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Reviving the Surrealist Revolt: A Retracing of Surrealism's History and a Reimagining of its Future in Translation

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ABSTRACT

Although Surrealist writing has literary merit, Surrealist texts were written as revolutionary tracts meant to undermine the social order. Yet the politically radical aspects of the movement are no longer taken very seriously. At least one contributing factor to the current impotence of Surrealism is the approach taken in the translation of Surrealist texts. Many translators have presented Surrealist texts as they would traditionally present any literary document. However, Walter Benjamin's writings on translation, in particular his essay "The Task of the Translator," provide a novel conception of translation, one which can produce linguistically radical texts. I will argue that the Benjaminian approach to translating Surrealism promises to reinvigorate Surrealism for modern readers.

Keywords: French Literature, Surrealism, Translation, Louis Aragon, André Breton, Walter Benjamin

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE DEATH OF SURREALISM

Maurice Nadeau opens his monumental 1944 work *Histoire du Surréalisme* by exclaiming: “A history of surrealism—then surrealism must be dead!” (35). This phrase is meant to be ironic, but there is perhaps more truth in the words than Nadeau intended. Through their experiments with language and art, the surrealists endeavor to overthrow what they see as the oppressive logic of fascism and capitalism dominant in inter-war Europe. Their texts are revolutionary tracts distributed with the intent of undermining the extant social order. Today, however, surrealism has lost its edge. Surrealist works are widely available, but they are only seen as the subject of literary study. The revolutionary ambitions of the movement are no longer taken seriously. The contemporary concept of surrealism has become associated with the simply bizarre. For many, to call a work of literature “surrealistic” is only to differentiate it by emphasizing some weird or incomprehensible characteristic.

Surrealism certainly stands out among other literary styles, but what makes surrealism unique is not simply its strange content. The movement is designed to be radically different from established conventions. Indeed, “literature” in the traditional sense is part of what the surrealists are revolting against. The aspirations of the surrealist movement are greater in scope than mere literary expression. What the surrealists hope to achieve is nothing short of “a total transformation of life” (Nadeau 36). For this reason, it

is particularly damning for surrealism to be reduced to the level of literature. However, this is Nadeau's conclusion in the retrospective afterward included in the 1957 edition of his *Histoire du Surréalisme*: "Until further notice, we must resign ourselves to considering surrealism as a literary school" (230).

However, Walter Benjamin is a contemporary of the surrealists who sees the potential of their movement outside the scope of literature. As he observes in his 1929 essay, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia": "the writings of this circle are not literature but something else--demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature" (208). Benjamin has respect for the political radicalism of the surrealists, as he goes on to say: "Since Bakunin, Europe has lacked a radical concept of freedom. The Surrealists have one" (215). In many ways Benjamin's theories are complimentary to those of surrealism. Specifically, I will show that Benjamin's re-conception of translation, as proposed in his essay "The Task of the Translator," promises to help revitalize the now inert revolutionary project called for in surrealist writings. By being reproduced in translation the texts can take on an "afterlife," giving them a new relevance and power.

The project to reinvigorate surrealism for a twenty-first century public is not an inconsequential one. The surrealist movement can be seen as a desperate groping for identity in a world on the cusp of the popular culture boom. It is perhaps telling that the opening line of *Nadja* is "Who am I?" (9)¹. The setting of the surrealist narratives is a Paris in the midst of a major city planning project to homogenize the city. While the authorities were redrawing the city to make it more consumer-friendly, cinemas, music

¹ «Qui suis-je?»

Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Breton's *Nadja* and *Manifeste du Surréalisme* are mine.

halls, and neon signs were propagating a rhetoric of conformity. Surrealism attempts to preserve uniqueness by using Freudian tools to dig deep within the subconscious, far away from the homogeneous world of logic and culture. The surrealist project to reclaim one's identity seems even more valid today. If persistent homogenization is a provoking force for surrealism, then we could expect that we have even more reason to revolt. We are bombarded by more homogenizing forces than the surrealists ever were in the 1920's and 30's. Technology now does much of our thinking for us. You cannot finish typing a query into a search bar before it is guessed what you are (or perhaps should be) searching for. Insisting that his work remain unedited, Aragon demanded that even the spelling mistakes in his manuscript remain in the printed version of *Traité du style* (*Treatise 3*). Today, spelling mistakes are often corrected before you notice you have made them.

In this paper, we will begin by reviewing some of the history of the surrealist movement. By analyzing the events that fractured the movement, in particular the notorious "Aragon affair," we will understand some of the theoretical tensions that penetrate surrealism. Specifically, we will see that there is a divide between the surrealists on the kind of action needed to effect the promised revolution. While Louis Aragon insists that direct engagement in party politics is necessary, André Breton places the greatest emphasis on the subversive potential of unadulterated creative experimentation. This discussion will help frame our present endeavor. Next, we will discuss some of the unique difficulties surrounding translating surrealism, arriving at the conclusion that a traditional approach is not suited for the task. Finally, we will explore the possibilities opened up by Benjamin's theories on translation.

CHAPTER 2

MAKING SENSE OF THE ARAGON AFFAIR

Surrealism was dealt a number of heavy blows in its complicated history as one of the most important intellectual movements of the twentieth century, but none as harsh as the loss of one of the movement's co-founders, Louis Aragon. His departure was preceded by that of several other fixtures of surrealism and followed by even more, but his break with the movement was by far the most infamous. In 1932, Aragon left the surrealist movement, adopting instead the socialist realism endorsed by the communist party. There has been something of a tradition in the study of surrealism to view Aragon's departure as a result of his conformity to the growing trend of communism or his lack of rigor as a thinker. This trend undoubtedly owes its origins to the harsh criticisms of surrealist leader André Breton who lost a friend and ally in the fallout from the "Aragon affair," as it came to be known. However, we will see that Aragon's break with the movement was not a superficial shift of allegiances. Rather, it was the result of intellectual differences between Breton and Aragon extending from their preferred forms of political action to their conceptions of surrealism and even to their understanding of the nature of human expression.

Breton continued to write commentaries on surrealism well after World War II. These writings profoundly influenced the way surrealism was viewed for much of the twentieth century. But scholarship in a post-Bretonian world has shed new light on the

departure of Aragon and many of the other surrealists. There is now a view that the crises which fractured the surrealist movement resulted from contradictions in the movement's doctrines which Breton was unable to resolve and on which he was unwilling to compromise. The primary catalyst for the resulting and inevitable split in the surrealist movement was the influence of communism and the uneasy rapport it held with surrealism.

Though surrealism would later come to identify itself with communism, the relationship between the two was at first somewhat hostile. Louis Aragon made his early skepticism about communism very clear when, in 1925, he wrote to the communist periodical *Clarté* to defend an earlier statement in which he referred to the Moscow government as “moronic”:

You have chosen to isolate as an attack a phrase which bears witness to my lack of enthusiasm for the Bolshevik government, and with it for all communism... I have always placed, and place today, the spirit of revolt far above *any* politics... The Russian Revolution? Forgive me for shrugging my shoulders. On the level of ideas, it is, at best, a vague ministerial crisis. (Nadeau 101)

It is shocking to consider that these words were written by the same person who, only six years later, wrote in his poem “Front Rouge”: “Fire on the trained bears of the social democracy... Fire I tell you / Under the leadership of the Communist Party / the SFIC... Glory to / The Red / Army” (Nadeau 288-293). What could have motivated this radical change of opinion which ultimately led to his formal break with the surrealist movement he had helped to create?

Aragon's shift has been interpreted very differently by commentators on surrealism. Some see it as a sign of intellectual weakness. Surrealism scholar Gérard Durozoi describes Aragon as a “Theoretician of ‘mentir-vrai’ – ‘lying the truth’ – who played on his different masks and created multiple reflections, as if to avoid the

condemnation – more moral than literary – with which successive generations would judge him” (650). This seems to follow the tradition established by Breton to see Aragon’s actions as “political opportunism” (Nadeau 181).

Juxtaposed against these interpretations are those, such as that of literary scholar Roger Shattuck, which describe Aragon as a somewhat tortured figure, struggling, like the other surrealists to make sense of “‘the contradiction he carried within him’ –namely between dialectic materialism and surrealist idealism” (18). In most insightful accounts of Aragon’s motives in leaving surrealism, there are two contradictory, yet fundamentally “surrealist” ideologies pitted against each other: a politically-oriented, Marxist, dialectical materialism and an a less explicitly political, metaphysical idealism. Early in the movement’s history, while its ambitions were still nebulous, it was easier for the surrealists to reconcile these conflicting attitudes. But as the movement progressed, the divide deepened and Aragon and Breton found themselves on opposite ends of the rift. This much is clear even if the exact nature of the rift and the true motives of each side remain contested.

Of course this only leads to further questions. Why was Aragon forced to choose between surrealism and party communism if surrealism was officially aligned with the French Communist Party? In answering these questions, Aragon could be allowed to speak for himself; there are several passages that shed light on his views and motivations. However, in approaching the topic it would perhaps be best to follow Aragon’s own wisdom: “I would like you to note that what I shout is not generated spontaneously. I do not believe in the parthenogenesis of my violence, but in its determinism” (*Treatise* 111). Therefore, before Aragon himself is consulted to understand the motivations behind these

events, the difficult relationship between communism and surrealism must be traced back to its origins. It will be seen that the Aragon affair was not without precedent, and that it was actually symptomatic of a crisis that had been afflicting the movement for years.

The relationship between surrealism and communism had always been uneasy. As illustrated earlier, Aragon and the other surrealists were hesitant about endorsing politics of any kind in the movement's fledgling period; they saw their aims as occupying a higher realm of concern. However, it seems that the revolution promised by communism was too enticing for them to deny forever. The movement did not share communism's interest in the "amelioration of the abominable earthly comfort" (Nadeau 123), as Breton made very clear. However, surrealism and communism found common ground in the mutual desire to destroy the bourgeoisie and its oppressive values. In 1925, the surrealists began to improve their rapport with the editors of *Clarté*, brought together at first by a shared hatred of France's actions in the Moroccan war. The two groups began a collaboration that saw the complete reversal of many surrealists' views on communism. The change was profound as historian and literary scholar Roger Short noted: "Aragon was soon writing with the conviction and facility of a lifelong Marxist. In articles such as 'Le Proletariat de l'esprit', he showed how capital could turn ideas themselves into commodities" (8). This article appeared in *Clarté* only months after Aragon's denouncement of communism had appeared in the same journal (Nadeau 117-124) (Short 6-10).

Did this reversal signify a transformation of the surrealist movement into another sect of the same youthful communist intellectualism that was forming the roots of French existentialism at this time? It would appear not. True to surrealist form, the movement

backed out of the clartéist alliance as easily as it had established it. Fearing for their autonomy, the surrealists refused to combine editorial efforts with *Clarté* in the proposed review *La Guerre Civile*, and instead continued to publish their own journal *La Révolution Surréaliste* (Nadeau 117-124) (Short 6-10). On the surface this hesitation was met with little resentment from the *Clarté* group. Marcel Fourier of *Clarté* wrote optimistically:

It would obviously be absurd at the present time to ask the surrealists to renounce surrealism. Have they asked the communists to renounce communism? In short, it is better that the projected experiment has not *yet* occurred, but still remains in the future (Nadeau 124).

The reality, however, was that this flirtation with communism would lead the surrealists down a path that would divide them bitterly rather than unite them with the other revolutionary sects.

Even as early as 1926, Fourier's optimism was not shared by all. Pierre Naville became frustrated with surrealism and left the movement to join the editorial staff of *Clarté*. This departure proved prophetic and it was accompanied by Naville's insight that surrealism could not reconcile the two contradictory attitudes it attempted to hold simultaneously. There was a "metaphysical attitude," which Naville described as a "theoretical speculation on the data of internal experience and of a certain experience of external objects and events" (Nadeau 128). This perspective maintained that liberation of the mind must precede political revolution. The metaphysical attitude is juxtaposed against a "dialectical attitude," which he claimed was concerned with the "progress of the mind according to its consciousness of itself" (Nadeau 128). On the contrary, this perspective would show that a political revolution must take place before the mind can be liberated (Nadeau 127-132).

Naville presented the potential for surrealist activism as a dichotomy between political engagement and automatic, literary experimentation. If this criticism were correct, it would seriously undermine the surrealist project, limiting it to either a mere literary movement or another arm of the communist political machine. This bifurcation would be devastating for a movement as opposed to literary establishment as it was to party politics. Breton struggled to defend surrealism as a whole greater than its contradictory parts. Ironically, it was precisely this attempt to preserve the movement that led to its disintegration, as Robert Short noted:

Breton's efforts to make Surrealism an effective revolutionary force while maintaining its independence by steering a course between the Scylla of assimilation into the art world and the Charybdis of absorption by the communist party, caused casualties on the left of the group as well as on the right (15)

To demonstrate that they were willing to contribute to the political revolution as well as that of the mind, five leading surrealists, Aragon, Breton, Éluard, Péret, and Unik, joined the communist party in 1927 (Nadeau 135). However, because they refused to surrender their autonomy, they found themselves alienated within the party. The communists were skeptical of the surrealists, who obviously had a very different set of objectives. This animosity was mutual; the surrealists did not share many of the views of the party and resented the journalistic assignments that it issued them. In the end, little came of this communist alignment, and the surrealist movement continued to operate mostly outside the party (Short 10-15).

Though Breton attempted to address Naville's criticisms, he failed to reconcile the "metaphysical" attitude with the "dialectical" one, which ultimately forced the surrealist movement into two separate camps. Why did the movement struggle so much with these seemingly conflicting concepts of idealism (which was linked to the "metaphysical

attitude”) and dialectical materialism? This likely extends back to the profound influence of Hegelian philosophy on surrealist theory. Hegel’s theories place a strong, idealist emphasis on the mind. Through Hegel’s dialectical progression, the mind (in a distinctively Hegelian sense of the word) develops and eventually attains absolute freedom. This inspired the surrealists to seek a “revolution of the mind,” a final negation that would lead to the freedom promised by the dialectic. It is this devotion to Hegelian principles that stimulated the movement’s difficult relationship with communism, as

Short observed:

They had long believed that the Hegelian dialectic was the key to the resolution of conflicts in the real world and that Hegelianism found its own historical resolution in Marxism. This logic, they said, brought them face to face with the communist party to which, as Surrealists, they had no alternative to offer. (10)

Ultimately Naville’s predictions came true, and the two ideologies were pried apart by political pressures: dialectical materialism prescribed political action, while idealism chafed under such practical, worldly concerns. In 1932, Aragon gravitated toward the politics of communism. Breton was thrown out of the communist party in 1933, after which he mostly avoided direct engagement in politics. Maurice Nadeau summed it up best when he said:

Each crisis expressed the collision, within the movement, of the surrealist forces and the communist forces, or the disharmony between the level of mind and that of facts: the surrealist Robert Desnos was unwilling to become a communist, the communist Aragon could no longer be a surrealist. If the two paths were parallel, they could no longer intersect. (202-203)

This intellectual conflict was made very apparent during the unfolding of the notorious Aragon affair. The scandal involved Aragon’s departure from the surrealist group in 1932 as a result of his renewed commitment to the French Communist Party following a somewhat mysterious trip to Russia. The events begin in late 1930, when Louis Aragon traveled to Moscow with fellow surrealist Georges Sadoul. Aragon himself

remained obscure about the reasons for the trip saying only: “As you may know, at the end of 1930, Georges Sadoul and I went to Russia. We went there more willingly in Russia than elsewhere, much more willingly: that is all I have to say about the reasons for our departure!” (Nadeau 177). Though Aragon was evasive about the topic at the time, it has since been established that his original motives for traveling to Russia were mostly personal. Aragon’s lover and future wife, Elsa Triolet, urged him to take her to see her sister in Russia (Durozoi 231). Sadoul, fearing imprisonment for sedition, urged Aragon to go and take her along (Shattuck 18).

While in Russia, Aragon and Sadoul were invited to serve as French delegates to the International Conference of Revolutionary Writers in Kharkov. During the proceedings the two surrealists were pressured into denouncing key components of Bretonian surrealism: idealism, Freudianism, Trotskyism, etc. and to retract their support of the *Second Manifeste du Surréalisme*. Upon his return, Aragon attempted to reassure the surrealists to his commitment to their movement with writings like “Aux intellectuels révolutionnaires.” However, it became increasingly clear that his commitment to party communism was stronger (Durozoi 231-233).

After he published the violent poem “Front Rouge” for *Littérature de la Révolution mondiale* in late 1931, the French government charged Aragon with inciting murder, citing lines from the poem such as “Kill the cops / comrades / Kill the cops” (Nadeau 287-288). André Breton rushed to Aragon’s defense. While condemning the content of the poem (to Breton, it was little more than communist propaganda), Breton successfully defended Aragon’s rights as a poet against legal recourse. Aragon, unable to accept Breton’s criticism of the Communist Party and its endorsed literature, had an

announcement of his formal withdrawal from surrealism posted in *L'Humanité* in early 1932 (Durozoi 231-233).

At this point, a question comes to mind: if the movement was being pulled in two opposite directions, what caused Aragon to gravitate toward the perspective of the communist party, rather than Breton's? Nadeau attributes Aragon's polarization to the dialectical side of surrealism to external pressures: "Aragon merely followed the current that with increasing power swept the advanced intellectuals of every nation toward the USSR" (181). Aragon held the Marxist, dialectical attitude to the exclusion of the metaphysical, idealist attitude, which alienated him from those like Breton, who still tried to reconcile both. This tendency to see Aragon's shift as a result of the external influence of the intellectual climate is supported by Breton's retrospective descriptions of his former friend's personality: "His mental agility was unparalleled, whence perhaps the noticeable laxity of his opinions and, also, a certain suggestibility... The one clear danger was his over-eagerness to please" (Taylor viii).

However, to reduce Aragon's communist sympathies to the influence of an intellectual trend seems like an overly simplistic explanation. Could the influence of a trip to Russia have so easily reversed all of Aragon's surrealist ideals? Could he have been so impressionable? It seems, rather, that his communism is not so easily attributed to keeping up with the fashions of the time. His departure from surrealism was not an instantaneous, unjustified shift of ideas. The events of the Aragon affair were the inevitable result of a gradual progression of Aragon's political, philosophical, and artistic ideals, a set of principles that put him at odds with Breton and other surrealists.

It seems evident that Aragon's social consciousness had always been greater than other surrealists like Breton. In "Passage de l'Opéra," the first section of his narrative *Paysan de Paris*, which was published in 1926, before he joined the communist party, Aragon describes the working class victims of the Boulevard Haussmann Building Society, which very poorly compensated the owners of the shops that would be demolished for the construction of the Boulevard Haussmann. He depicts the merchants of the Passage de l'Opéra in a very sympathetic light, describing "the seething fury rightly felt by all inhabitants of this place" (25), and exposes the corruption of a "justice, which in this instance is not only slow but suspiciously blind in one eye" (26). Compare this to Breton's social commentary in *Nadja* which reveals an equal level of disgust for the mechanisms of capitalism but far less sympathy for the working class:

It is not the martyrdom that one suffers that creates this liberty. It is... a perpetual unchaining... These steps do you suppose them capable of making them? Have they the time for them, even? Have they the heart for them? Good people, you said, yes, good like those that get themselves killed in the war, right? ... Many unhappy people and some poor imbeciles. (79)²

Of course, Aragon's communism was not only informed by his social awareness; it was also precipitated by theoretical factors. In his introduction to his English translation of *Paysan de Paris* (*Paris Peasant*) Simon Watson Taylor shows that Aragon's materialism is evident even in this relatively early surrealist narrative: "'The Peasant's Dream' may be seen as a 'corrective' to the preceding segment of the book... [it] not only calls to a halt the idealism implicit in the first two parts of the book; it also represents the opposite spirit of the automatism cherished by most of the early

² Ce n'est pas le martyr qu'on subit qui crée cette liberté. Elle est... un désenchaînement perpétuel... Ces pas, les supposez-vous capable de les faire ? En ont-ils le temps, seulement ? En ont-ils le cœur ? De braves gens, disiez-vous, oui, braves comme ceux qui se sont fait tuer à la guerre, n'est-ce pas ? ... beaucoup de malheureux et quelques pauvres imbéciles.

surrealists.” Taylor further exposes the meaning of the text by quoting Aragon’s memoir, which described *Paysan de Paris* as

The novel of what I was at that time... the evolution of a mind, starting with a mythological conception of the world, and leading towards a materialism which is not achieved in the final pages of the book, but only *promised* within the terms of a proclamation of the failure of Hegelianism, the loftiest of all those conceptions which allowed man to advance along the path of idealism. (xi)

In this way, *Paysan de Paris* could be interpreted as a kind of *Bildungsroman* for Aragon. It follows his progression from the idealism he espoused at the formation of the surrealist movement to the beginnings of the dialectical materialism he came to embrace as he matured as a writer and thinker.

The result of this evolution can be seen in its most philosophical form as the strong emphasis on the concrete over the abstract in “The Peasant’s Dream.” In this section Aragon claims that he “condemn[s] the idealists, the mind condemns them,” and that he regards God as “a disgusting and vulgar idea.” He denies that “God is the purpose of metaphysics” (193), holding instead that “Notion, or knowledge of the concrete is, then, the purpose of all metaphysics” (195). He also endeavors to show that logic and metaphysics are separate entities: “the purpose of logic is abstract knowledge, and the purpose of metaphysics is concrete knowledge” (194-195). It is for this reason that he directly criticizes Hegel, calling his *The Doctrine of Essence* “a useless intermediary that allowed him to pass from logic to metaphysics after having originally compounded them. Yet all that was necessary was to maintain their individualities” (195). He concludes that “madness is the predominance of the abstract and the general over the concrete,” and that his concern “is with metaphysics not with madness. And not reason” (202). Therefore, he rejects Hegelianism and idealism and embraces what he calls “a poetic life” (203), believing that “the concrete has no other form of expression than poetry” (201-202).

Others have shown that the unfolding of the Aragon affair revealed more than a political or philosophical conflict, but one that extended to the nature of artistic expression. As Robert Short posits:

“Ultimately, the differences between Breton on one side and Aragon and the communists on the other were about the nature of communication. For Breton, a writer’s ‘meaning’ lay in the words he wrote and the intention behind them; their subversive value was latent within them. For Aragon, meaning lay solely in the interpretation made by the reader or by the majority of society at any given time.” (17)

The stakes of this argument were high. If Breton’s idealist perspective is correct, subjecting oneself to unwavering political commitments is not only unnecessary but detrimental to the purity of one’s writing. On the other hand, if Aragon’s materialist perspective is correct, surrealist writing will be worthless until a political revolution takes place and creates social conditions in which such writing will be fully intelligible to the public. Short tries to show that the two men’s beliefs about writing informed their politics, rather than vice versa: “Aragon concluded that unswerving service to the revolution was the writer’s first duty not merely for the sake of his ideals as a man but for the sake of the validity of his writing” (17).

Thinking of writing as the source of the break between Aragon and Breton makes sense when it is considered that what finally triggered Aragon’s official departure was Breton’s “defense” of “Front Rouge”(“Red Front”) against legal action. In arguing that Aragon could not be criminally charged for the contents of his poetry, he also insults Aragon’s work and ideals:

In the *Manifeste du Surréalisme*, I insisted, in the name of the poetic conception my friends and I maintained, on disengaging the author’s responsibility entirely in cases when certain texts of incontestable “automatic” character were incriminated... Of course I am not claiming that the poem “Red Front” corresponds to the definition of an automatic text... On the other hand, I believe that the poetic position which is determined today for Aragon by the twelve or fifteen books he has written can in no way be sacrificed to the agitation which some find opportune to provoke around one of his poems which they by exception turn into a model of conscious thought (296-297) ... recalling finally that it was written during Aragon’s stay in the USSR, [I] regard it... as a *poem of circumstance* (303).

Breton criticizes the poem for not being automatic enough to be considered authentically surrealist, condemning it for being written with a specific purpose in mind. Further, the description of “Front Rouge” as “a poem of circumstance.” amounts to Breton calling it a piece of propaganda. However, he defends Aragon’s rights by citing the surrealist principle of rejecting authorial control and responsibility. These points are a tremendous insult to Aragon, who was skeptical of strict automatic writing and willing to accept responsibility for whatever he wrote:

We all know that surrealism is a conscious form of inspiration... Surrealism is inspiration recognized, accepted and put to work (*Treatise* 94) ... Thus surrealism is not a refuge from style. It is too simplistic to believe that in surrealism form and content are indifferent (*Treatise* 95) ... If you write deplorable twaddle using surrealist techniques, it will still be deplorable twaddle (*Treatise* 96). I care enormously about what I write and I claim full responsibility for it (*Treatise* 115).

Breton seems to be criticizing Aragon for an artistic shift. There is no doubt that Aragon was undergoing a change, but to what degree? Was Aragon’s poem “Front Rouge” as much of a radical stylistic departure as Breton claims it to be? Perhaps Aragon was not leaving behind surrealism altogether. But rather, as seen above, his understanding of surrealism was different than that of Breton. For example, consider this selection from “Front Rouge”:

Your turn Communist Youth / Sweep away the human debris where there linger still / the incantatory spider of the sign of the cross / Volunteers of socialist construction / Drive before you the past like a dangerous dog / Rise up against your mothers / Abandon night pestilence and family (290)... The universe must hear / a voice shouting the glory of materialist dialectics... Glory to materialist dialectics / and glory to its incarnation / The Red / Army (293)

Compare this to a selection from Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris*, an undeniably surrealist text:

Young People will plunge passionately into this serious, unprofitable game. It will pervert the course of their lives. The Faculties will be deserted, the laboratories closed down. The very idea of armies, families, professions will become inconceivable. Then, in the face of this ever-increasing disaffection of social life, a great conspiracy of all the dogmatic and realist forces of the world will be organized against the phantom of illusions. It will win, this coalition of powers dedicated to the principles of why-not and making-the-best-of-it. But it will be the last crusade of the mind. And for this battle that is lost in advance I recruit you today, adventurous, grave hearts, contemptuous

of victory, who search the night for an abyss into which to hurl yourselves. Come, the roster is open. Queue up at this window please. (67)

These selections reveal shocking parallels between two texts that are supposedly so different. Each is a description of the impending revolution with which the surrealists were so fascinated. Both include descriptions of a youth in revolt and an overthrow of social institutions. The major difference between the two is the driving force of the revolution and the level of confidence in its success. The selection from *Paysan de Paris* is concerned with the idealist “revolution of the mind,” and it seems doomed to failure. “Front Rouge,” on the other hand, describes a social revolution as the inevitable result of the dialectical materialist progression, and its success is equally inevitable. Upon analysis, it is clear that the content of Aragon’s later writing was not as different as Breton had described it. If Aragon’s writing had changed it was as a result of his definitive rejection of idealism and his embrace of materialism.

In conclusion, Louis Aragon’s separation from surrealism (and the fracturing of the movement in general) should be understood as the inevitable conclusion of an inconsistency in surrealist theory. The tension between the idealism and materialism present in surrealism manifests itself as a fork in the road of revolutionary activity. If Breton is correct and meaningful sociopolitical change is only possible after a radical conceptual shift, then the creative and theoretical fields are the locus of revolutionary potential. But if, as Aragon believes, surrealism is not the agent of social change but rather something possible once it has been effected, then revolutionary energies are perhaps better invested in more traditional channels, such as those of party communism. A project to reinvigorate surrealism on its own terms is thus somewhat committed to the Bretonian approach, since for Aragon such an attempt would be futile unless coupled

with more direct political engagement. Yet in many ways, Aragon's view has been vindicated. Regardless of our assessment of communism's success, it is clear that it has had more of a political impact than Bretonian surrealism. For nearly a century, surrealism has been confined to artistic and literary spheres without bringing about the conceptual revolution that Breton anticipates in his 1924 *Manifeste du Surréalisme*: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, in appearance so contradictory, which are dream and reality, in a kind of absolute reality, of surreality" (24).³ In order to understand how the perception of surrealism has been unable to rise above the status of a literary movement, it will be beneficial to discuss how it has been presented to the Anglophone world, especially in the context of our translation project.

³ « Je crois à la résolution future de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de surréalité. »

CHAPTER 3

TRANSLATING REVOLT: A REEXAMINATION OF SURREALISM IN TRANSLATION

Translation traditionally attempts to convey the meaning of a text from one language to another for the sake of the reader unfamiliar with the original language. However, this approach seems inappropriate for the surrealist movement, since meaning is not its main preoccupation. As Benjamin explains: “Language takes precedence. Not only before meaning. Also before the self” (Surrealism 208). As we will see, it is language which will prove to be the locus of revolutionary potential. Indeed, a text is not surrealist by virtue of its content or meaning but rather by the methodology employed to write it. Specifically, surrealist texts are at least ostensibly “automatically” written, meaning that the writer proceeds without any plan or specific purpose in mind and refuses to revise the text. The unconscious characteristic of their writing is particularly important for the surrealists, who revolt against logic and reason, believing that these concepts are responsible for oppressive political structures. Once surrealist writing is submitted to conscious revision, which it must be in order to be translated in the traditional sense, its subversive spirit is diminished, if not completely destroyed. While it may be tempting to use translations to make the surrealist oeuvre more accessible, one must remember that the surrealists take pains to make their work *inaccessible* to the public. For Benjamin as well, translation and creative endeavor in general, should not become the means to a practical end directed at the reader (e.g. the attempt to make a

work understandable to a foreign audience): “In the appreciation of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful” (The Task of the Translator 69). To recapture the surrealist spirit of revolt, we must follow Benjamin’s lead and completely rethink the task of the translator.

But what exactly is this revolutionary component of surrealist writing that is lost in translation? One of the most important elements of the surrealist method of composition is its “automatic” character. In André Breton’s *Manifeste du Surréalisme*, considered to be the founding document of the organized movement, surrealism is defined as a “Pure psychic automatism... dictated by thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason, outside of all aesthetic or moral preoccupation” (36).⁴ The surrealists typically engage in automatic writing, meaning they reject the authorial control central to most literary endeavors. For Breton, calculating reason has rendered literature boring and unimaginative: “The ambition of authors does not go very far” (*Manifeste* 17).⁵ His ambitions go much farther; they are nothing short of revolutionary, in the full sense of the term.

In response, Breton develops a surrealist methodology of automatic writing in the *Manifeste*, instructing the surrealist writer on how best to minimize the intrusion of conscious thought in the writing process. Indeed, automatic writing must proceed without any plan or specific purpose in mind: “Write quickly without a preconceived subject, quickly enough not to be tempted to reread” (41).⁶ Further, the section of the *Manifeste* that concerns compositional method is entitled “Surrealist written composition, or first

⁴ « Automatismes psychiques pur... Dictée de la pensée, en l’absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale. »

⁵ « L’ambition des auteurs ne va pas très loin »

⁶ « Écrivez vite sans sujet préconçu, assez vite pour ne pas retenir et ne pas être tenté de vous relire »

and last draft,” indicating that any revision is out of the question (41).⁷ The surrealists see themselves as “modest recording devices,” that is, they wish for their writing to be a means of recording the activity of their unconscious minds (39).⁸ An enthusiastic reader of Freud, Breton hopes that surrealist endeavors will probe into the unconscious and explore new domains.

Even if we accept that automatic writing can truly capture the contents of the unconscious, what benefit could it hope to confer beyond some artistic novelty? Surrealism is not only an act of defiance against boring novels; as we have seen, there is also a political stake in the surrealist revolt (*Manifeste* 17). According to the surrealists, in addition to diminishing the imagination of writers, reason deprives people of their freedom and contentment. For Breton, “We are still living under the reign of logic” (19).⁹ This reign of logic subordinates all human activity to practical considerations: “Under the pretext of progress, we have come to... proscribe all means of research into truth which do not conform to usefulness” (20).¹⁰ While this seems obviously problematic for the poetic frame of mind, it is problematic for humanity in general. Human lives become a dull and insufferable slavery to an absurd cycle of work and consumption. As Breton says elsewhere of the inhabitants of such a world: These people would not know how to be interesting to the extent to which they support work.” (*Nadja* 78).¹¹ Benjamin is also concerned with the limitations imposed on the mind by the logic of work: “The perpetual

⁷ « Composition surréaliste écrite, ou premier et dernier jet »

⁸ « modestes appareils enregistreurs »,

⁹ « Nous vivons encore sous le règne de la logique »

¹⁰ « Sous prétexte de progrès, on est parvenu... à proscrire tout mode de recherche de la vérité qui n'est pas conforme à l'usage. »

¹¹ « Ces gens ne sauraient être intéressants dans la mesure où ils supportent le travail »

readiness of volitional, discursive memory, encouraged by the technique of mechanical reproduction, reduces the scope for the play of the imagination” (On Some Motifs in Baudelaire 186). Surrealist writing promises to be a “War of independence” against the tyranny of rationality, but only if the writing can successfully express an unconscious spirit divorced from the normalizing influence of conscious thought (*Manifeste* 60).¹²

Translation, however, is a necessarily conscious process. Good translators exert a great deal of mental effort to transfer the ideas and nuances of the original text into a new language. This amount of conscious deliberation is typically warranted because the fundamental incommensurability between languages and cultures is extremely difficult to reconcile. But as we have seen, the surrealist ethic is opposed to conscious, rational thought. What is worse, a translation is always an activity directed to a practical end of conveying the meaning of a text to a new audience through another language. Since this rational, pragmatic activity is always the product of at least one translator, it is an example of the kind of work that the surrealists are trying to escape in their artistic endeavors.

Further, a surrealist text, once translated, becomes another intellectual commodity. The translator’s pretention to have conveyed the meaning of the text implies that he or she has first discovered an objective meaning behind it. Once someone claims to have uncovered its meaning, even the original loses its mysteriousness and therefore its subversive potential. It is in this way that Breton’s (at least ostensibly) automatic work *Nadja* has come to be perceived as a *roman à clé*. The difficult passages of the book become puzzles that can be solved with scholarly attention. Then, thanks to the hard work

¹² «guerre d’indépendance»

of the academic community, it is repackaged, disseminated, and analyzed across the world.

Critics may disagree about how to interpret or evaluate a surrealist work, but what is universally agreed is that it can be rationally analyzed. After some semblance of critical consensus is reached, the text is fitted into an intellectual schema and recorded in the annals of literary encyclopedias before being left on a shelf to collect dust. There is no revolutionary potential left in the book; it is just another novel, if a strange one. Nothing could have frustrated the revolutionary ambitions of the surrealists more than to see this happen to their work. The goal of surrealism is to produce troubling writing. They want to undermine traditional literary forms by presenting a new form of expression outside the confines of reason. But if writing is capable of being translated, it is capable of being rationalized. In this way, the bounds of literary tradition are simply expanded to include the now impotent surrealist movement.

At this point, it would be useful to take a look at a translation of a brief passage of surrealist text. In this way, we can see how, in translation, an automatic text must be submitted to careful logical scrutiny. The opening to Breton's *Nadja* will provide us with an excellent example of the difficulties that might complicate a translation of a surrealist (or indeed *any*) text: « Qui suis-je? Si par exception je m'en rapportais à un adage : en effet pourquoi tout ne reviendrait-il pas à savoir qui je «hante » » (9) ? Literary scholar Richard Howard offers this English translation : “Who am I ? If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I ‘haunt’” (11).

Howard's translation works well enough; it conveys the essential meaning of the two opening sentences, and as we have seen, this is the translator's goal. Yet, even in

these opening lines, much of Breton's style and subtext has already been lost. To begin, the culture gap between the original text and the Anglophone reader has not been bridged by the translation, which will almost certainly result in some degree of misinterpretation. The proverb alluded to here is a French one: « Dis-moi qui tu hantes, je te dirai qui tu es, » or "Tell me whom you haunt, I will tell you who you are." The choice of this proverb is very significant for the following section of the book, so Howard is right not to attempt to adapt the passage to a similar English proverb. However, the Anglophone reader's likely unfamiliarity with the French proverb will inevitably make this passage more mysterious in English than it is in the original French, frustrating the attempt to convey the passage's meaning. Proverbs like this one and other linguistic elements like idioms or figures of speech are obvious difficulties for the translator. But as we shall see, the problems of translation run much deeper.

Further, and perhaps more significantly, Howard has transformed the second sentence from an interrogative to a declarative in order to avoid awkward syntax in English. However, to maintain the lack of certainty conveyed by the interrogative, he inserts "perhaps" to weaken the sentence's declarative force. Also, the changes in the sentence's internal punctuation are significant: the colon becomes a comma and the second sentence is now a conditional statement in the "if... then..." format of propositional logic. While this tactic might convey the literal meaning of the text, it has greatly altered the style. In Howard's version the narrator's opening line of internal enquiry is cut short and replaced with internal dialogue. The narrator's mode of thinking has been altered, and therefore the critically important automatic character of the text has

been destroyed by the rational efforts of the well meaning translator. In this way, the translator's attempt to convey the meaning of the text has frustrated itself.

If we accept that any attempt to translate a surrealist text will deprive it of its artistic and political value, what are we to do? Should we simply abandon the translations in favor of the original French? As we have seen, reading the original will give us more direct access to the author's automatic style. However, the mere *possibility* of rationally conveying the meaning of the text undermines its subversive potential to escape the confines of reason. This exposes an intrinsic weakness in the automatic text as an act of revolt: No matter how unconscious the origins of a text may be, it cannot avoid being rationalized in interpretation. Logic is so bound to perception that the reader will find or project a reasoned meaning in even the most irrational of works. The more senseless it is the more determined the reader becomes to make sense of it. Automatic methodology can radicalize the writing process, but it does nothing to assure that the reading process will undergo a parallel transformation. In order to revitalize the surrealist project, what is needed is a method of foiling the reader's natural inclinations.

CHAPTER 4

BENJAMIN, SURREALISM AND “THE TASK OF THE TRANSLATOR”

In his essay, “The Task of the Translator” Benjamin rejects the traditional, pragmatic view of translation and forms a radically different approach. As we saw in the previous chapter, Benjamin’s view of translation diverges from the traditional one in that he abandons the concern for the reader which is typically of central importance. In addition, the translator should not focus on the meaning of the text which, in the traditional conception, is the essential component to convey: “Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information--hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations” (69). For Benjamin, this model of communication rooted in the transmission of information is precisely what must be subverted. One path for this subversion lies in a competing model of communication, the story:

Historically, the various modes of communication have competed with one another. The replacement of the older narration by information, of information by sensation, reflects the increasing atrophy of experience. In turn, there is a contrast between all these forms and the story, which is one of the oldest forms of communication. It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the potter’s hand. (On Some Motifs in Baudelaire 159)

The attempt to convey a meaning or “happening” will always be bound to the form of information (which is itself bound to the logic of capitalism). To revolt against this form of communication, another form is needed. As we have just seen, Benjamin

certainly sees great potential in the form of the story in its ability to capture experience. However, translation is another form which has advantages of its own, especially for the project of reinvigorating surrealism (*The Task of the Translator* 70)¹³. As Benjamin goes on to say:

A translation issues from the original--not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. (71)

Thus, even if surrealism is in fact dead, there is hope that revolutionary potential lies within the “afterlife” found in translations: “The life of the originals attain in them to its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering” (72). Thus, to shy away from translation and retreat to the originals would only be a backward step for the movement.

But as we have seen, the translation of surrealist text is particularly problematic. How are we to approach a project of radicalizing translation without succumbing to the pitfalls discussed above? Benjamin’s discussion of translation is such a dramatic departure from the typical view that we are left wondering how to approach any Benjaminian translation. If we are neither to concern ourselves with the meaning of the text nor with a consideration for the reader, what criteria are left to us to guide our translation?

We can be sure that for Benjamin, language rather than content, is the essential component. As he states: “Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages” (72). According to Benjamin, it is by appreciating this kinship of languages that we gain an understanding of “pure

¹³ Zohn’s translation strangely renders Benjamin’s sentence: “Übersetzung ist eine Form” as “Translation is a mode.” Weber argues that it is more correct to maintain the use of the word “Form” in the English, and I follow his usage here (Weber, 56-58).

language,” which he describes as “that element in a translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter” (75). The key to this pure language is a re-conception of intention. This returns us to our discussion of surrealism. Earlier, we rejected the traditional model of translation because it failed to fulfill the revolutionary intentions of the authors by subjecting automatic writing to conscious revision. In response, one could imagine a technique of *automatic translation*, that is, an unreflecting interpretation of a text from one language to another. Instead of rationally conveying meaning, the automatic translator would unthinkingly transcribe his or her immediate impressions of the text, line by line. While, contrary to aims of traditional translation, this would distance the end result from the original, it would reinvest the work with subversive potential, thereby fulfilling the intentions of the surrealist authors.

This automatic model of radicalizing translation may seem attractive for its simplicity, but it would prove no less problematic than the original texts. As we saw earlier, automatism cannot escape the normalizing effects of interpretation. However, just because we cannot recapture the automatism the surrealists intended for their works does not mean that intention must be left behind. Rather, Benjamin again invites us to rethink one of our preconceived notions. In translating, we must think of the intention of the *word*, rather than that of the author: “The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he [sic] is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (76).

Indeed, as Benjamin elaborates:

A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade. (79)

The intention of individual words, in relative isolation from the rest of the text, should be the concern of the translator. This “word-by-word literalness” is the key to pure language and the subversive potential that Benjaminian translation could hold (Weber 74). As

Benjamin explains:

In this pure language--which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages--all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished. This very stratum furnishes a new and higher justification for free translation ... It is the task of the translator to release in his [sic] own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his [sic] re-creation of that work. (80)

In this way, the particularities of a language, i.e. grammatical laws, are transcended in translation. Benjamin scholar Samuel Weber explains that Benjaminian translation reveals “the capacity of language to defy the general rules that allow it to function as a medium of communication” (76). For Benjamin, then, translation presents the opportunity for freedom.

The surrealists seek freedom in automatic language, outside from the tyranny of logic. However, particular languages bear the impressions of the cultures from which they emerge. If one is employing a capitalist language, even unconsciously, the oppressive structures of capitalism are bound remain. However, if these linguistic structures could themselves be subverted, then there might be hope of creating a text outside of this oppression. In this way the surrealist project and that of Benjamin are complementary. While surrealism promises to free language from conscious thought, Benjaminian translation promises to free this language from its structure. Such a radical approach to the translation of surrealist text would not only revitalize the movement, but extend it to new domains.

Returning now to the passage we examined earlier, I would offer the following attempt at a Benjaminian translation of the opening of *Nadja*: “Who am I? If by exception I were to rely on an adage: indeed why would everything not come back to knowing whom I ‘haunt’?” This translation is a little more awkward than the one proposed by Howard. Maintaining the punctuation and word order of the original has also retained something of its flow, leaving the passage sounding at least somewhat odd to the Anglophone ear. Of course, this would not be problematic for Benjamin. What, if anything, could be rendered through translation in smooth, natural prose would only be information. A successful translation should trouble our linguistic inclinations, not reinforce them. To further emphasize this point, Benjamin cites Rudolf Pannwitz: “The basic error of the translator is that he [sic] preserves the state in which his [sic] own language happens to be instead of allowing his [sic] language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue” (Task of the Translator 81).

Once the task of the translator is reconfigured, so is his or her creative role in the translation. In the traditional framing, translation is only a means to an end, and therefore the translator is not making any contribution of her or his own. The translator is supposed to disappear completely, to preserve the illusion that the original author is speaking to the reader without any outside intervention. The illusion is often so perfectly executed that the translator’s name does not even appear on the cover of the book. But, in Benjamin’s conception, translation can be viewed as having a positive literary value. In his essay, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin devotes an important section to a discussion of Baudelaire’s translation of Poe’s story “The Man of the Crowd,” indicating that a translation can be considered a significant part of an author’s oeuvre. Further, Benjamin

celebrates the literary value of the translations of the German Romanticists: “their own great translations testify to their sense of the essential nature and the dignity of this literary [form]¹⁴” (Task of the Translator 76). If undertaken with the right frame of mind, our translation project for surrealism could have substantive value of its own, especially if it can radicalize surrealist writing to the point of (re)attaining its revolutionary impact.

¹⁴ See above note on the use of “form” in place of Zohn’s “mode.”

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: A PHOTOGRAPHIC MODEL OF TRANSLATION

Once we have accepted that Benjamin's theory of translation is the key to revitalizing surrealism, we are presented with a new problem: We are never given a clear idea of what such a translation of surrealism would look like. "The Task of the Translator" is written as an introduction to Benjamin's translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*, but Benjamin does not give an example of how his re-conceptions have influenced his translation. What is clear is that a Benjaminian translation should not be a re-translation. Benjamin cautions that translation is not to be conflated with other literary forms: "As translation is a [form] of its own, the task of the translator, too, may be regarded as distinct and clearly different from the task of the poet" (76).

To translate a translation would be to mistake a translator for a poet. However, this does not mean that the original cannot be translated again: "Thus translation, ironically, transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering. The original can only be raised there anew at other points of time" (Task of the Translator 75). As Benjamin further explains in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction":

Mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on the ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics. (224)

The line of thinking Benjamin applies here to photography is easily applied to translation as well. The original text, like a photographic negative, can be infinitely reproduced. For this reason, there can never be a final, definitive translation; there is always the possibility of further reproductions. Indeed, this dissolution of authenticity in the infinite capacity for reproduction and dissemination opens further political possibilities for subverting the proprietary logic of capitalism.

In addition, the analogy of the photograph invites us to consider a component of surrealism that has been conspicuously absent from our earlier discussion: visual media. Though this paper has mostly been concerned with surrealist writing, many of the most influential and enduring works of the surrealist oeuvre are paintings, sculptures, and photographs. By understanding the qualities of surrealist images, we may develop an idea of what shape our translations should take. In her essay “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” Art critic Rosalind Krauss explains that photography is a medium particularly suited to Surrealism. Reflecting on the idealist revolution of the mind demanded by Breton, Krauss describes the state of surreality as “nature convulsed into a kind of writing” (29).

Krauss asserts that this convulsion is the common thread through all of the wide variety of surrealist endeavors: “What unites *all* surrealist production is precisely this experience of nature as representation, physical matter as writing” (31). The surrealist resolution of dream and reality would dissolve the concept of metaphor. In surreality, things are not symbolic of ideas, things and ideas are one. In a similar way, image and language become one in the surrealist photograph:

The photographs are not *interpretations* of reality... They are presentations of that very reality as configured, or coded, or written. The experience of nature as sign, or nature as representation, comes “naturally” then to photography. (29)

Because of the immediacy of its perception, the image is more intimately tied to reality, while the symbolic, mediating function of language makes it a form of representation. A synthesis of these two is the surrealist ideal. It is for this reason that Breton integrated photography into his books *Nadja* and *L'Amour fou*. Each photograph in these books is captioned by a sentence that is also found in the body of the text itself. The photograph is not merely a reference to the relevant section of the book; it is almost as if the sentence *is* the photograph: the two form a whole. As surrealist photography can make images more like writing, a successful translation could make surrealist writing more like the image.

This, then, helps us conceive the shape which the translated text should take: an imagistic text, a fusion of reality and representation, of “signified and signifier” (Krauss 22). This is what Benjamin claims can be achieved by accessing pure language in translation: “to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized, to regain pure language fully formed in the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation” (80). Unfortunately, even Weber is forced to admit “How this is to be conceived, concretely, remains elusive” (Translatability 75). Benjamin is a notoriously difficult thinker and “The Task of the Translator” is particularly characteristic of this quality in his writing. However, pure language, if indeed accessible, would be well worth pursuing for our translation project.

In conclusion, the task of the translator, though different, is complementary to that of the writer. This is particularly true in the case of surrealism. Even if time has rendered surrealism largely sterile and lifeless, the translator can enliven them again. However, the traditional emphasis of transferring meaning threatens to repeat the capitalist structures in

the very works that attempt to subvert them. Instead, if Benjamin's pure language is given the privileged position, then surrealism could be radicalized beyond even its original subversive capacity. Indeed, as Benjamin explains "One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later" (Mechanical Reproduction 237). Until a translation emerges that can fulfill the demands created by the surrealist movement, we are left to wonder what new ground surrealism would hope to explore outside the constraints of both logical and linguistic structure. Hopefully such a translation project can be the manifestation of the speculation with which Nadeau concluded the afterward to the 1957 edition of *Histoire du Surréalisme*: "Then after it will come, perhaps, those who will truly put an end to metaphors" (230).

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