

For the Love of André

Daniel BOUGNOUX

Those I love create me, said the author of *Le Fou d'Elsa*. Aragon's first great love was for André Breton: the letters he wrote to his mentor between 1918 and 1931 testify to the torments of a moral, artistic and political education.

Reviewed: Aragon, *Lettres à André Breton (1918-1931)*. Edited with an introduction by Lionel Follet. Gallimard 2011. 469 p., 23.90 €.

How does one become Aragon? A biographer would dream of isolating an encounter or enumerating suchlike circumstances, as though such a singular personality could ever be reduced to that. His *Lettres à André Breton (1918-1931)*, however, certainly shed a light on his formative years that will be henceforth indispensable, whether for the purpose of reading his first writings, especially *Feu de joie* and *Anicet*, or for unraveling, at the very roots of his eroticism, the obscure affinities of friendship, love, war and of writing – which always remained inseparable for him from reading.

The difference in standing between the two writers is blatant right from the cover of the book: André Breton tops the bill in big red letters, Aragon (divested of his first name as he insisted from 1928 on) appears below in small black caps. In late September 1917, when they met at Val-de-Grâce, Aragon was about to turn 20. He already knew Rimbaud by heart and, as Breton observed in his *Entretiens*, he had “really read everything,” and yet still found himself very isolated despite his sparkling gifts. André, 20 months his senior, was associating with Valéry, Apollinaire and Reverdy, and quite naturally played the role of his mentor, or principal intercessor – an ambivalent figure to be revisited in Aragon's novel *Les Aventures de Télémaque*.

“Not much revolt in him then,” remarks Breton in his *Entretiens* (1952), as borne out by Adrienne Monnier, who appreciated the tall well-behaved young Louis’ visits to her reading room. We don’t have Breton’s letters to provide a mirror image to this correspondence: they won’t be available till 2016. And those concerning Aragon are liable to be very incomplete anyway due to the plundering of his library. Nonetheless, based on the fragments thereof which he wrote out again himself (particularly in *Lautréamont et Nous*), it is safe to assume they won’t show the same warmth, the same ardent passion. In fact the most charming thing about this collection of letters is the very young and bashful man we discover there, a young writer molded by his older compeer. The flame that kindles in *Anicet* – or in *Feu de joie* – burns no less brightly in these letters, which express all the fervour, youthful freshness and confidence of a *disciple*. André’s influence was such that Aragon-Anicet was prepared to scratch out his own eyes and pull out his own teeth just to see and taste the world thenceforth through the senses of his elder – rechristened Baptiste Ajamais in the novel: “He realized that he would only be following once again in the designated direction, that he was under Baptiste’s influence.[...] What power then did this authoritarian being have over him? In the shadows, one could make out his mesmerized gaze and furrowed brow. There was no denying it: Baptiste was subjugating Anicet, and to what end?” (*Œuvres Romanesques Complètes*, Volume I, p. 85). These are grounds indeed to anticipate here the lesson of *Le Fou d’Elsa*: “Those I love create me.” And to wonder with Anicet “how not to become enamoured of the person who at every instant gives us the human equivalent of the things outside us?” (*ibid.*, p. 120).

While Louis devotes himself heart and soul to André, the latter in return seems to use his authority over Louis, or Louis’ attachment to him. In this series of letters, during the “falling-out” of December 1918–January 1919, we see the younger man lose his composure, beg, and suffer the throes of jealousy or the agony of betrayal. But we also see him pull himself together, scoff, mature, and hold out to his correspondent the virtuous and mocking mirror of a *Rondeau of Omnipotence* (p. 269, letter of April 19, 1919), using the weapons of femininity, in a word, in a tricky battle in which lighthearted banter is intermingled with tragedy.

These ostensibly impulsive, bashful or detached missives make for a first-rate archive, not so much on Aragon’s homosexuality, as a superficial analysis would readily diagnose, as on the torments of a moral, artistic and political education. What we are reading here, in

footnotes, as it were, to *Anicet*, *Télémaque* and *Le Libertinage*, is their brilliant author's *bildungsroman*, the story of his coming of age. And that story sometimes verges on possession, even voodoo. Aragon is bestridden, inseminated by Breton: "But I love you so much that you don't know what you are getting into" (he writes in the throes of the crisis on January 24, 1919, adding to this declaration an ambiguous allusion to the relationship between Verlaine and Rimbaud). Or take this sonorous alexandrine concluding his letter of September 22, 1918: "And I honor you, André, which means MAN in Greek" (p. 200). Or this plea: "If you have nothing to say to me, imagine I'm the most beautiful woman in the world and write to me. Or the greatest poet" (December 29, 1918). But the young thoroughbred was proud to assert his youthful vitality and knew how to kick over the traces in this rodeo and turn the tables to his own advantage: "There is a bit of nervous nastiness in me. I NEED to feel your friendship.[...] SO I'd like to BEAT you as one does rebellious women" (September 14, 1918, p. 200). Or in a fit of pique – Breton had just refused to keep his promise to collaborate on writing the novel about Matisse (which was to become *Madame à Sa Tour Monte*) –: "Now you've begun simpering around. You LITTLE GIRL, you" (November 17, 1918).

The fact that they gave up on their plans to co-write the novel says reams about the deep-seated discord between the two writers, above and beyond this abortive collaborative project. In the course of his passionate letters, it is enlightening to see Aragon take note of his mentor's reluctance and choose to go his own way. In spite of the massive transference and the truly amorous wrath that comes to the fore in a few of the letters, we see a writer forging his own identity and gaining his independence: "It's time to attend to one's self.[...] I need to take off. But not so much from others' horizons. From ours" (May 24, 1918) – which is to acknowledge still his allegiance to Breton. He comes back to this a few letters later: "I've already explained myself on this head [i.e. being oneself]" (May 31). The following letters show him still under Breton's persistent influence: "I'm working on making what you call my "Season in Hell" presentable, and with the title *Roman* [i.e. "Novel"]]. Is it doable? If you order me to, I'll stop working on it. I leave it up to you" (June 3, 1918). And two letters later: "I'm not going to write *Roman* because you think it's ill-timed."

We don't know what this novelistic undertaking was; the plans for the novel *Anicet*, at any rate, did not take shape till that fall. But Breton's enduring sway was clearly manifest. And yet, whatever the latter's reservations about the novelistic genre may have been, from the moment Aragon seizes on his subject we see him swing into action: "But rest assured, my

novel is done in my head [...]. I'm still writing a laborious book, my first novel, [it's] traditionalist.[...] Spare yourself the trouble of threatening [me]" (April 24, 1919). And he proceeds to cite the rather outrageous order André had given him: "Understand that I want to be the *sole* judge of what you may undertake along new lines of thinking" (Aragon quotes the same line again in *Lautréamont et Nous*). This is a tall order indeed: Breton had appropriated Aragon's thought to the point of forbidding him to invent! To which the latter, who was then in his emancipation process, retorted ironically: "But I'm not undertaking anything, I'm continuing. New lines of thinking are not to be had on demand" (p. 277).

This heated exchange is most edifying, and sheds considerable light on the younger writer's efforts to free himself and forge his own identity. It followed closely upon a crucial event, retold in retrospect in *Lautréamont et Nous* (1967), namely the much-discussed episode regarding "what we said on a certain evening": walking along the gates of the Tuileries on the Rue de Rivoli, the two friends came up with a terrorist plot, which was to be the source of inspiration for the poem *Programme* in *Feu de Joie*, and later for the very black, and premonitory, tale in *Le Libertinage* entitled *Lorsque Tout Est Fini* ("When It's All Over"). Terrorist reasoning that is based on *purging* cannot but backfire on its instigators, and what this poem and this tale so perspicaciously envision is the final duel – which Stalin, for example, was to carry out in methodically eliminating the old Bolsheviks. Without getting ahead of ourselves and anticipating a story – a chapter of Modern History – on which a large part of Aragon's work was to pivot either by way of evasion or rationalization, it is striking to find the seeds of the coming war and terror in this friendship that was so formative for Aragon; and to read, for example, in his letter of April 20, 1919, following their hotheaded conversation at the Tuileries, this summing-up of conflicting passions: "No, you have nothing to fear FOR THE TIME BEING because for the time being nothing and no-one is more dear to me than you are, and what makes this friendship so precious is the dramatic certainty that ONE DAY we will kill each other to death.[...] I'm going to keep you in a state of apprehension, and I want you to know that it will not be for nothing, for while you may have found a way to establish your power over the world, I have found one to establish mine over you. In this manner I shall have you at my mercy.[...] **Oh my friend, what does the whole world matter when I have a letter from you**" (this closing sentence of the letter is penned in a larger hand).

This background helps to account for Aragon's objections to the various leftists who were to campaign against the French Communist Party: "They lacked a dada movement." He could have added – and he had certainly thought about it – that they lacked the experience of having fought two wars, an experience in which he himself excelled. Or that they lacked the experience of a friendship as devastating as André Breton's. "*HAUTE ECOLE*," as *Anicet* sums it up: the supreme school of life. Some friendships, or love affairs, are indeed equivalent to wars, Dr. Decoeur¹ says to Aurélien, referring to his wife, Rose Melrose, as "my great private war." Over the course of these 172 letters, in which a passion undergoes a long-drawn-out open-heart vivisection, we learn to unravel the tangled masses of love and hate, of masochism and sadism, of admiration and murder – which, upon closer scrutiny, turn out to be made of the stuff of fairly ordinary life.

The late correspondance concerns the Surrealists' involvement in Communism, and particularly the Soviet Writers Congress of November 1930 in Kharkiv, Ukraine, which precipitated the breakup between Aragon and Breton. The events are well known: we see Aragon serving as scout for Breton, then as the Surrealists' representative to the Soviets. The fact that the latter took advantage of Breton's good faith to the point of inducing him to commit an irreparable act vis-à-vis Breton does not belie the general progression: we have followed by stages, one letter after another, the maturation of a young man becoming conscious of his own genius and calibrating his closeness, or keeping his distance, accordingly – though without ever ceasing to *serve*. Aragon, who always steadfastly stood by others, only seemed to write in emulation or for love, committed as he was to courtly service and serving up offerings to others.

This sense of service, so conspicuous here, is tied in with the experience of war, which clearly sets the two friends apart. In his *Entretiens*, Breton observed by way of reproach that Aragon had always borne his military duties "joyfully." In 1918 as in 1940, as a matter of fact, Aragon's heroic conduct was the admiration of his superiors. He obviously had a love for the military, or more precisely for service, and his whole life long he was to remain a militant, a soldier, a man who served: the army, the Party, Elsa, which were as many frameworks structuring, and yet disorienting, this personality endowed with many gifts and susceptible to many temptations. Service provided him a guide rail, as it were, but also functioned as an

¹ The name means literally "of the heart" – Translator's note.

expiatory sacrifice in redeeming the taint of birth. That war was intimate, comprehending his work, even his love, which he experienced as a constant fight. His whole life long, Aragon never stopped fighting.

Breton, conversely, who was more of an anarchist than a militant, remained rebellious towards externally imposed discipline. His writing, apt to enkindle desire, was also quite capable of triggering, in passing, a student revolt in Haiti during his memorable talk in Port-au-Prince in 1945. But he took no interest in organizing an enduring avant-garde, much less a political party. His penchant for astrology and magic oriented him towards a fixist ontology, so too his curiosity about spectacles of nature, which he ultimately preferred to social movements, current events and history. His practicing of horoscopes and seances was counterbalanced by loathing of novels and journalism. Breton the poet felt traversed, even transfixed, by the “automatic message,” but never took the pains to weave a sustained narrative or give birth to characters liable to share enduringly in his existence or put his identity at stake. His strolls through the flea markets, the meanderings of *Nadja* and the “night of the sunflower” adventure don’t seem to culminate in authentic encounters in what might be called the “real world” so much as they seem to proceed from the pleasure principle or the magic reflections of a specular mirror. Objective chance, like *Witz* (the witticism analyzed by Freud), turns in a circle: there is *Geist* (that of the ghost) in these encounters, in these objects. “Beautiful as the chance encounter...²”: the Surrealists may well have defined their activity as the art of chance encounters, in other words through the shock of otherness, but it escapes from that into a surreality that mimics, more than it confronts, the reality principle and the turbulency of history. In search of intense ecstasies, Surrealism couldn’t care less about lasting qualities; it prefers “*la nuit des éclairs*,” the night sky shot through with lightning, to the lucubrations of the Enlightenment. The carefully wrought construction of meaning or of a shared *logos* could hardly hold the attention of Breton or those inspired by his magisterium.

Aragon, who was a journalist, novelist, poet *and a militant*, was eventually to turn his back on Breton and turn toward the “enlarged mentality” with which Kant credited Enlightenment man, and which, it seems to me, had inspired his thoughts and actions, whatever his own gray areas might have been. In the relationship between Aragon and Breton, whose seminal effects on the history of Surrealism have yet to be fully probed, the calls for

² “...of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table,” a line by 19th-century *poète maudit* Lautréamont often quoted by the Surrealists – Translator’s note.

demystification, explication, organization and *criticism* (whether (historical, technical, sociological or other) undeniably came from the younger writer. Disdained by his old friends, who may have found him at once too cerebral and too sentimental, and long considered suspicious within his own party, Aragon is a feast for those who seek criticism at the core of artistic creation and who don't divorce the exercise of intelligence from the stormy experience of the passions.

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