

Review of Henri Behar, *Potlatch, André Breton ou la cérémonie du don*
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Henri Behar is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Paris III and a leading authority on Surrealism and the early twentieth-century avant-garde in France. His latest book, *Potlatch, André Breton ou la cérémonie du don*, constitutes a major achievement in the field of Surrealist Studies. It is the result of a comprehensive and meticulous collection of data and documents about the numerous dedications that Breton addressed to fellow writers and artists during his lifetime. These dedications are mixed with the equally numerous dedications that writers and artists addressed to Breton. This explains the term: “Potlatch,” which is part of the title of this book, since the Potlatch was originally defined by anthropologists as a system of exchanges (of gifts and counter-gifts) that characterizes various tribal and indigenous societies.

Any dedication is the sign of a close relationship between its author and its addressee. One can therefore see in this book that Breton was tied to a large network of artists and writers throughout the world. These dedications thus demonstrate the international nature of the surrealist movement. For instance, Breton dedicated some of his works to the American photographer Man Ray as well as to the Romanian painter Victor Brauner. By doing so, he stressed the fact that Surrealism existed beyond borders and narrow national identities. In this sense, Surrealism was global more than half a century before the start of globalization. It anticipated a transnational outlook on literature and art that is predominant in today’s culture.

What makes Henri Behar’s book particularly interesting is the fact that some of these dedications are addressed to and by personalities who were never officially part of the surrealist movement. It is the case for both Maurice Blanchot and Julien Gracq, among others. This shows that Surrealism influenced many major twentieth

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century writers, and that Breton constituted for them an iconic figure and a sort of spiritual father.

In this regard, Blanchot wrote one of the most important critical essays ever devoted to Surrealism, “Le Demain joueur,” which is included in his book *L’Entretien infini*. This essay was clearly apologetic: it defined first and foremost the existential and philosophical meaning of the concept of community for the history of Surrealism. It also emphasized the dominant role of playfulness in the aesthetics of the movement.

In many ways, Surrealism continued to develop and express itself beyond Surrealism. This assertion seems quite paradoxical but it nonetheless reflects the ongoing fascination that the work of André Breton engendered. The numerous dedications by personalities who were outsiders of Surrealism also enlighten the fact that the movement never ceased to exert its cultural influence. It functioned essentially as a magnet for writers and artists who wanted to escape the strict laws of rationalism and were attracted by the world of visions and the supernatural.

Many of them also viewed Surrealism as a transgressive perspective on both life and art. The power of such a perspective has waned over the years. Nevertheless it remains today one of the most original dimensions of the movement. Surrealism asserted the need for a thorough questioning of established moral values and ways of thinking in western culture. This need never truly disappeared and is still valid for a critical approach of avant-garde literature and art in the twenty-first century.

Henri Behar is the author, among others, of a seminal book on André Breton entitled *André Breton l’indésirable*, which was originally published in 1990 by Calmann-Lévy in Paris. He definitely implied here that Surrealism originated as an attitude of revolt towards both the social order and the literary tradition of Realism. “The undesirable,” indeed, is the one whose opinions break with conventional schools of thought and who is therefore marginalized because of his eccentric sensitivity.

The form of the dedication is by essence concise and is also eminently subjective and candid in its expression. The dedication always stems therefore from the assertion of an I. In this regard, Breton often expressed his personal feelings for many of the writers and artists to whom he dedicated his works. These dedications became in many ways short and instant poems characterized by their sheer authenticity. They echoed in this sense the form of automatic writing, which defined Breton’s unique perspective on the poetic language. One could thus identify dedications with fragments of a poetic discourse. Indeed, for Breton poetry existed everywhere. It penetrated the domain of everyday life and of mundane objects, as demonstrated by his novel *Nadja*. Therefore it could also exist in the simplest messages, as Henri Behar reminds us on the back cover of his book. These numerous dedications are often lyrical in their tone, which enhances their emotional significance.

Right after the end of World War Two, Breton published one of his most

important poetic works, *Ode à Charles Fourier*. In this work, he expressed his utmost intellectual respect and admiration for the nineteenth-century thinker of utopian socialism, who advocated a return to the natural world and a free lifestyle inside radical communities known as “Phalanstères.” This long poem can precisely be read and interpreted as a long post-mortem dedication. In this case, the poetic dimension of the dedication was quite obvious. It stressed the intense dialogue between the poet and the thinker, in which Breton addressed Fourier personally in order to demonstrate their similar perspective on life, language and society.

The dedications included in Behar’s book are juxtaposed with short biographical statements about the writers and artists to whom they are addressed or who are themselves the authors of these dedications. This adds to the deeply informative value of the book: it enables the reader to better identify these writers and artists, since some of them are not necessarily famous ones. Among these names, one can find sometime surprising figures that one would not necessarily relate to the history of Surrealism. I am thinking here in particular of Henri Jeanson, who is well-known for his work as a prolific screenwriter in the French film industry. Behar reminds us that he was also originally a member of the anarchist movement and participated in the foundation of the Alphonse Allais Academy.

This particular case demonstrates the close ties between Breton and the world of popular culture, from songs to cinema. This world exists beyond that of avant-garde literature and art. In this regard, one should not forget that numerous modern French singers, including Léo Ferré, adapted texts and poems by surrealist writers and made them available to a wide audience.

Behar’s book escapes traditional categories of scholarship. It is neither a critical essay or monograph, nor an edition of prose texts or poems by a particular author. It pays attention to a literary form that is often overlooked or seen as merely anecdotal. This constitutes the most striking aspect of this endeavor. The sheer number of Breton’s dedications that are gathered in this more than 500-page volume is also quite impressive.

Finally, one must stress the importance of the word “gift” that is part of the book’s title. Indeed, these dedications can be viewed as a set of personal gifts. By definition, a gift is neither premeditated nor planned. It must exist in the present, as a spontaneous gesture that does not ask for any reward or retribution. In this sense, it reflects the spirit of the avant-garde and of Surrealism in particular, since Surrealism celebrated the paramount role of the instant and of the unforeseen in both art and life.

Breton saw poetry as an essential gift from man to man. According to his perspective, the poet did not only offer his words to the other, but also his body and soul. The form of the dedication therefore echoes Breton’s personal philosophy of poetry. Moreover, the gift implies the need for a total commitment of the subject, which is precisely what surrealist poetry required from its practitioners.

In conclusion, one must praise the hard work that this book represents. It paves the way for new forms of surrealist scholarship based on unknown or rare documents rather than on canonical texts. Due largely to its encyclopedic scope, it will also constitute a very useful tool for future students of the movement.