used are the same. The generalisation of his theory of language is however accompanied by one significant change of emphasis: spontaneity, which remained an implicit value in the earlier article on Desnos, is now singled out as the common denominator of all surrealist modes of linguistic production, and by extension, the sole criterion of their value. The surrealist writer, argues Breton, must take advantage of ‘ cette faculté de premier jet ’²⁷ which allows an unmediated response to previously unimagined relationships between things and situations; ‘ parler, [...] écrire d’abondance ’, as Desnos, but also Soupault and Breton himself in *Les Champs magnétiques*, had done, allows the Unconscious to speak freely, whereas ‘ s’écouter, se lire n’ont d’autre effet que de suspendre l’occulte, l’admirable secours ’. Should the surrealist (Breton is writing now about his own practice, but his remarks clearly apply more widely) notice a weakness in one sentence, he must have confidence in a ‘ miraculeuse compensation ’ which will produce something marvellous in the next, for ‘ ce langage sans réserve que je cherche à rendre toujours valable ’ gives access to ‘ une extraordinaire lucidité ’.²⁸ This lucidity is encapsulated in an entity which now forms the touchstone of all surrealist production: the image.

In Breton’s definition, the poetic image is a manifestation of ‘ le principe d’association des idées ’,²⁹ a principle which, again after Freud, he sees as *the* fundamental mechanism of the Unconscious mind. Revelatory of the ‘ étendues illimitées où se manifestent [nos] <77> désirs ’,³⁰ the image emerges by predilection from the ‘ atmosphère surréaliste créée par l’écriture mécanique ’ in a ‘ course vertigineuse ’ in which spontaneously-generated images are ‘ les seuls guidons de l’esprit ’). Flashes of illumination in the ‘ nuit des éclairs ’ (Breton’s emphasis) that is the inner darkness of the Unconscious, the best images are those that present ‘ le degré d’arbitraire le plus élevé ’, revealing (or creating) ‘ des rapports plus délicats ’³¹ inaccessible to the conscious mind in its purely instrumental use of language. As he partly acknowledges at this point in the *Manifeste*, the immediate origin of Breton’s analogical theory of the image lies in the writings of his older contemporary and some-time mentor, Pierre Reverdy. Yet he alludes to Reverdy’s theory only to slant it to his own point of view, paying him the ‘ compliment ’ of calling him a surrealist poet who doesn’t know it (‘ Reverdy

²⁴ Tzara, *Manifeste Dada 1918* (Tzara 1981, 143). The title *Désordre formel* itself has obvious dadaesque resonances, with its emphasis on the disruption and subversion of norms.

²⁵ Breton 1988, 1311.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 334.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 335.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 338.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 335.

est surréaliste chez lui')³² and thereby minimizing any debt his own thinking might be seen to incur. This strategic recuperation of Reverdy by Breton, which critics unfamiliar with Reverdy's work have accepted at face value, is masterfully implemented in under two pages. It is worth pausing to examine how it is done because the same tactics and rhetoric recur in his treatment of Desnos.

In a short but influential text entitled 'L'Image', published in the thirteenth issue of his own review *Nord-Sud* (March 1918), Reverdy had defined the poetic image as a 'création pure de l'esprit'³³ in which two 'réalités plus ou moins éloignées'³⁴ are brought together and juxtaposed:

Plus les rapports des deux réalités seront lointains et justes, plus l'image sera forte ...³⁵

While applauding the criterion of distance, Breton objects in the *Premier manifeste* to that of *justesse* and what he takes to be the controlling role of the conscious mind, quoting with disapproval Reverdy's view that the image is made 'en rapprochant [...] deux réalités distantes dont *l'esprit seul* a saisi les <78> rapports':³⁶

... il ne semble pas possible de rapprocher volontairement ce qu'il appelle 'deux réalités distantes'. Le rapprochement se fait ou ne se fait pas, voilà tout.³⁷

For Breton in 1924, since it is now a matter of doctrine that valid imagery can only be the spontaneous product of the Unconscious, he feels compelled to apply *his* definition of the image to Reverdy's own poetry, following short extracts from three different texts containing what he regards as an image with the following pugnacious assertion:

Je nie, pour ma part, de la façon la plus formelle que chez Reverdy des images telles que: [...] offrent la moindre degré de préméditation. Il est faux, selon moi, de prétendre que 'l'esprit a saisi les rapports' des deux réalités en présence.³⁸

Leaving aside the impertinence of telling the senior poet how his own recent poetry must have been written, there are three significant aspects of this recuperation of Reverdy which apply to Desnos. First, Breton needs to assert the universal applicability of *his* Unconscious-based theory of the image against competing views, for if viable poetic images were producible by any more conscious process, there would be no way of telling whether new images that might come to public attention had emerged spontaneously from the Unconscious or not (which would in turn open the door for Dada writing to be accepted as 'poetry' containing 'images'). This is why he was so determined to read the texts of *Désordre formel* as the image-rich products of automatism.³⁹ Secondly, what interests Breton here is less the 'quality' of Reverdy's poetic imagery (however that might be judged), than its mode of production.⁴⁰ Although he has clearly selected samples of text which are strong candidates for consideration as 'images', what determines whether they may legitimately be so regarded is,

³² Ibid., 329.

³³ Reverdy 1975, 73.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 74; Reverdy's emphasis. Reverdy goes on to state that the understanding and appreciation of imagery also lies in *l'esprit*: 'L'esprit doit saisir et goûter sans mélange une image créée' (75).

³⁷ Breton, 1988, 337.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Indeed, one of the *Rose Sélavy* aphorisms figures among the exemplary images listed by Breton in the *Manifeste*; Breton 1988, 339.

⁴⁰ Marguerite Bonnet picks up this point in a comment on the *Premier manifeste*: 'ainsi, plus important que le résultat, est le processus' (Breton 1988, 1340).

for him, their <79> source. With breathtaking circularity he argues that since these *are* images with an element of the *merveilleux* in them, they *must* have originated in Reverdy's Unconscious – whatever he might say; and this origin in turn explains why he, Breton, is able to perceive the *merveilleux* in them. Thirdly, however, his claim is based on nothing more than personal conviction. There is no external evidence for what he says, and indeed Reverdy's own accounts directly contradict him. 'Je nie' is all well and good, but the only grounds for acquiescing in such a denial are faith or intimidation. In their readings of Reverdy as of Desnos, critics have been decisively influenced both by Breton's rhetoric of intellectual intimidation, and by his appeal to their faith in his vision.

As was stressed by his more sceptical contemporaries, Breton's vision of a *vérité surréaliste* was from the outset structured and defended by an essentially theological discourse, and nowhere is this discourse clearer than in his evaluation of Desnos. In the article 'Robert Desnos',⁴¹ published in *Le Journal littéraire* of 5 July 1924 and so almost contemporaneous with the writing of the *Premier manifeste*, he borrows the language of the Crusades to suggest that Surrealism is akin to a religious quest:⁴² in an age of 'héroïsme littéraire' and 'fanatisme' ('trois fanatiques de première grandeur: Picasso, Freud et Desnos'), Desnos has, writes Breton, made the greatest mark. Choosing a start-date ('depuis 1921') that both corresponds to the supposed decadence and demise of Dada, and also conveniently excludes from consideration Desnos's pre-*sommeils* odes, he lists as yet unpublished works (again including *Désordre formel*) in which 'un "merveilleux" moderne, qui ne le cède en rien à l'ancien, a choisi Robert Desnos pour siège de ses manifestations'. Like divine Grace, the surrealist *merveilleux* has descended on Desnos and now expresses <80> itself through him: 'Symbolisme, cubisme, dadaïsme sont depuis longtemps révolus, le *Surréalisme* [Breton's emphasis] est à l'ordre du jour et Desnos est son prophète.' By the end of the article, Robert the Prophet has been promoted to Saint Robert: 'il perdra sur terre quelques livres et, du jour de sa mort, qui ne saurait tarder, il commencera à opérer des miracles'. While there is much intended provocation and parody in this 'blasphemous' mis-use of religious terminology, it nevertheless points to a structural homology between the ancient mechanisms of divine grace and those of the new 'divinity' which, in Breton's developing thinking, will take over its moral and ethical role: the surrealist Unconscious. Desnos the *sommeilleur* ('Desnos rêve tout haut sans dormir', repeats Breton here) is a mystic whose words are revelation. Revelation, of course, depends not on rational acquiescence but on belief, and it seems clear that Breton's attitude to the *sommeils* was indeed that of a believer. Even many years after what he perceived as the cruel disappointment of the late 1920s, he was still, in *Entretiens*, adamant that the *sommeilleur* had been able to go where no man had gone before. Speaking of '[les] plongées journalières de Desnos dans ce qui était vraiment l'*inconnu*', he continues to regard him as the exemplary surrealist: 'Nul comme lui n'aura foncé tête baissée dans toutes les voies du merveilleux'.⁴³ It was perhaps, even at that distance in time, less damaging for Breton to argue that Desnos had 'betrayed' his marvellous gift than to question his own faith in a phenomenon on which the rest of his life's work had been founded.

⁴¹ Breton 1988, 473-4.

⁴² 'Certes, je ne crois pas à la vertu prophétique de la parole surréaliste [...] La piété des hommes ne me trompe pas' (Breton 1988, 344); but he ends the 1929 'Préface pour la réimpression du "Manifeste"' on the deliberately theological image of Surrealism as the dispenser 'des rayons transfigurants d'une grâce que je persiste en tout point à opposer à la grâce divine.' (Breton 1988, 403). Desnos in turn ends his 'Troisième manifeste' with a dig at Breton's quasi-theological attitude: 'Et je suis un athée' (Desnos 1978, 476).

⁴³ Breton 1973, 90.

Referring to the “jeux de mots” of *Rose Sélavy*,⁴⁴ which he clearly still sees as the most emblematic products of Desnos’s repeated <81> descents into the Unconscious, Breton speaks admiringly, towards the end of the same interview, of ‘le pouvoir qu’a montré Desnos de se transporter à *volonté*, instantanément, des médiocrités de la vie courante en pleine zone d’illumination et d’effusion poétique’.⁴⁵ Two pages earlier he had expressed the ideal, but unrealised, aspiration of automatic writing as being to ‘passer à *volonté* de cet autre côté aussi bien que de revenir par ici également à *volonté*, sans s’imposer de discipline particulière et comme s’il suffisait d’appuyer sur un bouton’.⁴⁶ The spiritistic spatial opposition between ‘cet autre côté’ and ‘par ici’ is doubled by one of values (‘illumination’, ‘effusion poétique’ vs. ‘médiocrité’) which rhetorically enhances the aesthetic and philosophical premium placed on the mysterious *process*, at the press of a button, of passage between the two domains. For Breton, the crucial thing about the *Rose Sélavy* utterances was their spontaneity and origin ‘de l’autre côté’, guaranteed in his view by Desnos’s facility in switching into ‘unconscious’ mode. At the end of the sixth interview he even admits that on paper they look less impressive (‘il arrive que des facilités, voire des trivialités les déparent’);⁴⁷ but,

jaillissant de lui, du fait même de leur nature cent pour cent inspirée, irréprouvable, inépuisable, ils n’offraient aucune prise à la critique. Il va sans dire que la “littérature” et ses critères n’avaient plus rien à voir ici.⁴⁸

This argument is as circular as the one about Reverdy’s images, but he forecloses dissent, like many another exponent of revealed truth, with a declaration of faith – and a warning: critics, ‘bas les pattes!’ No doubts can be entertained about the ‘inspired’ nature of *Rose Sélavy* and the other texts that Desnos planned to publish as *Désordre formel*. For Breton has, out of personal conviction and aesthetic inclination, gambled heavily on the sincerity of the *sommeilleur*. If by any chance *Rose Sélavy* was the result of premeditation, then in his eyes it would lose all value – but more importantly, the whole theoretical edifice of <82> Surrealism would be undermined. It is this unacceptable possibility that is encoded, as if defiantly, in Breton’s own evaluation: ‘Desnos parle surréaliste à *volonté*’. Such a profoundly subversive reading of the phrase is, understandably, one that Breton worked throughout his life to repress. But the enduring influence of his pronouncements about Surrealism since his death has been such as to transmit to critics the same repression, in the shadow of which the work of Desnos has been read.

Après: Robert le Diable

Like his canonisation, Desnos’s excommunication by Breton was legitimised on the grounds of sincerity, and it is into that unstable terrain that Desnos’s critics have resolutely followed. Of course, for some time after the end of the *sommeils* period Breton continued to regard

⁴⁴ The use of scare-quotes here (which may have been prompted by tone of voice, or perhaps reflects the semi-scripted nature of the interviews) distances Breton from any suggestion that the *Rose Sélavy* texts might be ‘merely’ word-plays, while the elliptical explanation that ‘ces “jeux de mots *se donnaient* pour le produit d’une communication télépathique avec Marcel Duchamp, alors à New York’ (Breton 1953, 90; emphasis added) allows him to avoid saying what credence he attaches to it. The rhetorical effect in both cases is to sustain the myth (dismissed out of hand by Marie-Claire Dumas as an ‘affabulation mystificatrice’; Desnos 1999, 144) without having to defend it and so risk awkward questions – a strategy adopted by many critics since.

⁴⁵ Breton 1973, 90; emphasis added.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 88; emphasis added.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

Desnos as an exemplary exponent of his theory of surrealist language. Looking back, in *Entretiens*, over the period of *La Révolution surréaliste* (late 1924-1929), he refers approvingly to the language games of Leiris and Desnos and their desire to ‘intervenir, [...] opérer sur la matière même du langage en obligeant les mots à livrer leur vie secrète et à trahir le mystérieux commerce qu’ils entretiennent en dehors de leur sens’.⁴⁹ He justifies his takeover of the editorship of the review from Artaud in 1925 by the need to direct its activities back towards language as revelation of the Unconscious, renewing his commitment to ‘remettre le langage en effervescence, comme il avait été mis dans l’écriture automatique et dans les sommeils, en comptant aveuglément sur ce qui peut en résulter’⁵⁰ and referring to *Deuil pour deuil* (1924) and *La Liberté ou l’amour !* (1927) <83> as high-points of the ‘floraison [...] la plus éclatante’ of surrealist production between 1926 and 1929.⁵¹ Even in the *Second manifeste*, the first version of which appeared in issue 12 of *La Révolution surréaliste* (15 December 1929),⁵² these texts, together with *C’est les bottes de sept lieues cette phrase: je me vois*, are held up as exemplary, alongside the ‘légende, moins belle que la réalité’, of his ‘activité qui ne se dépensa pas uniquement à écrire des livres’⁵³ – i.e. the *sumeils*. Yet this reminder of Desnos’s earlier contribution to the movement is the last concessive moment in the long section of the *Second manifeste* devoted to detailing ‘ce qu’il y a de contaminé’ in recent so-called surrealist productions, characterised by a ‘manque de rigueur et de pureté’.⁵⁴ The most contaminated figure is of course Desnos, who ‘désire rentrer dans la norme’⁵⁵ and so has traded a career in journalism, ‘une des activités les plus périlleuses qui soient’,⁵⁶ for his earlier inspired commerce with ‘les puissances [...] qui l’avaient quelque temps soulevé et dont il paraît ignorer encore qu’elles étaient des puissances des ténèbres’.⁵⁷ Having once held pride of place among the visionaries of the Unconscious, ‘ceux qui ont vu, je dis vu, ce que les autres craignent de voir...’,⁵⁸ Desnos has now, out of weakness of character, betrayed his own powers and the high ideals of the movement. Thus at the root of Breton’s charges against Desnos lie values of sincerity and personal integrity, his attack beginning with a character assassination all the more rhetorically effective for the sorrowing tone in which it is delivered.

It is however the accusations of *linguistic* ‘insincerity’ that are most telling. Breton quotes a ‘stupide petit entrefilet’ in an un-named <84> newspaper, the author of which gleefully recounts an occasion in Cuba when Desnos recited to him some poetry in alexandrines – “‘*Et (mais n’allez point le répéter, et couler ainsi ce charmant poète), quand ces alexandrins n’étaient pas de Jean Racine, ils étaient de lui.*”’⁵⁹ The anonymous trouble-maker clearly realises what discredits the spectacle of a surrealist speaking in alexandrines will bring on him in the eyes of the movement, and Breton does indeed express indignation about Desnos’s

⁴⁹ Breton 1973, 110.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵² The revised, definitive text was published by Simon Kra on 25 June 1930.

⁵³ Breton 1988, 812.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 811.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 812.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* The editors of the Pléiade edition pick up in a note this allusion to a favourite theme of Desnos: ‘Pour Breton, Desnos a oublié sa vraie nature de poète qui résidait dans son abandon aux puissances ténébreuses de l’inconscient’ (Breton 1988, 1612).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Breton 1988, 813.

apparent desire to return to the tradition of fixed-form poetry, slating in particular the ‘débauche de quatrains’⁶⁰ at the end of *Corps et biens*:

Voilà donc où mène l’usage immodéré du don verbal, quand il est destiné à masquer une absence radicale de pensée et à renouer avec la tradition imbécile du poète “dans les nuages”: à l’heure où cette tradition est rompue ...

What Breton finds completely unacceptable here is less a retrograde return to traditional values than the ‘misuse’ of the ‘don verbal’ which has always distinguished Desnos. Curiously for a theorist of automatism and the unchecked flow of verbal associations, Breton here castigates the excessive, uncontrolled use of Desnos’s linguistic talent and the ‘absence radicale de pensée’ underlying it. In other words, his extreme verbal facility was admirable only so long as it was put to the service of automatism and the theories of poetic production that Breton built on it. Once that facility was directed into types of writing incompatible with automatism, then it was by definition, for Breton, being used in a shallow and *insincere* way. More damaging for surrealist orthodoxy, however, is the obvious implication that Desnos’s extreme linguistic facility might have been used with equal ‘insincerity’ in all his writings – including his ‘automatic’ ones. It is thus of crucial importance for Breton here to re-affirm the absolute ‘sincerity’ of the productions of the *sommeils*, in contradistinction to Desnos’s more recent work. Hence Breton’s extremely polarised, Manichean presentation of Desnos in 1929: before his betrayal of the movement, *Saint Robert*; after, *Robert le Diable*.

<85>

It is for this same reason that Breton (like most critics who have followed him) is completely unable to handle the notion of Desnos writing pastiche. As early as the *Premier manifeste*, he betrays anxiety about the threat that pastiche would hold for Surrealism by attempting to dismiss it with a would-be performative:

Je ne crois pas au prochain établissement d’un poncif surréaliste⁶¹

There is here another warning to the reader, again disguised as an act of faith, that this is a subject that cannot legitimately be raised; yet Surrealism as a movement with values based solely on the unverifiable sincerity of certain automatic practices was uniquely vulnerable, as Breton clearly realised even in 1924, to imitation, pastiche and parody that might be undetectable as such and so pass for the real thing.⁶² Desnos’s mastery of pastiche had been superbly demonstrated by his publication in *La Liberté ou l’amour !* of ‘Les Veilleurs d’Arthur Rimbaud’, which purported (and was taken by many) to be a ‘rediscovered’ (or spiritistically reconstructed) poem by the great surrealist precursor. In the *Second manifeste*, Breton dismisses with contempt the ‘vers [...] mauvais (faux, chevillés et creux)’⁶³ of this

⁶⁰ Ibid., 814.

⁶¹ Ibid., 340. The British philosopher L.J. Austin identified performative utterances as being those whose effect is to perform actions in the world (e.g. ‘I name this ship ...’). Breton has a tendency to use statements of belief, as here, as if they alone were able to bring about the state or situation to which they refer.

⁶² Marie-Claire Dumas raises this possibility at the start of her presentation of Desnos’s writings of 1922: ‘Jusqu’à quel point l’écriture automatique permettait-elle de saisir à la source le jaillissement de la parole libérée des contraintes de la conscience ? La spontanéité espérée ne risquait-elle pas de tourner en son contraire, le poncif ?’ (Desnos 1999, 122).

⁶³ Breton 1988, 813. Adjectives which Desnos adopts defiantly in his ‘Prière d’insérer’ for *Corps et biens* as positive characteristics of his own poetry: ‘L’art poétique de Robert Desnos qui se manifeste sous tous les aspects (de la prose à l’alexandrin faux, chevillé et creux)...’ (Dumas 1984, 149). He is equally defiant about the decision to write in alexandrines at all: ‘Car n’est-ce point une preuve de liberté, en 1930, que de pouvoir, quand cela lui chante, écrire en alexandrins ?’ (ibid.).

compellingly Rimboldian text, and critics have largely followed his lead in dismissing it.⁶⁴ <86> Sarcastically accusing Desnos of rivalling in poetic platitude Ernest Raynaud, co-founder of the despised École Romane, he castigates the poem's alexandrines as evidence of 'une ambition ridicule et [...] une incompréhension inexcusable des fins poétiques actuelles',⁶⁵ concluding:

il est pénible qu'un de ceux que nous croyions être des nôtres entreprenne de nous faire tout extérieurement le coup du "Bateau ivre"...

'Tout extérieurement' is, from Breton's perspective, the most damning proof of betrayal, for this is evidently not (despite the author's mock-serious claims to the contrary) a text that has welled up spontaneously from Desnos's Unconscious, but one that he has allowed himself to 'fabriquer de toutes pièces'.⁶⁷ The poem's most signal defect, for Breton, is therefore its lack of 'sincerity', a particular manifestation of a wider betrayal of principles which, in an interview given in 1941, he was to characterise as 'cette maladie spécifiquement moderne [...] qui porte ces intellectuels à se déjuger radicalement, à renier d'une façon masochiste et exhibitionniste leur propre témoignage'.⁶⁸

Apart from an extraordinary tirade, added to the revised (1930) version of the *Second manifeste*, about the blasphemous use of 'Maldoror' by Desnos and friends as the name for a Montparnasse nightclub,⁶⁹ this attack by Breton on Desnos the insincere *pasticheur* is the most heart-felt in the *Second manifeste*. All the more so, no doubt, because he knew that 'Les Veilleurs' was far from being an isolated incident in the otherwise unblemished career of a surrealist automatist. Right from the start of his career Desnos had shown an extraordinary ability to slip into the style and thematic world of other poets; even <87> *Rose Sélavy* owed a direct and acknowledged debt to Marcel Duchamp (the apparatus of a 'telepathic communication' with writers alive or dead was clearly designed to allow a 'surrealist' explanation of this kind of pastiche, which is why Breton leaves open the possibility, against all common sense, that it might have been 'genuine'). Whether or not the two earliest texts of *Corps et biens*, 'Le Fard des Argonautes' and 'Ode à Coco', are directly identifiable as pastiches,⁷⁰ they are certainly not, in theme, imagery or form, surrealist-type products of unconscious processes, which is no doubt why Breton never mentions them in his writings about Desnos. Nor has he anything to say about the rest of the early poetry in which the voices of other poets can be heard, from the 'préciosité qui se voudrait proche de la nostalgie verlainienne'⁷¹ of 'Aquarelle', 'Casqués du héaume' and 'Chanson' (published in 1918), to the Apollinairean tones of the short texts contained in *Prospectus* (1919), constructed on clichéd fragments of everyday language. In 1922-3, Desnos also wrote explicit imitations of Nouveau, Cros and (sacrilege of sacrileges!) Lautréamont, which Dumas calls a "'faux" ludique', justifying the decision to omit them from her new edition (and thus occlude them

⁶⁴ Thus, while the poem is printed with *La Liberté ou l'Amour !* in Marie-Claire Dumas's recent edition of Desnos's *Œuvres*, the editor adopts Breton's valuation of the poem's 'forme poétique usée', remarking on its 'fonction ambiguë par rapport au récit' but with no further comment (Desnos 1999, 315).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Breton 1988, 815. Of course Breton assumes the role of sole arbiter 'des fins poétiques actuelles'.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 813.

⁶⁸ Breton 1973, 230.

⁶⁹ Breton quotes in evidence for the prosecution the amusing *Candide* article that narrates the events: 'Maldoror pour un surréaliste c'est l'équivalent de Jésus-Christ pour un chrétien' (Breton 1988, 813) – an irony that he misses completely by calling Lautréamont on the next page 'l'inattaquable'.

⁷⁰ Marie-Claire Dumas for one hears in them 'comme un écho du "Bateau ivre"' (Desnos 1999, 12).

⁷¹ Ibid., 12.

from Desnos's *œuvre*, just as Breton had sought to do) on the grounds that they were the mere 'exercices' of a poet searching for a voice of his own:

Que le jeune Desnos ait cherché sa manière en imitant explicitement ses prédécesseurs, en témoignent un certain nombre de poèmes dits 'de Nouveau', 'de Cros', 'de Lautréamont', non repris ici, dans lesquels l'accent parodique est sensible.⁷²

Yet these 'parodies' (or pastiches ? how could a surrealist possibly parody 'l'inattaquable' Lautréamont?) were written at exactly the time when, according to Breton, Desnos had already found in the *sommeils* his (unconscious) 'voice', albeit borrowed 'telepathically' from Duchamp.

<88>

While Marie-Claire Dumas follows Breton, exemplifying one critical attitude to the embarrassing problem of Desnos's pastiche poems, Marguerite Bonnet takes an apparently opposite line which, however, turns out to be no less Bretonian. She points out in a note on 'Les Mots sans rides' that the pastiche poems were contained in the same 'dossier conservé par Breton'⁷³ as some of the *Rose Sélavy* texts and automatic drawings by Desnos, and that he was thinking of publishing them in *Littérature* but changed his mind. She conjectures that this decision might be explained by the fact that Breton 'avait de grandes réserves dès 1922 sur les productions versifiées de Desnos endormi',⁷⁴ before reminding us that:

Breton fait sur ces productions un silence total dans 'Les Mots sans rides' et ne retient de ce bouillonnement créateur des *sommeils* que certains dessins et dans le domaine verbal les aphorismes de Rose Sélavy.

She evidently takes a more positive view of these texts than Dumas, seeing them as a legitimate product of the 'bouillonnement créateur des *sommeils*' rather than negligible exercises unworthy of republication,⁷⁵ and implicitly criticising Breton for the selectivity of his appropriation of Desnos at this defining moment for Surrealism. But she remains, like Breton himself, completely unable to accept pastiche as a legitimate mode of surrealist expression, attempting to justify these texts as something more than 'just' pastiche by re-applying Breton's criterion of creative sincerity to poems

... dans lesquels nous verrions volontiers une tentative de réactivation médiumnique de poètes aimés, par un Desnos qui croit réellement, en cette période d'intense exaltation, à ses pouvoirs seconds.⁷⁶

Thus Breton's concern about pastiche's threat to the whole surrealist edifice is reproduced in the anxieties of critics, for whom there is no middle ground between complete rejection (Dumas) or a complete act <89> of faith (Bonnet) in an unverifiable (and on the face of it decidedly implausible) surrealist-spiritistic origin.⁷⁷ The option of accepting them as pastiche, and going on to see pastiche as one of the major modes of Desnos's poetic contribution, is simply not available, consistently and authoritatively 'written out' by Breton, for whom it had

⁷² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷³ Breton 1988, 1311.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 6.

⁷⁵ Despite the fact that they were already in the public domain, having been published by Michel Murat in *L'Herne* (1987).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ The rhetorical sleight of hand by which the 'act of faith' ('croit réellement') is apparently passed back up the line here to Desnos cannot mask the fact that Bonnet's readers are being asked to have faith in her judgement ('nous verrions volontiers') that his 'belief' was 'sincere', and therefore plausible.

to remain axiomatic, right to the end of his life, that ‘durant des années Robert Desnos s’est abandonné *Corps et biens* [...] à l’automatisme surréaliste’.⁷⁸

It was in order to defend himself against Breton’s accusations of insincerity in the *Second manifeste*, that Desnos wrote the ‘Prière d’insérer’ of *Corps et biens*. Yet the very terms in which he protests his innocence and stakes his claim to originality are those determined by Breton: the book, writes Desnos referring to himself in the third person, is

... un journal singulièrement sincère, exact et adapté aux moindres révolutions de sa sensibilité.⁷⁹

It is as if only a demonstration of the deep, private origins of the book’s inspiration could carry any weight in the attempt to demonstrate its value. It was the easy target presented by this plea of sincerity that was attacked in turn by Louis Aragon in the long article ‘Corps, âme et biens’⁸⁰ which he published in the first issue of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (July 1930) in direct rebuttal of the ‘Prière d’insérer’:

La *sincérité* de Desnos est d’ailleurs telle qu’il n’y a pour ainsi dire pas un seul accent, que cet auteur veuille laisser perdre: singer Apollinaire, Hugo, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, au point de calquer des vers sur les leurs, ne le dispense pas d’imiter <90> Tailhade, Vitrac et Cocteau. Jusqu’à Paul Valéry dont le serpent empêche notre homme de dormir.⁸¹

Like Breton, Aragon polemically assimilates pastiche to insincerity, so that in order to demolish Desnos as a poet and *Corps et biens* as a book, all he needs to do is identify echoes of other writers. More sweepingly than Breton, he dismisses the whole work on such grounds, even though he admits that ‘pour la majorité des poèmes la question de la sincérité ne serait pas à poser, n’étaient les déclarations de Desnos’.⁸² Only because Desnos has protested his sincerity too much, daring at the same time to claim a heretical pre-eminence as a surrealist, must doubt necessarily be cast on works whose sincerity would otherwise pass without question.

For, so anxious is Aragon to demolish Desnos’s credentials that he now sets out to rubbish even the texts whose authenticity Breton himself never doubted: those of *Désordre formel*. Purely for rhetorical purposes, he feigns for a moment to make an exception for two of them:

Si le lecteur peut en lisant *L’Aumonyme* ou *Langage cuit* réserver son jugement à cause du caractère innové de la forme, et s’en prendre à soi-même de ne pas apercevoir le fond, quand il aura lu *L’Aveugle* ou *De silex et de feu* il tiendra le système. C’est la complaisance verbale...⁸³

⁷⁸ Desnos 1999, 139.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 589.

⁸⁰ The title is of course an ironic modified *reprise* of Desnos’s own, evocative of the sublimation of the poet’s material existence as he plunges (as Breton repeatedly said) into the depths of the mind. Mocking Desnos’s ‘conversion’ to philosophical materialism, Aragon lists the allusions in *Corps et biens* to *l’âme*, including the phrase ‘corps, âme et biens’ in the closing text, ‘Le Poème à Florence’ (Dumas 1984, 157). Extracts from Aragon’s article are reprinted in Desnos 1999, 590-91.

⁸¹ Dumas 1984, 151. Perhaps significantly, this passage is omitted from the reprint in Desnos 1999 (see n. 80, above). There follow two more paragraphs in which Aragon scornfully identifies further literary debts: ‘Tout le stéréotypé du bagage romantique s’ajoute ici au dictionnaire épuisé du dix-huitième siècle. On dirait une vaste tinette...’ (ibid., 152).

⁸² Ibid., 152.

⁸³ Ibid., 155.

Both, despite their formal novelty, are condemned as content-less, the systematic products of ‘complaisance verbale’ (earlier qualified as ‘cette masturbation d’un genre mineur’)⁸⁴ expressing itself in a ‘verbosité qui vers 1923 pouvait encore faire une espèce d’illusion’.⁸⁵ So the apparent ‘sincerity’ of *L’Aumonyme* and *Langage cuit* was but verbal <91> artifice, unwittingly unmasked in his own ‘Prière d’insérer’ by Desnos’s attempts to link them with the contemptible later poetry in a single over-arching definition of Surrealism:

Rapprocher les jeux de mots d’alors des alexandrins d’aujourd’hui et de ceux de la veille, c’était de la dernière maladresse pour un escamoteur du type Desnos, c’était montrer que les ressorts en étaient les mêmes, la vieille niaiserie poétique n’avait pas un instant perdu ses droits.⁸⁶

Thus the very texts which, for Breton, apparently remained the repositories of ‘la précieuse confiance’ of the Unconscious, are tainted with the ‘insincerity’ of the poems in alexandrines. The same goes for ‘les jeux de mots de *Rose Sélavy*, imités et vulgarisés de Marcel Duchamp’,⁸⁷ presented in *Corps et biens* as poems, ‘alors qu’à l’époque où ils furent écrits ils avaient essentiellement la valeur de documents cliniques pour l’étude de crises hystériformes que Desnos et quelques autres arrivaient à reproduire.’⁸⁸ Insincerity and ‘falsification’,⁸⁹ this time of the status of the texts (but Aragon is of course being dishonest here: for Breton the *Rose Sélavy* aphorisms were never clinical documents), are again the sole grounds for condemning work that was formerly the object of adulation. And Aragon makes absolutely no bones about the retrospective nature of this judgement:

Il ne reste rien de la poésie de Robert Desnos : je n’ai pas la moindre honte à reconnaître que le voisinage de ses poèmes récents me fait voir ses poèmes anciens à une lueur telle, qu’on ne peut me toucher en me disant que jadis j’ai trouvé celui-ci ou celui-là pas si mal, avant tout.⁹⁰

He then completes the ‘assassination’ of Desnos by returning to his conviction that the ‘messages télépathiques’⁹¹ which supposedly inspired *Rose Sélavy* were faked, to dismiss out of hand the whole work of ‘ce menteur professionnel qui se permet de s’attaquer à tout ce qu’il <92> y a de pur en ramassant et assaisonnant avec sa bave les plus infâmes ragots et les plus misérables inventions’.⁹² After a cheap pun on the word ‘matières’, the article then concludes in scatological vein: ‘il se range ainsi définitivement dans la catégorie des mouches à merde’.⁹³

⁸⁴ Ibid., 150.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 157.

⁹² Desnos’s ‘crime’ of course included contributing to the Breton *Cadavre* in January 1930 (see Desnos 1999, 480-81), then publishing in *Le Courrier littéraire* (March 1930) a *Troisième manifeste du surréalisme* (ibid., 484-7) in which he denounces ‘le puritanisme, le protestantisme [...] le hideux conformisme religieux’ of Breton, declaring that: ‘Croire au surréalisme, c’est repaver le chemin de Dieu’ (ibid., 487). ‘Tout ce qu’il y a de pur’, indeed.

⁹³ Ibid., 158.

The Sincerity Topos in Desnos Criticism

'Sincerity' is thus the criterion according to which Breton affirms, in 1924, the visionary mysticism of Desnos, yet it is also the one by which Aragon, five years later, would demolish the whole edifice of his work. If, as Marie-Claire Dumas suggests in the Préface to her edition of *Nouvelles Hébrides*, in automatic writing 'le mérite de beauté fait place à celui de sincérité',⁹⁴ then once suspicion sets in, the *merveilleux* becomes automatically tainted, a *poncif*. If the touchstone of value is an unverifiable 'principe de sincérité absolue',⁹⁵ when the ideological wind changes it is open season for sceptics and detractors. Even at the time of the *sommeils*, many in the surrealist entourage (Ribemont-Dessaignes, Aragon, Eluard, Tzara, even Duchamp himself) saw them as pure mystification, or in the words of Dumas, 'des supercheries d'un jeune simulateur qui désirait briller aux yeux de son entourage'.⁹⁶ Only Breton's powerful personality and his commitment to access to the Unconscious by any means could have imposed allegiance to such practices. Unfortunately for Desnos, he became <93> locked by Breton into his role as *sommeilleur* and surrealist visionary, when his interests and achievements were already wider and would soon evolve again. As Dumas points out in her important first book on Desnos, his present and future writing was in reality hijacked by the document in which he was most lavishly praised:

Assez paradoxalement en participant activement, en 1922-1923, à l'élaboration et à la révélation de l'idée surréaliste, Desnos œuvrait à son détriment, forgeant ce qui allait agir sur lui comme un frein et au nom de quoi il serait finalement condamné. De ce point de vue, le premier *Manifeste* représente pour Desnos une double frustration: il était en partie dépossédé d'une activité à laquelle il avait largement contribué; d'autre part il se sentait mis à distance par Breton ...⁹⁷

Desnos criticism too has been hijacked by Bretonian Surrealism and the Sincerity Topos: for over half a century now commentators have, enthusiastically or with more or less embarrassment, donned that same straitjacket.⁹⁸ 'A quel moment le dormeur quitte-t-il le domaine de la parodie pour entrer dans celui de l'acte authentique ?'⁹⁹ This awkward question has generally been answered by an act of faith, with critics seeking to serve Desnos by 'believing in' the automatic origin of almost everything he wrote;¹⁰⁰ even the most unlikely works have been <94> treated as unmediated products of deep obsessions and anxieties, spontaneously expressing themselves in original imagery.

A striking illustration of the power of Breton's influence can be found in the work of early Surrealism expert J. H. Matthews, who is unusual precisely in *not* believing in the automatic

⁹⁴ Desnos 1978, 16.

⁹⁵ Dumas 1980, 45.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁷ Dumas 1980, 188.

⁹⁸ In her 1984 book Dumas for instance subscribes to the sincerity topos, writing of the 1929 poems from *Corps et biens*: 'la sincérité d'une telle poésie est hors de doute' (Dumas 1984, 133) and calling the whole collection (after Desnos himself) a 'journal poétique scrupuleux', a 'bilan sincère établi dans un moment de crise' (*ibid.*, 143).

⁹⁹ Dumas 1980, 50.

¹⁰⁰ In 'Une vague de rêves' of 1924 (*Commerce*, Cahier 11, p. 107), Aragon comes up with an ingenious, if casuistical, rationalisation for this belief: 'L'idée de la simulation est remise en jeu. Pour moi, je n'ai jamais pu me faire une idée claire de cette idée. Simuler une chose, est-ce autre chose que la penser ? Et ce qui est pensé, est. Vous ne me ferez pas sortir de là. Qu'on m'explique, d'ailleurs, le caractère génial des rêves parlés qui se déroulaient devant moi!' (cited Davis 1981, 25-6; interestingly, this part of the article is silently omitted from the new Dumas edition (Desnos 1999, 140-141)). Aragon's rationale is itself an act of faith: *because* Desnos's 'spoken dreams' were inspirational, they *must* have been produced by his Unconscious ...

origin of the *Rose Sélavy* aphorisms, yet still feels compelled to read them as ‘equivalent to’ automatic writing:

There can be no doubt, then, that Desnos was seeking consciously, through the method applied in these texts, the equivalent of the freedom attainable in the absence of conscious control during self hypnosis.¹⁰¹

Even though he does not subscribe to Breton’s act of faith in the Desnosian Unconscious, he preserves the surrealist ideology of language as ‘freedom’ by inventing a weaker version of the ‘automatic’ hypothesis which keeps his reading within the bounds set by Breton. No such qualms are evident in Hélène Laroche Davis’s book *Robert Desnos. Une voix, un chant, un cri*, a classic example of fixed-focus surrealist criticism where everything is assumed to come direct from the Unconscious, as if in a dream.¹⁰² Thus, among numerous other examples, ‘Idéale maîtresse’ from *Langage cuit*¹⁰³ is held up as an ‘exemple d’écriture automatique’ which ‘reprend le même mécanisme que le travail du rêve pour libérer du joug de la raison et des contingences du monde extérieur’.¹⁰⁴ The critic even imposes an orthodox surrealist (and so ‘respectable’) origin on the homosexual fellatio imagery of *Le Fard des Argonautes*: ‘Ces alexandrins naissent des rêves du poète qui découvre enfouis en lui des désirs et des tendances qui sont des tabous pour la société’.¹⁰⁵ The problem of how dreams might <95> spontaneously express themselves in alexandrines is however not addressed.

A more sophisticated and productive line is taken by Michel Murat in his 1988 book *Robert Desnos. Les grands jours du poète*, which is however a telling example of the pressure of Breton’s influence on a critic aware of the contradictory positions he is forced to adopt. A key strategy for squaring the circle is his use of *style indirect libre* to narrate Desnos’s activities within the surrealist group. In an early section of the book (‘Entrée du médium’) in particular, the events of the *sommeils* are recounted in a historic present (‘Il y a trois dormeurs: Crevel, Desnos, Péret’)¹⁰⁶ which leaves the narrative perspective deliberately ambiguous: is Murat relating what he as a critic and historian believes happened, or what he thinks the participants believed at the time, based on the accounts – many by Breton – that he has read? An assertion such as: ‘Pendant ce temps, Desnos écrit, rêve et dort. Il ne cesse en cela de prouver le surréalisme, de même qu’on prouve le mouvement en marchant’¹⁰⁷ looks like an authoritative statement of fact, yet it is by no means unambiguously owned by Murat: it can equally well be read as his assessment of what the surrealists themselves thought, an assessment with which, he could argue, he is not necessarily in agreement. The conflation in a single narrative voice of these two historically different positions, those (imagined) of the participants in the events and of the critic writing over 60 years later, removes any distance between them and leads Murat’s reader to assume that he assents in the account he is giving, while at the same time leaving open the escape-route that these are not, linguistically-speaking, statements of his belief. Though he does allude to subsequent allegations that Desnos had ‘simulé’,¹⁰⁸ it seems clear that on balance he accepts the orthodox explanation of

¹⁰¹ Matthews 1969, 56.

¹⁰² The critic’s allegiance to the Bretonian line on automatism is unwavering: ‘L’écriture automatique est le langage de l’inconscient’ (Davis 1981, 33); ‘l’écriture automatique qui reproduit le mécanisme psychique du langage du rêve’ (ibid., 37); ‘le surréel ou le merveilleux qui est avant tout langage qui ressemble au langage subconscient du désir’ (ibid., 40).

¹⁰³ Desnos 1999, 530.

¹⁰⁴ Davis 1981, 24.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰⁶ Murat 1988, 13.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 14.

the *sommeils*: ‘le comportement des dormeurs, bien qu’il ne puisse en toute rigueur passer pour une preuve, emporte la conviction’.¹⁰⁹ Yet this ‘conviction’, which his reader is invited to share by a kind of performative comparable <96> to those used by Breton (unless we are back in *style indirect libre* and the belief is that of the surrealists themselves), is arrived at without discussion of the evidence: it is a critical act of faith legitimised solely by a rhetorical procedure.

Once this first step, the rhetorical conflation of the critic’s viewpoint with that of André Breton, has been accepted, much can follow. Murat is immediately able to fall in with Breton’s deprecation of Dada in comparison with the ‘automatic’ products of *Rose Sélavy*, though again using the ambiguous *style indirect libre* which leaves open the possibility that he is doing no more than identifying with the perceptions of Desnos’s admiring contemporaries: ‘le dormeur fascine parce qu’il obtient involontairement ce à quoi Dada s’efforçait de parvenir par art’.¹¹⁰ With Desnos now established as a sincere automatist, Murat can proceed with confidence to take the Bretonian line on the ‘language games’ texts: ‘De 1922 à 1924, l’œuvre de Desnos se place presque entièrement sous le signe de l’“automatisme psychique pur” tel que le définit le *Manifeste du surréalisme*’¹¹¹ – though ‘presque’ leaves an opening for a doubt expressed a few pages later, when he only insists that *Rose Sélavy* is entirely automatic: *L’Aumonyme* and *Langage cuit* ‘doivent néanmoins être envisagés avant tout sous l’angle des procédés dont ils sont issus’.¹¹² However, analysing the linguistic procedures which clearly generated these texts is only a necessary detour, for Murat, before returning to an apparently clear vote of confidence, in another quasi-performative utterance, in Breton’s view of their automatic origin: ‘On peut en effet se fier au jugement de Breton et supposer que Desnos “écrit surréaliste” au même titre qu’il “parle surréaliste”’.¹¹³ But while admitting that ‘la question de l’authenticité et du degré d’automatisme n’en disparaissent pas pour autant’,¹¹⁴ he avoids considering the consequences of Desnos’s possible non-sincerity, choosing tacitly to omit the profoundly ambiguous qualification ‘à volonté’ from his Breton allusion. Instead, he adapts <97> the latter’s notion of *hasard objectif*, never anything but a literary fiction, to account for a claimed ‘inner necessity’ (i.e. involuntary sincerity) of the language games: ‘L’arbitraire n’est que l’apparence sous laquelle s’objective la nécessité intérieure: le procédé joue le rôle d’un écran où le sujet projette une vérité qui lui reste inconnue’.¹¹⁵

A second strategy for rescuing the ‘sincerity’ of the language games, recuperating their procedural artificiality as a higher form of (self-conscious) authenticity, is employed by Murat in a later chapter significantly entitled ‘Les beaux effets du surréel’. Accepting that ‘*L’Aumonyme* a peu à voir avec l’automatisme’,¹¹⁶ he now presents the homonymic puns as a deliberate flirting with that other staple of surrealist theoretical discourses, the language of non-rationality: ‘La conscience du mensonge est la condition paradoxale de l’authenticité d’une parole poétique qui se mesure à la folie...’.¹¹⁷ Alluding to a highly appropriate word-play on ‘pastiche’ and ‘postiche’ by the critic Colette Guedj,¹¹⁸ he concludes, with a word-

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 16.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 33.

¹¹² Ibid., 36.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 47.

¹¹⁶ Murat 1988, 82.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 85.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., n. 19.

play of his own, that in this case ‘le mensonge œuvre pour le songe’¹¹⁹ – a pirouette by which he drags *L’Aumonyme* straight back into the canonical surrealist territory of dream.¹²⁰

What these two critical strategies have in common is Murat’s determination to read ‘behind’ texts which seem to operate on the surface of language a ‘deeper’ subjectivity. Nowhere is this attitude more evident than in his treatment of *Langage cuit*, which in his hands becomes the ‘missing link’ between the language-game texts and the <98> love poetry (*Langage cuit* forme le maillon par où la recherche de *Désordre formel* déborde sur l’ensemble de l’œuvre poétique et tend à perdre son autonomie’),¹²¹ a procedural means for Desnos of finding a lyrical voice:

Dans la langue qu’il transforme en bloquant ses automatismes, Desnos cherche les ‘secrets d’un art magique’. Sans être naïve, sa démarche n’est pas essentiellement démystificatrice et critique [...] Desnos cherche ici un ‘secret’, celui de sa propre parole; le travail sur le cliché contribue à l’invention du *moi* lyrique.¹²²

Thus for example in ‘Idéale maîtresse’ the textual mechanism by which nouns take the place of verbs is no surface procedure but the expression of a deep-seated psychological necessity:

La contradiction, l’ambivalence, le court-circuit logique, le raccourci ou le détour d’un point à un autre, les cristallisation du sens et de l’expérience, en somme tout ce qui constitue une personnalité mentale, tire parti du jeu formel pour obtenir un accès direct au langage, sans contrôle de la conscience réflexive.¹²³

Now *Langage cuit* too can be read as a surrealist game designed to give access to the hidden patterns of the Unconscious: ‘Contrariétés et postulations s’énoncent ici comme des lois de l’imaginaire’.¹²⁴ However, the texts of the collection are not, for Murat, all equally productive in this respect: he dislikes the ‘conscience populaire’ that he identifies in the clichés of ‘C’était un bon copain’,¹²⁵ and regards the two ‘Langage cuit’ poems themselves as mere exercises which ‘ont pour charge de roder la lecture [...] la règle des antonymes [...] Son application est agréablement mécanique’.¹²⁶ In ‘Idéal maîtresse’, in contrast, ‘l’on pénètre dans une sorte de palais des glaces de la subjectivité’.¹²⁷ But while the sense-effects might arguably be stranger <99> in that poem, the procedure by which they are generated is no less mechanical. Murat here is, like Breton, using an aesthetic value-judgement to defend a theoretical division between texts that ‘genuinely’ reveal the author’s unconscious subjectivity, and those that he admits do not.

One of the few commentators to have stood out against such psychologising readings of *Langage cuit* is Steven Winspur. Where Murat warns against approaches that remain on the surface of the texts (‘Le formalisme pur est conservateur; remontant aux sources, il rétablit un

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ In her recent edition Marie-Claire Dumas adopts a related strategy, seeing the language-game texts as originating in Desnos’s desire for ‘une appropriation individuelle de la langue’ (Desnos 1999, 167). However, this move, authorised by Breton’s assessment of *Rose Sélavy* in ‘Les Mots sans rides’ (‘Les mots font l’amour’; Breton 1988, 286), is just another way of remaining within the orthodox thematics of Surrealism and the sincerity topos, for as Desnos himself provocatively reminds us in his 1923 essay ‘De l’érotisme considéré dans ses manifestations écrites...’: ‘il n’est pas de mensonge possible en littérature érotique’ (*ibid.*, 180).

¹²¹ Murat 1988, 87.

¹²² Ibid., 88.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 90.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 91.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 88-9.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 89.

ordre et protège le lecteur de l'inouï'),¹²⁸ Winspur resolutely rejects any temptation to symbolic interpretation, concentrating instead on the 'gymnastique verbale qui constitue le poème en question'.¹²⁹ For example, he reads 'Cœur en bouche'¹³⁰ as a set of linguistic and cultural (intertextual) clichés to which the poet draws attention by the application of a *sui generis* rhetorical permutation rule which is identified metatextually in the title: "'Cœur en bouche" est fondé sur le déplacement de métaphores figées [...] et c'est la perception de ce déplacement qui constitue la signification du poème'.¹³¹ The 'dead metaphors' which Desnos re-activates in phrases such as 'Une neige de seins' spark intertextual recollections of other writers (e.g. Gautier's 'Seins, neige moulée en globe'), so that the texts of *Langage cuit* are performative, self-generating utterances, exemplary and deliberate products of 'la géométrie intertextuelle qui engendre toute innovation littéraire'.¹³² Winspur argues persuasively that linguistically- subversive texts such as these are more appropriately regarded as 'le point culminant d'une expérience commencée par les dadaïstes en 1917 et 1918',¹³³ rather than as examples of any surrealist *merveilleux*. In fact, it is rather Michel Murat's 'inouï', the conditioned reflex to see all non-referential verbalism as a deep expression of some unconscious lyrical creativity, that conservatively <100> protects the reader of Desnos by offering a ready-made explanation and value-system. Less safe but potentially far richer is Winspur's 'formalist' reading of *Désordre formel* as a Dadaist work.

This debate, unthinkable to many critics because Breton made it so for ideological and historical reasons of his own, is not just a matter of labels. Linking Desnos to Dadaists such as Tzara and Picabia can help to open up aspects of his writing that Breton repressed and which critics have struggled to deal with ever since. In particular, by re-examining the language-game works as intertextual ready-mades, linguistic artefacts assembled (whether consciously or not: the question is no longer important) from heterogeneous cultural bric-a-brac, it becomes possible to connect them, and indeed the rest of his 'sincere' poetry, to the critically devalued pastiches. The pertinence of such a connection is implicitly acknowledged by Michel Murat when he examines *L'Horloge à court circuit* from *Nouvelles Hébrides*: 'Autant qu'à un pastiche de *Barrières*, la saynète fait penser à un exercice dans le style dada'.¹³⁴ The term 'exercice' of course fits with the systematic devaluation of Dada by Surrealism, and he is quick to circumscribe the heretical suggestion that a canonical text from *Les Champs magnétiques* might be susceptible to pastiche by asserting that *L'Horloge* 'reste isolée'¹³⁵ in Desnos's work. Yet near the beginning of his book he had already identified what he calls Desnos's 'appropriation mimétique'¹³⁶ of other discourses as a systematic mechanism of his creativity: in addition to the pastiches of contemporaries in *Prospectus* and of Rimbaud in "'Les Veilleurs" d'Arthur Rimbaud', 'à quatre reprises, Desnos ainsi va se lancer dans une voie qu'un autre avait ouverte'.¹³⁷ Thus *Nouvelles Hébrides* are Desnos's *Champs magnétiques*, while the aphorisms of *Rose Sélavy*, an idea borrowed from Duchamp, were supposedly composed in a state of *sommeil* imitated from Crevel, and *P'Oasis* from *L'Aumonyme* is clearly derived from Vitrac.¹³⁸ Murat's difficulty is in

¹²⁸ Murat 1988, 77.

¹²⁹ *L'Herne* 1987, 104.

¹³⁰ Desnos 1999, 532-3.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 106.

¹³³ Ibid., 105.

¹³⁴ Murat 1988, 58.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 59.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

reconciling pastiche with automatism, <101> and particularly with the need to find an ‘automatic’ origin for the versified productions dismissed by Breton and Aragon. Again he begins with assertion rather than argument: ‘Il peut sembler paradoxal de considérer le vers comme un mode d’invention automatique. Mais pour Desnos le fait s’impose comme une évidence’,¹³⁹ and his recourse to Fraenkel’s account of Desnos’s oracular versified speech (‘On entendit alors, de la bouche de Desnos, l’automatisme poétique déferler [...] il pouvait improviser des alexandrins pressés comme un troupeau de bisons’)¹⁴⁰ does little more to convince. He develops a speculative theory (‘la pulsion du vers’) that the rhythmic structure of verse can act as a ‘réceptacle invisible’¹⁴¹ into which uncontrolled verbal material from the Unconscious can flow. But Murat’s claim for the specificity of the alexandrine (‘l’automatisme tend à s’établir dans ce rythme, comme un moteur qui prend son régime’)¹⁴² is directly contradicted by Breton and Aragon in their attack on Desnos; and his carefully-constructed hypothesis on the following page explaining the automatic generation of a poem in regular quatrains is somewhat undermined by the throwaway admission that ‘On peut aussi puiser dans un matériau préconstruit’.¹⁴³

Michel Murat is, then, well aware of the fragility of the distinction between ‘sincere’ lyricism and pastiche in Desnos, but refuses to draw the logical conclusion, that by renouncing the unsustainable and limiting criterion of sincerity and an unverifiable automatism, the critic can take a more productive view of Desnos’s writing as a whole. Instead, he makes an unconvincing attempt to reconcile what he calls ‘le simulacre’ (which presumably includes pastiche) with automatism by defending it as just one more ‘procedure’ for generating the lyrical *merveilleux*: ‘Simulacre et merveilleux restent ainsi face à face. Le simulacre est un merveilleux désenchanté; mais on peut aussi bien dire que le merveilleux est un simulacre qui s’enchanté de lui-même, et <102> nous enchante’.¹⁴⁴ The problem with this rhetorical explanation is its circularity: if the only difference between *le merveilleux* and the *poncif* that Breton so feared lies in the eye of the beholder (are we or are we not ‘enchantés?’), then what motivates that aesthetic response and how is it to be justified in critical terms? Murat recognises the problem, admitting that ‘D’un point de vue technique, rien ne différencie le merveilleux du simulacre’.¹⁴⁵ Critics writing about Surrealism (but the trend is particularly acute among commentators on Desnos) have generally ignored this difficulty, preferring either simply to assert their own aesthetic appreciation as evidence of the ‘genuineness’ of the material in question or, worse, taking their faith in its ‘surrealist’ origin as sufficient cause for ‘enchantement’ with its aesthetic qualities. Murat attempts to construct a technical foundation for his own appreciation of the difference between *merveilleux* and pastiche, drawing a distinction between properly analogical constructs and visual *adunata* which are ‘plus pauvre(s) en sens que la métaphore’.¹⁴⁶ He also suspects the facility of metaphors based solely on a linking ‘de’ (which, he points out, are common in Breton and Eluard, but not Desnos), remarking that they ‘ont une allure de pastiche’.¹⁴⁷ Yet when on the same page he illustrates Desnos’s material ‘univers parallèle du merveilleux’¹⁴⁸ with examples from *Les Ténèbres*, the phrases he comes up with (‘ailes de satin’, ‘nuit de tissu fragile’, ‘paysage de

¹³⁹ Ibid., 45.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 46.

¹⁴⁴ Murat 1988, 94.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

résine et d'agate')¹⁴⁹ are precisely of this type: why then are they not pastiche? As Murat has already acknowledged: 'Une telle "merveille" est fragile: dès que le doute l'affecte, c'est un processus de simulation qui peut s'ouvrir.'¹⁵⁰

Desnos the Discourse Chameleon

It is a striking fact that Surrealism is the only movement of the 20th Century whose commentators, in their vast majority, still subscribe to the Romantic notion of art as the sincere expression of a deep lyrical self. Despite half a century of structuralism, deconstruction, cultural and gender studies, which has demonstrated conclusively that literary texts are (also) the products of conventions, social expectations and pre-existing discourses, most writers on Surrealism have locked themselves in, whether complacently like Hélène Laroche Davis or with evident anxiety like Michel Murat,¹⁵¹ to the theory of aesthetic production developed and promoted by André Breton. The fact that continued adherence to such a theory many decades after its real creative moment should still be an article of faith is testimony not to its veracity, but to the intellectual control exerted even today by its key proponent. The strength, but also the vulnerability, of Breton's theory lies in its exclusiveness: his definitions leave no room for any external influence on the 'pure' discourse of Surrealism. He presents critics with a stark choice: either subscribe to the unconscious *merveille*, or take their literary curiosity elsewhere. Belief in automatism and the spontaneous expression of desire cannot logically be reconciled with intertextuality and particularly its most conscious avatar, pastiche, a major threat to the whole ideology of Surrealism. Hence the crucial importance of Desnos, both for Breton and for us today. For Breton, it was vital to manipulate the reception of his work so that only those parts compatible with surrealist doctrine were discussed. For us, on the other hand, it is vital not only to take a new look at Desnos by freeing ourselves from the Bretonian straitjacket, but then to extend that fresh perspective to the surrealist movement as a whole.

<104>

Breton sought to marginalize Desnos's ability to espouse and (re)produce 'from the inside' discourses which are hard to defend as surrealist, many of them not even 'his own'. Liberating him from the exclusive perspective of Surrealism will allow these different discourses to be appreciated in their (and his) own terms, and Desnos to be seen for the language virtuoso that he really was. Rather than a naïve transcriber of automatic messages who betrayed his 'gift' (Michel Murat writes revealingly of 'l'innocence [...] de l'automatisme et des sommeils'),¹⁵² we will then discover in Desnos a more interesting, plural persona, a supremely articulate analyst and assimilator of the themes and styles in 'l'air du temps' around him. It is time to celebrate the post-modern breadth and facility of Desnos, a poet who understood Rimbaud's style more intuitively than any critic but could also write, when the occasion demanded, powerful Resistance poetry, instead of reducing him, as Breton was determined to do, to the stunted proportions of a surrealist of dubious orthodoxy.¹⁵³ For it is clear that among the many discourses mastered by this poetic chameleon was that of

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 78.

¹⁵¹ For instance, in order to link as products of the same deep subjectivity the love poems of 1927 onwards and the 'oracular' language-game texts, Murat is forced to postulate a psychological 'duplicité' (Murat 1988, 91) at the heart of *Corps et biens*: a 'face [...] impersonnelle' directed towards the surrealist group ('trouver une langue') and a concealed lyrical self whose real intention was to 'trouver sa langue ...' (92).

¹⁵² Murat 1988, 137.

¹⁵³ Michel Murat, for one, appreciates the post-modern aspect of 'Ode à Coco' in which Desnos 'bricole avec des débris de culture un oiseau de paradis artificiel' (Murat 1988, 110).

Surrealism itself, thematised so insistently that only the most doctrinaire Bretonian could deny the presence of a knowing metatextual awareness in the writings he produced. Michel Murat recognises as much, finding in *Deuil pour Deuil* ‘une thématique propre à l’automatisme’,¹⁵⁴ an allegorical self-consciousness which is not naïve: ‘plutôt que de manifester l’automatisme, il s’agit d’en exprimer l’esthétique et la morale’.¹⁵⁵ His observation can be extended to the whole of Desnos’s writings of the *Corps et biens* period, from which it is a simple matter to extract a fragmentary poetics of the Unconscious which actively thematises not only the ambience of automatism, but also its mechanisms: <105>

Je poursuis ainsi à l’état de veille ma personnalité des rêves nocturnes¹⁵⁶

Car nous incarnerons nos rêves mirifiques¹⁵⁷

Le poison de mon rêve est voluptueux et sûr¹⁵⁸

Ne tourmentez plus Rose Sélavy, car mon génie est énigme¹⁵⁹

Je vous somme, sommeils
de m’étonner
et de tonner¹⁶⁰

Dans la nuit il y a les merveilles du monde¹⁶¹

Le naufrage s’accentue sous la paupière
Je conte et décris le sommeil
Je recueille les flacons de la nuit et les range sur une étagère¹⁶²

Ecoute, écoute monter les grandes images vulgaires que nous transfigurons¹⁶³

Once this self-reflexive awareness in Desnos’s surrealism is recognised and accepted,¹⁶⁴ it makes possible a more complex and satisfactory reading of even the most apparently heartfelt texts of *A la Mystérieuse* (1926) or *Les Ténèbres* (1927), which Breton would prefer to see as *just* spontaneous expressions of anguish at lost love.¹⁶⁵ ‘Ô douleurs de l’amour !’ for instance is clearly about the transformation <106> of emotion into art, a process which is anything but an automatic sublimation because its results are determined at every stage by obsessive, but self-aware, eroticism:

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 58.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 59.

¹⁵⁶ Desnos 1999, 301.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 495.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 500.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 503.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 520.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 540.

¹⁶² Ibid., 557.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 897.

¹⁶⁴ Marie-Claire Dumas writes of ‘une œuvre plus surveillée qu’il n’y paraît’ (Desnos 1999, 886). Comparable self-referential strands adding up to an allegory of anxiety about Surrealism and originality are found in *Les Champs magnétiques* (see Rothwell 2001).

¹⁶⁵ Predictably, Hélène Laroche Davis also espouses this orthodox but limiting discourse on love: ‘L’erotisme est un “miroir spirituel” du poète. Pas de mensonge possible. Le langage de l’amour est individuel et totalement libre’ (Davis 1981, 87).

O douleurs de l'amour, vous que je crée et habille¹⁶⁶

Emotion and self-expression are reintroduced here at a secondary level, by a metatextual admission that the poem is founded on a rhetorical language game (*douleur* – and the poem – are figured erotically as a woman whom the poet creates and describes to assuage an inaccessibility which generates *douleur*), the circularity of which we (and the poet) interpret in terms of a personal obsession.¹⁶⁷ Thus by admitting and exploiting the ludic, linguistic status of the text, Desnos is able to achieve a greater sense of deep feeling than through any naïve, 'spontaneous' outpouring of emotion. The metatextual mechanism and Desnos's conscious use of it are arguably more in keeping with the knowing, sophisticated aesthetics of the late 20th Century than automatism, not least in that they leave tantalisingly unanswerable the question of whether or not the poet's writing is 'sincere'.

Many if not all of Desnos's texts are susceptible of this richer, more aware type of reading, if only we are prepared to break out of the ideological framework imposed by André Breton. The critical rebellion against the Father is clearly underway, nuancing and complicating Michel Murat's reading, for instance, as he struggles to reconcile its implications with old surrealist assumptions. On the other hand, Marie-Claire Dumas's otherwise invaluable recent edition still guides the reader between Desnos the sincere automatist of 1922-3 and the love-struck Romantic of 1926:

autant l'écriture automatique faisait du poète la proie écartelée de l'arbitraire, autant la figure de la chanteuse fixe sa rêverie sur le motif unique de l'aimée inaccessible: Yvonne George.¹⁶⁸

Desnos can only be rescued from that critical *impasse* if the sincerity topos is abandoned and due recognition given to the real originality of this post-modern manipulator of discourses. Once that step has been taken and he has been relieved of the duty of being exclusively a surrealist, it will also be possible to restore him to his true place in the avant-garde ferment of the inter-war years. Critics will, for instance, be free to take up Steven Wispur's provocative suggestion that the Desnos of *Désordre formel* (like, indeed, André Breton himself in 1922 and 1923) was really a Dadaist, instead of repressing that eminently sensible and productive idea as Marguerite Bonnet (after Breton) insists we must do.¹⁶⁹ Max Jacob, another contemporary whose reputation has suffered from Breton's determination to sever the true roots of Surrealism (whatever he may say about precursors in the *Premier manifeste*), will also be seen to have important affinities with Desnos. Marie-Claire Dumas dismisses his 1917 collection *Le Cornet à dés* as mere 'exercices de style',¹⁷⁰ in contrast to the automatic 'sincerity' of *Rose Sélavy*. Yet when we evacuate the sincerity topos, the similarities between the lapidary and punning 'Le Coq et la perle' utterances in Jacob's collection and those of Rose are eminently worthy of critical attention. Like Desnos, the older poet is a consummate *pasticheur* and parodist, though of narrative conventions and genres rather than

¹⁶⁶ Desnos 1999, 538.

¹⁶⁷ As Steven Wispur points out in relation to *Langage cuit*, Desnos often delivers such metatextual 'instructions' in the titles of his poems (Wispur 1987, 105). One which has been generally overlooked is the clear allusion to a circular self-awareness in the title of the supposedly automatic *C'est les bottes de 7 lieues cette phrase "Je me vois"* of 1926 (Desnos 1999, pp. 289-98).

¹⁶⁸ Desnos 1999, 287.

¹⁶⁹ See for instance her note in the Pléiade edition comparing the cut-up 'Poème' Breton published in the *Premier manifeste* with the dadaist cut-up methodology advocated by Tzara in 'Pour faire un poème dadaïste' (*Littérature* 15, juillet-août 1920): 'la parenté des moyens ne doit pas masquer la différence des buts' (Breton 1988, 1362, n. 1). Given that Breton would have known Tzara's text, a second purpose of this appeal to the 'buts' of the automatist is to protect him from allegations of influence by Tzara.

¹⁷⁰ Dumas 1984, 34.

individual voices; again, a serious comparison of this central aspect of their work is long overdue. The prerequisite for such a re-evaluation, which can and should lead to a re-balancing of the literary history of the period, is that the hegemonic discourse of Surrealism be lifted from Desnos. His experiments with language and attitude to self-expression were certainly influenced by the surrealist ambiance and Breton's theories, but it is surely wrong for 21st-century critics to go on evaluating his work solely for conformity <108> to surrealist doctrines. However convenient such a ready-made value-system may be, it goes against a fundamental principle of Surrealism itself, for, as Mary-Ann Caws points out, 'Surrealist poetry allows us, by its own tenets, no safe spot from which to look on'.¹⁷¹ To adapt an adage of Camus: 'il faut cesser d'imaginer Desnos sincère'.

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¹⁷¹ Caws 1977, 3.