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Author	James Leveque
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Surrealism and the 'Fissured Subject': Breton, Éluard, and Desnos

James Leveque
The University of Edinburgh

The idea of an unstable, divided, or decentred self precedes Surrealism, infusing much of the thought of its avant-garde forebears. Apollinaire's poetry 'begins from the premise of the dismemberment of Orpheus, from the fact of the existence of the only possible poetic voice as one which is disseminated throughout an experience which defies unification' (Revie 185). Surrealism, for its part, applied 'the fissured subject of psychoanalysis' (Cohen 6) as early as 1919, when Breton and Soupault began the automatic writing experiments of *The Magnetic Fields* (1920). Automatic writing and collaborative projects undermined the author's unity by privileging chance and the drives of the unconscious over authorial intention. Roland Barthes points out that 'Surrealism […] contributed to the desacrilization of the image of the Author by ceaselessly recommending the abrupt disappointment of expectations of meaning' (144). The idea of the Author who presents complete and autonomous thoughts and concepts for a receptive Reader was rejected by these Surrealist techniques.

Although known as one of the most doctrinaire movements of the historical avant-garde – mostly due to Breton's intense theorising and dominating personality – individual Surrealists approached the problem of the divided and decentred subject from substantially different angles. Surrealism began as a poetic movement around the circle of Breton, Soupault, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Benjamin Péret, and Robert Desnos. By the end of the 1930s most had broken with Breton, if not the foundational tenets of the movement itself. This study examines collections of Surrealist poetry from the mid-1930s from Breton, Éluard, and Desnos as examples of the variant understandings of the subject within Surrealism. Breton published *The Air of the Water* (1934) in the midst of his most intense articulation of Surrealist theory in *Communicating Vessels* (1932) and *Mad Love* (1937); Éluard published *Public Rose* (1934), *Easy* (1935), and *The Covered Forehead* (1936) just a few years before his break with Breton in 1938; *The Neck-less* (1934) was published by Desnos a half-decade after being 'excommunicated' from the Surrealist

group by Breton, though he never ceased to consider himself a Surrealist. In each case, the poet's understanding of the 'fissured subject' and his vision of the potential for that subject is both Surrealist and entirely individual.

Breton: Division, Transmutation, Reunification

Breton admitted that verifying a truly automatic text was practically impossible, but never relinquished his conviction that an *a priori* unified self was a contrivance, mocking writers who 'put "themselves" into this work, which is worse than ever since their "self" is only ever someone else's; I am tempted to say they remove their selves and replace them with nothing' (Breton, *Automatic Message* 14). By clearing the decks of what he saw as falsely finite and empty bourgeois constructions of the self, Breton envisioned a new self that had a 'truer' relationship to exterior and interior life.

Breton wrote *The Air of the Water* [*L'air de l'eau*] after meeting his second wife, Jacqueline Lamba, on 29 May 1934, who said, 'After having written *L'air de l'eau* he came back and read it to me, making a commentary of it, explaining each sentence. But later I have heard him say that he had all sorts of reservations about analysis of what did not become immediately evident in his own poems, as one cannot autoanalyze oneself completely' (Quoted in Balakian, *Breton* 143). Time, places, and people destabilise the self – a notion that Breton addressed as far back as *Nadja* (1928), opening that novel with the question 'Who am I?' Margaret Cohen locates this 'haunted' subjectivity in a dialectic between Breton and his Parisian environment, suggesting himself as a product of his social conditions (63). Reflecting on this dependence on social environment – as writers often do – undermines the integrity of the self, described in 'I dream I see you…'[1] of *The Air of the Water*, where Breton imagines his love seated in front of a mirror 'indefinitely superimposed on yourself' ('superposée indéfiniment à toi-même'; *Œuvres* 397; 1).[2] This recalls an image discussed by Breton in the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), describing a phrase he heard while falling asleep: 'There is a man cut in two by the window' (*Manifestoes* 21). This could be an oblique way of representing a simple reflection, but Breton goes on to describe a man cut across the waist as he leans out of a window but a 'fantasmatic' one, 'a "purely interior model" in which the subject is somehow split both positionally – at once inside and outside the scene – and psychically

– "cut in two"' (Foster 22-23).

'I dream I see you…' engages the lover as someone composed of an infinity of differentiated moments and places, layered and intermingled but never quite one. Breton suggests with a hint of ambivalence that perhaps one place is as good as another: 'You wake where you fell asleep or elsewhere' ('Tu t'éveilles où tu t'es endormie ou ailleurs'; *Œuvres* 397; 10). But he resolves the ambivalence, writing, 'I caress all that you were / In all that you must still be' (Je caresse tout ce qui fut toi / Dans tout ce que doit l'être encore; 22). One place might *seem* as good as another, but embedding the lover's past within her future shows these places as integral moments of the *process* of personal identity. Breton refers to his lover as 'My living fountain of Shiva' ('Ma fontaine vivante de Sivas'; 28), a reference to the Hindu divinity with multiple arms and natures (Bonnet, ed., *Œuvres* 1556n1). Throughout the collection, the lover is often represented as part of nature, such as: 'Your flesh dewed by the flight of a thousand birds of paradise' (Ta chair arrosée de l'envol de mille oiseaux de paradis; 'Le poisson-télescope', Ibid. 396; 18). In the opening lines of 'Always for the first time…' the poet hardly recognises the lover each time he sees her, as if 'her appearance seems to change and so his love for her is always new, in spite of what we might call the "real" conditions within the surrealist vision' (Caws, *Poetry* 85). The poem brings back the variety of everyday life that engenders changeability:

> There are rocking chairs on a bridge there are branches that risk scratching you in
> > the forest
> There is in a Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette window
> Two beautiful crossed legs in fancy stockings
> Which flare out at the centre of a great white clover
> There is a ladder of silk unrolled over the ivy
> There is
> (Il y a des rocking-chairs sur un pont il y a des branchages qui risquent de
> t'égratigner
> > dans la forêt
> Il y a dans une vitrine rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette
> Deux belles jambes croisées prises dans de hauts bas

Qui s'évasent au centre d'un grand trèfle blanc

Il y a une échelle de soie déroulée sur le lierre

Il y a;

        Œuvres 408; 30-35)

The 'diversity of the world […] collapses the everyday in the song of the marvellous' ('la diversité du monde […] fait basculer le quotidien dans le chant du merveilleux'; Bonnet, ed., *Œuvres* 1561n1); that is, the everyday becomes charged with unconscious desires and reconfigured as part of a new chain of obscure meanings while breaking down habitual, outmoded meanings (cf. Cohen 107-108).

Breton frequently expresses the effects of love in terms of movement, especially of the natural elements, as in 'Movement rhymed to the crushing of oyster-shells and reddish stars' ('Mouvement rythmé par le pilage de coquilles d'huître et d'étoiles rousses'; *Œuvres* 404). But 'World in a kiss…' anchors the metaphor in cosmic imagery:

Everything becomes opaque I see passing the carriage of the night

Drawn by axolotls in blue shoes

[…]

The scales of the great celestial tortoise with hydrophilus stomach

Battling each night in love

With the great black tortoise the gigantic centipede of roots

(Tout devient opaque je vois passer le carrosse de la nuit

Trainé par les axolotls à souliers bleus

[…]

Les écailles de la grande tortue céleste à ventre d'hydrophile

Qui se bat chaque nuit dans l'amour

Avec la grande tortue noire le gigantesque scolopendre de racines;

        Ibid. 395-396; 5-6, 31-33)

Rather than discreet, differentiated moments, these images suggest a more continuous process of continual change – made more alive by the encounter with the lover.

Breton developed this idea of the encounter (*La rencontre*) to conceptualise the transformation of individual subjectivity. The seeds of the encounter are planted by the marvellous's feeling of the uncanny or *dépaysment*. Closely following Freud's

description of the uncanny in 1919 as 'nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' ('Uncanny' 363-364), the marvellous brings out unconscious desires both familiar and new. The marvellous image need not make *rational* sense, but ought to elicit the partially repressed desires and sexual energies of the unconscious, such as the libidinal spark many Surrealists saw in Lautréamont's 'chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing machine and an umbrella'. The other half of the encounter was objective chance, defined by Breton as 'the form making manifest the exterior necessity which traces its path in the human unconscious (boldly trying to interpret and to reconcile Engels and Freud on this point)' (*Mad Love* 23). Breton attempts to describe an encounter between distinct forms of causality: external, objective necessity as defined by Friedrich Engels, and unconscious desire as defined by Freud (cf. Cohen 135). The marvellous, when coupled with objective chance, accounts in Breton's eyes for the encounter's sense of destiny or fate.

Constant metamorphosis results in an intermingling and unifying of desires, and Breton ends 'Almost five o'clock…' with a concrete image of such an occurrence:

By way of a dagger whose coral handle bifurcates to infinity

So that your blood and mine

Make one

(Au moyen d'un poignard dont le manche de corail bifurque à l'infini

Pour que ton sang et le mien

N'en fassent qu'un;

Œuvres 403; 22-24)

The encounter, as understood in these poems, is two distinct subjective desires brought together through chance, changing one another's world. Breton writes that 'The sympathy existing between two or several beings seems to lead them toward solutions they would have never found on their own' (*Mad Love*, 34). The encounter does not create some false sense of self-unity, but opens the subject up to the mutability of existence and possibility for 'reunification' with another and wider world. 'When the poet says "world in a kiss," it is not a new world but a fuller possession and a more concrete apprehension of the already familiar one' (Balakian, *Breton* 142).

Éluard: Isolation, then Connection

Éluard's poetry consistently casts an eye towards youth, without abandoning his desires for the future. The subtitle of 'The Faded Light', in *Public Rose*, asserts 'I inevitably use my other representations in order to complicate, illuminate and mix in my sleep my final illusions of youth and my sentimental aspirations' ('je me sers inévitablement de mes autres représentations pour compliquer, illuminer et mêler à mon sommeil mes dernières illusions de jeunesse et mes aspirations sentimentales'; *Œuvres* 425). The desires that animated youthful innocence constitute a space outside of time; and because it lacks a past, youth is strongly connected to the central theme of purity, Éluard occasionally using the phrase 'children without age' ('enfants sans âge') (found in both *Public Rose* and *Natural Course* (1938)): 'Youth, the happy state, without past, without memory' ('La jeunesse, l'état heureux, sans passé, sans souvenir'; Jucker-Wehrli 27). Éluard sees himself as somewhat tainted by his own past and the world around him, saying as much in the 1926 collection *The Underside of Life, or The Human Pyramid*: 'My whole living and corrupted being aspired to the rigidity and majesty of death' ('Tout mon être vivant et corrompu aspirait à la rigidité et à la majesté des morts'; *Œuvres* 201), prefiguring the isolation of the poet within his poetry. Such isolation may have manifested itself when Éluard disappeared in 1924 on a trip around the world to escape legal troubles and, quite likely, his wife Gala, who was having an affair with the painter Max Ernst.

Ursula Jucker-Wehrli describes the 'interior universe' as a mental space where the poet can strip away the aspects of life, memory, and the past that have hindered or sullied the poet (cf. 34). Poggioli also addresses the 'mystique of purity' in similar terms, as a way for poetry to 'liberate art from any connection to psychological and empirical reality, to reduce every work to the intimate laws of its own expressive essence' (201). In the poem 'Good and Bad Languages', time and activity have ceased, and life loses all defining features:

We have closed the shutters
The trees no longer grow

We will no longer excavate the earth

We won't uproot ourselves

There is no more depth

Nor surface

(Nous avons fermé les volets

Les arbres ne l'élèveront plus

On ne fouillera plus la terre

On ne nous déterrera pas

Il n'y a plus de profondeurs

Ni de surfaces.;

   Œuvres 432-433; 72-77)

Language itself loses its meaning and usefulness and silence is preferred. In the opening, untitled poem of *Easy*, Éluard writes 'You make bubbles of silence in the desert of noises' ('Tu fais des bulles de silence dans le désert des bruits'; Ibid. 459; 6). The lover closes herself off from a cacophony of meaningless sounds. In the interior universe the poet finds that youthful purity that time has robbed him of. He wishes 'The extinction of all form, individuality and action. While detaching himself in this way from exterior reality, Éluard searches for another reality, *surreality*' ('[l]'extinction de toute forme, individualité et action. En se détachant ainsi de la réalité extérieure, Éluard cherche une autre réalité, la *surréalité* '; Jucker-Wehrli 35).

  Éluard's troubles are effaced in the interior universe, so the theme of purity has the active aspect of purification or cleansing. The result of this interior universe is one of extreme isolation where the world is drained of colour and distinction: 'A monotone shelter / A décor of anywhere' (Un monotone abri / Un décor de partout; 'At the End of the Year, *Œuvres* 464; 45-46) The trappings of daily life have become reason to flee into oneself, as Éluard writes in 'Poetic Objectivity':

Hope of the first steps

To flee the inhuman colours

Of the tempest of feeble gestures

To great empty bodies

(Espoir des premiers pas

Fuir les couleurs inhumaines

Des tempêtes aux gestes mous

Aux grands corps vides;

      Œuvres 421; 6-9)

Yet, Éluard is not so naïve as to believe that a person can exist indefinitely within such a state; so ultimately the theme of purity is associated with absolute absence and death, 'for the renounced half of life leaves a sorrowful absence, and the complete dissolution can threaten the "I" that believed it was liberating itself from the prison of individuality' ('car la moitié renieé da la vie laisse une absence douloureuse, et la dissolution complète peut menacer le "Je" qui croyait se libérer de la prison de l'individualité'; Jucker-Wehrli 45). Éluardian purity is a beautiful negation within the self, but with the purpose of preparing a truly sympathetic engagement with others or the other.

      Much of Éluard's poetry of the 1930s carries a tension between the luminous innocence of purity and the despair of purity's isolation. Mary Ann Caws writes that 'When the poet loses his sense of immediacy and necessity […], the bright surface of the mirror which reflected his genuine image is replaced by the artificial and empty appearance of an image' (*Poetry* 157). Éluard, perhaps more than Breton, understood that the pure aestheticism associated with both Surrealism and the avant-garde in general held itself at a radical distance from social praxis. Likely influenced by Aragon's abandonment of Surrealism in favour of socialist realism, Éluard continued with 'his experimental gropings and adjustments of Surrealism that he had carried out in the 1920's in order to make Surrealism revolutionary in more than just theoretical intention' (Arnold 165).

      Éluard and Breton state in *Notes on Poetry* (1929) that 'We ruin something while accomplishing or representing it in its most pure and beautiful state' ('On ruine quelque chose en l'accomplissant ou la représentant dans son plus pur et bel état'; *Œuvres* 474) – expressing the tension between pure aesthetic expression and social praxis. Éluard writes in *Public Rose* that for purity to become something other than the image of absence and death, the poet must move beyond isolated subjectivity into the realm of human

connection, (i.e., 'poetic objectivity') which manifests itself as love (Ibid. 421).

Images of light, vision, water, mirrors, air, and the lover – often in tension with images of darkness – serve as connotations of both transparency and the movement beyond subjective isolation and into an expansion of the self into the world. Light serves for transparency, 'concretiz[ing] an inner emotional experience' and 'serv[ing] as a basis by which to judge the events of life' (Nugent 525). In 'A Personality' Éluard uses the image of vision, describing the lover as 'Crowned by my eyes' ('Couronnée de mes yeux') and they are 'face to face and nothing is invisible to us' ('face à face et rien ne nous est invisible'; *Œuvres* 418; 33, 36). Further in the poem, Éluard repeats the phrase 'I have seen' ('J'ai vu') numerous times, reiterating the importance of clear sight.

Éluard multiplies the self through images of water and mirrors, as another function of light and vision: 'Multiple your eyes diverse and confused / Make the mirrors flourish.' (Multiple tes yeux divers et confondus / Font fleurir les miroirs.; 'The Embrace', *Œuvres* 460). 'Nothing Else', in *Public Rose*, mixes the images of mirrors, air, and water in a single line: 'Where flying mirrors come to drink' ('Où les miroirs volants viennent boire'; Ibid. 437; 5). One imagines mirrors and water mutually reflecting each other in an image of infinity. Yet, the most ideal 'mirror' is the other lover, the poet and lover become mutually reflecting mirrors:

Even when we are far from one another

Everything unites us

Making the part of the echo

That of the mirror

That of the bedroom that of the city

That of each man of each woman

That of solitude

(Même quand nous sommes loin l'un de lautre

Tout nous unit

Fais la part de l'écho

Celle du miroir

Celle de la chambre celle de la ville

Celle de chaque homme de chaque femme

Celle de la solitude;

   'Poetic Objectivity', Ibid. 423; 35-41)

The image of the mirror itself is somewhat subdued, being only one piece of the larger 'mirroring' of the lovers. But this image is also important insofar as the subjective self is divided and multiplied by the lover and extended into the ephemera of daily life – into people, places, and sounds.

Images of transparency and multiplication act as a vehicle for Éluard's drive to develop a balance between interior and exterior. In the 'mirror' of the lover, the poet sees both himself and his escape from the solitude of the interior universe. Often, the lover herself takes the form of the world:

You are water diverted from its abysses

You are the earth that takes root

And on which everything establishes itself

(Tu es l'eau détournée de ses abîmes

Tu es la terre qui prend racines

Et sur laquelle tout s'établit;

   Œuvres 459; 3-5)

The poet sees the world through the eyes of the lover, and thus confirms not only its existence, but his own place within the world:

Between your eyes and the images that I see there

There is everything I contemplate

Myself deep-rooted

Like a gathering plant

That simulates a rock amongst other rocks

(Entre tes yeux et les images que j'y vois

Il y a tout ce que j'en pense

Moi-même indéracinable

Comme une plante que s'amasse

Que simule un rocher parmi d'autres rochers;

'Such a Woman', Ibid. 440; 27-31)

Multiplication also allows the poet and lover to see themselves within the other:

Another have I been myself

Who in life who in myself

And the others me

(Une autre ai-je été moi-même

Qui dans la vie qui en moi-même

Et moi les autres;[3]

'A Personality', Ibid. 419; 63-65)

Neither is truly effaced and both find unity while maintaining some level of subjective integrity. The positive and negative aspects of a multiplied self are held in tension, as in *The Covered Forehead*:

I eclipsed from my silhouette

The sun that would have followed me

Here I have my piece of shadows

(J'éclipsais de ma silhouette

Le soleil qui m'aurait suivi

Ici j'ai ma part de ténèbres;

Ibid. 469-70; 22-24)

The alternation between light and dark signals that even within love, despair is always a possibility.

Purity can be recovered in Éluard's interior universe, but not as an end in itself. The light of the interior universe strips the poet of acquired habits, memories, and forms that have clouded the poet's thinking and separated him from others – death 'reduced to sensation, or rather clothed with the positive power of an absence of sensation' (Balakian, *Origins* 121). From love 'surge the purified forms of the exterior world' ('surgissent les formes purifiées du monde extérieur'; Jucker-Wehrli 36). Though the light of purity and transparency may give the poet hope, the tension with darkness, obscurity, and shadow is always present, as Éluard acknowledges in *Easy*:

The prisons of freedom efface themselves

We have forevermore

Left behind us the hope that consumes itself

In a rotting city of flesh and misery

Of tyranny

(Les prisons de la liberté s'effacent

Nous avons à jamais

Laissé derrière nous l'espoir qui se consume

Dans une ville pétrie de chair et de misère

De tyrannie;

'At the End of the Year', *Œuvres* 463; 11-15)

Éluard might simply be telling us that, in the love amongst people, there is a purity better than that of one's own interior universe. Love can provide transparency in a society that parades as freedom but in fact provides less and less opportunities for immediate, unstandardised, uncommodified experience. Of all the Surrealists, Éluard might provide the most earnest connection between love and social struggle.

Desnos: Popular and Populist

In the *Third Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), Desnos claims a continuing fidelity to Surrealism according to his own definition: 'I, who have some right to talk about surrealism, declare here that the surreal exists only for non-surrealists. For surrealists there is only one reality – unique, whole, and open to all (Desnos, 'Third' 72). Desnos's familiar criticism of Breton's obscurantism, was answered by the latter in 'The Automatic Message', explaining the 'democratic' nature of Surrealism: 'Every man and every woman deserves the personal conviction that they themselves can, by right, have resource at will to this language which is not in any way supernatural, and is a vehicle, for each and every one of us, of revelation' (Breton, *Automatic Message*, 26). Despite Breton's defence, Desnos's commitment to a popular appreciation of Surrealism defined his attitude throughout the 1930s, when he worked in theatre, film, advertising, radio, and journalism, always bringing Surrealist themes and techniques to these mediums. Desnos viewed himself 'as a creator of both high and low art and of their conjunction and interaction' (Conley 12).

The Neck-less mixes characters and landscapes presented in poetic styles ranging

from the most open free-verse, to more conservative structures sometimes bordering on the naïve (Indeed, Desnos occasionally wrote children's poetry). The poems are unified by a consistent sympathy for the perennial heroes of Surrealist literature, the down-and-out and socially subversive. As Marie-Claire Dumas writes, 'To all those excluded, murderers, revolutionaries, "men of a common grave", Desnos fraternally addresses himself: "My neck-less / Men born too soon…"' ('À tous ces exclus, meurtriers, révolutionnaires, "hommes de la fosse commun", Desnos s'adresse fraternellement: "Mes sans cou, / Hommes nés trop tôt..."'; Dumas, ed., *Œuvres* 776). In 'Men', the poet specifically identifies himself with the 'Men of dirty character / Men of my two hands' (Hommes de sale caractère / Hommes de *mes deux mains* [my emphasis]; *Œuvres* 923; 1-2). In 'To the Neck-less', Desnos places himself within the raucous atmosphere of the bistro[4] where 'the neck-less' sing and pontificate, inciting the crowd to sing his name along with other Roberts of ill repute:

> I take up the word:
>
> "You have the hello,
>
> The hello of Robert Desnos, of Robert the Devil, of Robert Macaire, of Robert
>> Houdin, of Robert Robert, of Robert my uncle"
>
> (Je reprends la parole:
>
> "Vous avez le bonjour,
>
> Le bonjour de Robert Desnos, de Robert le Diable, de Robert Macaire, de Robert
>> Houdin, de Robert Robert, de Robert mon oncle";[5]
>>> Ibid. 939; 37-39)

Don Juan, a frequent character in Desnos's works ('The Night of Loveless Nights' (1930) and 'Siramour' (1931)), appears in 'The City of Don Juan'. As a heroic libertine, flouting bourgeois moral conventions, Don Juan plays the part of both passionate lover and heart-broken victim (cf. Greene 198). But if Don Juan is the victim of love's absence, he also embodies the inexhaustible hope and optimism of the possibility of desire fulfilled. The first 15 of 23 stanzas describe the nocturnal sordidness of the dream-city: a woman in mourning with a glass of wine and a dead bird, another performing a strip-tease in front of a window. The section ends with:

> The ones could have commanded royalty

The others were dirty of body and heart

Others still were carriers of tragic maladies

(Les unes auraient pu commander à des royaumes,

Les autres étaient sales de corps et de cœur,

D'autres encore étaient porteuses de tragiques maladies)

Yet, the next stanza brings the morning and a new hope for Don Juan:

But Don Juan with puffs from the approaching dawn

Felt an icy, refreshing wind,

A wind of low-tide and fresh oysters

(Mais Don Juan aux souffles de la prochaine aube

Sentait un vent glacial et réconfortant,

Un vent de marée basse et d'huîtres fraîches;

Œuvres 926-927; 43-48)

The initial 'But' of the stanza contrasts to the monotony of the tercets, each ending in a full stop. The sentence structure becomes more fluid. The dreamscape shifts from the nocturnal to the daytime.

In two poems, 'The four neck-less' and 'To the neck-less', Desnos adds an air of revolution to his down-and-out characters. As a play-on-words, the titles allow Desnos to signal multiple themes with a single word or phrase. On the one hand, 'making the 400 blows' ('The neck-less' is a play on the colloquial expression for raising hell, 'faire les quatre cents coups'; Ibid. 776), referring to the behaviour of 'the neck-less':

When they ran, it was from the wind,

When they cried, it was living,

When they slept, it was without regret

(Quand ils couraient, c'était du vent,

Quand ils pleuraient, c'était vivant,

Quand ils dormaient, c'était sans regret;

'The four neck-less', Ibid. 924; 10-12)

On the other hand, Desnos gives them revolutionary pretensions by playing on 'Les sans-culottes', the faction of Revolutionary-era radicals, many of whom were guillotined. These men are said by Desnos to be eternally born too soon, but the hope is expressed

that 'these lost men will live on "in tomorrow's revolutions," that the current street "revolutions" will live up to the legacy of bravery inherited from these men of the past' (Conley 116).

Desnos's use of the voice was informed by his work in radio, and Katharine Conley cites his ability to adopt 'different accents or registers of class affiliation' in this work (Ibid. 4). Class affiliation was one of the many voices Desnos occasionally wore in his poetry, as can be seen at the end of 'Like': 'Poem, poem, I ask a little of you… / I ask a little gold of you in order to be happy with the one I love' (Poème, poème, je vous demande un peu... / Je vous demande un peu d'or pour être heureux avec celle que j'aime; *Œuvres* 933; 35-36). The gold could be an allusion to the sense of the marvellous, but might also be simply admitting to a little material interest in writing poetry. Desnos voices the concerns of work and wages without judgement. The technology of radio, as a popular medium, amplified Desnos's conviction that multiple voices resided 'within the self and within surrealism' (Conley 5).

Direct quotation is another means of 'channelling' these voices. At the end of 'Halfway', after describing the experience of the man who feels the middle of his life, the poet cites the man himself only to repeat the phrase: 'But he says "Chase these blues away" / And he chases these blues away' (Mais il dit "Chassons ces idées noires" / Et il chasse ces idées noires; *Œuvres* 929; 41-42). The poet repeats the phrase, supporting the sentiment of the man – as if to channel the man, and then cite his agreement. At other points, the poet glosses the direct quotation:

And a man said to another man:

"'Til tomorrow."

Tomorrow, he will be dead or gone far from there

(Et un homme dit à un autre homme:

"À demain."

Demain, il sera mort ou parti loin de là;

     'The Furtive', Ibid. 929; 5-7)

The speaker is undercut by the easy certainty of the present with the unpredictability of the future.

Whether these voices make any particular sense is irrelevant to Desnos: the bistro,

where people talk at and over each other, is the democratic ideal. Competing sentiments intermingle without necessarily forming a coherent whole. The figures that speak are autonomous and mystical 'beings that represent for him love, poetry or human fraternity' ('êtres qui représentent pour lui l'amour, la poésie ou la fraternité humaine'; Greene 198). In 'To the neck-less' for example, one of 'the neck-less' asks the absurd question, 'What have you done with your wig' ('Qu'as tu fait de ta perruque'; *Œuvres* 938; 10). Neither of his respondents really answers the question, one simply turning around without a word, the other giving a highfalutin discourse: 'I am the rebel of all civilisation, / The abject assassin, the vile seducer of young girls, that satyr' (Je suis le rebelle de toute civilisation, / L'abject assassin, le vil suborneur de fillettes, le satyre; 17-18). This speaker even reaches the prophetic: 'I announce the Moses of tomorrow' ('J'annonce le Moïse de demain'; 30). This revolutionary fervour is given an air of absurdity or insincerity, which is certainly common within revolutionary circles. 'The neck-less' who avoids speaking is then perhaps closer to Desnos's own feeling: 'Here, what can be said is precisely that which is not true. So silence is preferred over speech, and judged to escape the inauthenticity that speech brings with it' (Caws, 'Postface', 350). This sentiment is similar to that of Éluard who, as noted above, also regards speech as often too facile (perhaps even playing on the French title (*Facile*) of his 1935 collection) to contain anything genuine.

Silence and voice is a classic Desnosian contradiction, opposing equal pairs such as fire and water, desert and town, road and forest, night and day – often placed within the context of a dream. The poem 'Fête-diable' juxtaposes: nearby village/faraway city, sleeping/waking, outdoors/indoors. The most explicit contradiction is that between light and shadows, but also the contradiction between roads and open countryside:

And the universe takes up its course

By the thousands of white roads traced by the world

Across the shadowy countryside

(Et l'univers reprend son cours

Par les milliers de routes blanches tracées par le monde

À travers les campagnes ténébreuses;

     Œuvres 931; 39-41)

The possibility of transmutation within the dreamscape – the 'location' where the poet can freely explore, as in psychoanalysis, how opposites imply each other – becomes the driving force of 'Fête-Diable'. Freud writes in *Interpreting Dreams* (1900) that 'reversal, transformation of a thing into its opposite, is in fact one of dream-work's favourite techniques of representation, […] It serves to reinforce wish-fulfilment against a specific element in the dream-thoughts. "If only it had been the other way around!"' (341-342). 'Fête-Diable' recalls the Catholic Fête-Dieu or Corpus Christi, celebrating the transubstantiation of bread into the body or presence of Christ.[6]

Desnos uses the dream's representation by opposites to answer Freud's own plea, 'If only it had been the other way around!'. Desnos answers, 'It can be!' and by the 1930s, 'the principle of inversion', states J. H. Matthews, 'which, in his early poetry, was no more than a linguistic device useful in upsetting the conventional, has become fundamental to the poetic vision' (64). Dreamscapes are places where multiple and contradictory voices can coexist without obligation to reason or logic and thus can become capable of change. In 'Apparition', perhaps the most dreamlike of this collection, he represents this transformation as a process of building up a new world, even if, for the time being, it is only poetic and imperfect:

> But it is no longer a matter of floating, nor of spurting, nor of hardening,
>
> But, from all mud,
>
> Making cement, marble, a sky, a cloud and joy and wreckage
>
> (Mais il ne s'agit plus de flotter, ni de jaillir, ni de durcir,
>
> Mais, de toute boue,
>
> Faire un ciment, un marbre, un ciel, un nuage et une joie et une épave;
>
> > *Œuvres* 922; 11-13)

Conclusion

Barthes states that 'writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing' (142). With the dissolution of language and meaning, Surrealism posited the logical conclusion of the dissolution of the subject itself – a conclusion that can be viewed, in

one form or another, in the poetry examined above.

Breton theorised a reunification of the objective and subjective worlds. Like Éluard, this involved a kind of negation, by the force of desire, of the outside world 'in favor of a system of representations favorable (or unfavorable) to the humans who find themselves placed before it' (Breton, *Vessels*, 111). For Breton and Éluard, internal, subjective representations are not necessarily better than objective representations (to the extent that those even exist), but while Breton envisions 'man, what remains of him, forever unmoving in the center of the whirlwind' (Ibid. 138) communicating with the objective world through chance and desire, Éluard imagined a balance between individuals who mutually influence, but never dominate one another. Perhaps anticipating his departure from Surrealism in favour of Communism in 1938, Éluard's decentred subject is merely preparing for a proper *social* balance. Desnos, perhaps the most radical in his democratic leanings, and certainly less inclined to theorise the individual subject in the way Breton and Éluard do, was content with a disparate and open reality. Not only is reality open, but the revolutionary change inherent in Desnos's vision is also much more open than that of his erstwhile Surrealist counterparts. Though the methods and goals often diverged and conflicted, in every case, surrealism accepted the individual as divided, messy, contradictory, and open.

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[1] Every poem in *The Air of the Water* is untitled. Henceforth, I refer to each poem by its first line.

[2] All translations are my own; citations are to the original text.

[3] The peculiar diction echoes Rimbaud's iconic phrase of self-fracture: 'Je est un autre', roughly translated as 'I is another'.

[4] 'Aux sans cou (To the Neck-less)' is a play on words as both dedication ('To the sans cou') and the standard formula for a restaurant name ('At the sans cou'); Conley, *Robert Desnos*., 116.

[5] Robert Macaire is the name of an archetypal villain in French fiction and drama; Robert Houdin refers to the magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805-1871) from whom Erik Weisz (a.k.a., Harry Houdini) took his stage-name.

[6] Martin Sorrell also seems to have picked up this allusion in the title of his translation: 'Feast of corpus diaboli'; cf. Sorrell, trans., *Essential Poems and Writings*, 295.