

Poetry, Surrealism, Jean-Jacques Pauvert and Greil Marcus: An Interview with Annie Le Brun¹

Question: How did you get involved with poetry?

Answer: Very early, when I was around 17 years old,² I knew that it would be impossible for me to be part of this world. “One isn’t serious when one is 17,”³ and that is something that society doesn’t forgive. At the age of 20, I was in such a state of refusal that I couldn’t imagine choosing any kind of career or joining up in one way or another. I read voraciously, because I had the impression that certain books spoke of what was preoccupying me, even if these weren’t books that were being published then.

Q: You didn’t feel part of your era?

A: I never had the feeling of belonging to one generation or another. But the 1960s were marked by a theoretical seriousness that I found intolerable. It came from a refusal of the perceptible world, as much in the philosophical domain with structuralism, as in the political domain, where the radicalism of the situationists⁴ had everything to attract me. But it would have meant accepting the absurd impasse that the situationists placed between themselves and the unconscious⁵ and, at the same time, obliterating the most lively [*agitante*] part of what we are by deliberately ignoring the ways in which dreams, desire and language affect us.

¹ *Trop de réalité*, interview conducted by Katrine Dupérou and published in *Le Matricule des Anges: Le Mensuel de la Littérature contemporaine* (#59 January 2005): http://www.lmda.net/din/tit_lmda.php?Id=20988. Translated by NOT BORED! 11 January 2019. All the footnotes and the title are by the translator.

² Ms. Le Brun was born in 1942.

³ A line from a poem by the French poet Arthur Rimbaud.

⁴ Founded in 1957, the Situationist International included Guy Debord, with whom Ms. Le Brun corresponded between 1989 and 1993.

⁵ See, for example, Guy Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations and the Situationist International’s Conditions for Organization and Action” (June 1957): “We now know that the unconscious imagination is poor, that automatic writing is monotonous, and that the whole ostentatious genre of would-be ‘strange’ and ‘shocking’ surrealistic creations has ceased to be very surprising.”

Also, when I encountered the books by the Surrealists, I saw that there were or had been people who approached these questions in essentially the same way I did.⁶

Q: What is your definition of Surrealism?

A: I don't believe that it is possible to give an acceptable definition of this movement, which was at the origin of the most diverse forms of expression. Surrealism is more an attitude to life than an avant-garde, which is what people try to make it in order to neutralize what's at stake, which is not at all aesthetic in nature. It is a way of being in the world that has allowed the majority of those who have risked it to discover the strangeness of what makes them unique. And so, when Breton declared in the list that appears at the beginning of *The First Manifesto of Surrealism*⁷ that "Sade is Surrealist in sadism," I took this as an aptitude or as a joke, and then – upon reflection – I saw in it a key to Surrealism, which gives to each person the possibility of finding in his or her own uniqueness that which separates him or her from others but also what links him or her to them, just as it did with Sade. If the feminists – furious at a surrealism that exalted love – had been less stupid, they would have realized that, more than anywhere else, women have expressed themselves in and through it, because they found there a climate of freedom such that they could venture into a place where they would never have been otherwise. This has been due to a quality of the air, a rarefied air in which exchanges pick up speed and thoughts become active.

Q: How do you situate Dada with respect to Surrealism?

A: You can't separate them or set them in opposition, as has been the rule. At the beginning, you find the same fury at a world whose values collapsed into the butchery of the war of 1914-1918. It was impossible to take such a world seriously. That's the Dada initiative in a nutshell, but, once that determination has been made, it is difficult to continue without settling into a negation that increasingly runs the risk of becoming formal, if not self-destructive. This is why we can say that Surrealism began with the inquest that appeared in one of the first issues of *The Surrealist Revolution*:⁸ "Is suicide a solution?" If we have the honesty to not become a professional negationist [*négateur*], this was indeed *the* question to

⁶ Ms. Le Brun joined the Surrealist group in the mid-1960s and stayed in it until 1969, when it officially disbanded.

⁷ Published in 1924.

⁸ Cf. *La Révolution surréaliste* #2, 15 January 1925.

which the Dada revolt led. Vaché,⁹ Cravan¹⁰ and Rigaut¹¹ responded to it by disappearing. But from the moment that you [decide to] continue to live, the question of meaningfulness is posed, a meaningfulness that is never given to you but must always be invented. And that was Surrealism's quest.

Q: Why set poetry in opposition to literature?

A: If poetry is what it seems to me to be, through the lens of Surrealism – an attitude [towards life], a way of being in the world, that doesn't exclude any perception or any form of expression – then literature is opposed to it because it is the activity of specialists. In fact, this opposition is very clear, because when Rimbaud declares, "The writer's hand is as good as the hand of the plowman. – What a century for hands! – I will never own mine,"¹² he is speaking of the impossibility of making a living from what is an opening to existence. Poetry isn't measured by the production of texts. In totalitarian regimes, the poets are the ones who kill themselves, who don't want to participate in any way. These days, given the plethora of poetic-literary productions, we can wonder if holding back and silence aren't more interesting. The experience of limits, free verse [*la poésie blanche*] and the impossibility of saying anything that allows you to write 300 pages are the new conformism, the academicism of today. We are living in an astounding epoch in which the limits are at the front and center of the stage, just as subsidized subversion has become the work [*le fait*] of professional literary hacks.

Q: Why publish poetry today?

A: I don't think that I have published "poetry." But it isn't by chance that I restated at the beginning of the book¹³ what I wrote almost 40 years ago: "I have nothing to say and even less than something to say." This is still true because I don't know – I don't want to know – where I'm going. And so I have been reproached for abandoning poetry for critical reflection.¹⁴ In fact, I have simply changed the register. At a certain moment, I felt obligated to try to understand what we were

⁹ Jacques Vaché, a French writer and designer who was born in 1895 and died of an opium overdose in 1919.

¹⁰ Arthur Cravan, a Swiss poet and boxer who was born in 1887 and disappeared somewhere in the Gulf of Tehuantepec in 1918.

¹¹ Jacques Rigaut, a French writer who was born in 1898 and committed suicide in 1929.

¹² Arthur Rimbaud, "Mauvais sang," *Une saison en enfer* (1873). Cf. also Annie Le Brun, *The Reality Overload* (Inner Traditions, 2008), p. 27.

¹³ *Ombre pour ombre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), a collection of previously published poems.

¹⁴ Le Brun's last book of poetry was published in 1977.

living through. As if, to escape from the misfortune of the times, I had to try to think about it. In retrospect, I realized that, the closer you look, I never stopped writing lyrical things. And so I wanted to see the successive forms [of my work] presented alongside the shadow that hasn't stopped accompanying me.

Q: What is lyricism?

A: It is difficult to speak about it when the subsidized poets lay claim to it in order to use their short breaths to exalt the most laughable pleasures of everyday life and when lyricism is, for the strong minds who take the intellectual high road, the worst thing to have around, like a definitively old-fashioned thing that must be gotten rid of. The fact is that both viewpoints are mistaken in that they see in lyricism an aestheticization of the real. On the contrary, lyricism is linked to the most violent awareness of disappearance. Lyricism is, first and foremost, a way of seeing beauty against the background of what threatens it. Lyricism is both the original [*premier*] eruption of poetry and the instinctive refusal of everything that hinders it. The current determination to deprive oneself of this transfiguring energy says a lot about the mediocrity of this epoch. We have nothing other than it with which to oppose death. Because if lyricism is always the development of a protest, as has been said, it is also a stunning passionate shield that protects the living by exalting it.

Q: In *La Traversée du livre*, Pauvert¹⁵ speaks of the revelation he experienced while reading your writing about Sade. What was this editorial adventure?

A: I met J.-J. Pauvert in 1977 following a television broadcast about my book *Lâchez tout*,¹⁶ which was a violent critique of neo-feminism. It was essentially an intervention against censorship, since – according to those ladies – [the writings of] Nietzsche, Sade and [Henry] Miller had to be censored as soon as possible. Pauvert saw the broadcast in which I had demanded, “What kind of liberation movement begins with censorship?” He beckoned me. I was very touched by this, because the majority of the books that were important to me had been published or reprinted by him. We haven't stopped working together since then. First he published *Les Châteaux de la subversion*,¹⁷ my essay on the *roman noir*.¹⁸ Then he asked me to write a preface to a reprinting of the complete works of Sade. I accepted without

¹⁵ Jean-Jacques Pauvert (1926-2014) was a French writer, editor and publisher. *La Traversée du livre* (Viviane Hamy, 2004) was his memoir.

¹⁶ Published by Le Sagittaire in 1977.

¹⁷ Published in 1982.

¹⁸ The “black novel,” Cf. film noir.

even thinking about it, as I was keen to take a strange journey into the deep waters of the question of love. Which didn't improve when he asked me to write an afterward for Jarry's *Le Surmâle*,¹⁹ which was one of the greatest books I knew. For his part, J.-J. Pauvert did extraordinary work on the *Anthologie historique des lectures érotiques*,²⁰ which was a monumental work that posed the question of the relationship between writing and desire, as a way of establishing how this question is linked with time, but also exploring how the erotic is not so much the text itself but one's reading of it. This anthology is a history of infatuation [*trouble*]. Only Pauvert could make it, because he is surely one of the greatest readers of the 20th century. He has both a rare, sensitive intelligence and an astonishing intellectual courage that goes hand-in-hand with being right when everyone else is wrong.

Q: Sade, Roussel,²¹ Jarry, Cravan: what is it that unites these figures who inhabit your writings?

A: They are people who have consciously risked everything to step out in front of their dreams and their wraiths and go on adventures to discover unknown landscapes. They never claimed they were doing anyone any good. As a result, the air got lighter. . . . Thus the extreme respect that I have for them.

Q: You are mostly referring to dead authors. Are such experiences²² impossible today?

A: It isn't impossible, but I haven't seen much that has moved me deeply. There are surely [impressive] human beings who are somewhere else, but everything seems constructed so that we know less [about them] than ever before. Given the networking of the current world, how can people who are outside of it, who have broken with it, appear in it? Instead of that, we are sold ersatz revolt that we can buy on the cheap: with *rap*,²³ a revolt for the poor; another one for the middle classes, directed at young executives and people in the advertising industry. . . . There is a veritable market in revolt: a dictionary of the *Siècle rebelle* published by Larousse,²⁴ a perfume. . . . A book that has its place in this market is *Lipstick*

¹⁹ Written by Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) and first published in 1902.

²⁰ Published in four volumes between 1985 and 2000.

²¹ Raymond Roussel (1877-1933), a French writer, playwright and poet.

²² The French word used here, *expériences*, can also mean "experiments."

²³ English in original.

²⁴ Over 1,300 pages long, this book – *Le Siècle rebelle: dictionnaire de la contestation XX^e siècle* – was compiled by Emmanuel de Waresquiel and published in 2004. Cf. also Annie Le Brun, *The Reality Overload* (Inner Traditions, 2008), p. 82.

*Traces*²⁵ by Greil Marcus, in which – situationism²⁶ helping out – Dada is declared the ancestor of the *punks*.²⁷ This is so imprecise that we are at the limits of distortion, if not disinformation, about the era in question. It is an exemplary product of the pre-chewed thinking that creates a sensation but also serves to camouflage the tragedy of the massacre of the *punk*²⁸ revolt, to which we must return. But we can already see in this book how, in order to forget that revolt, it aids in the flattening out of all historical perspective and the neutralization of the perceptible dimension that, today, determines the formatting of all cultural products. It's a little revolt, with trendy packaging, that one can buy in kit form for the holidays at the end of the year.²⁹ That book is an illustration of the critical analysis that I made, four years ago, in *Du trop de réalité*, which is being reprinted today.³⁰ Unfortunately, nothing has happened in the meantime to contradict the sad picture of this era that I made in it.

²⁵ *Lipstick Traces on a Cigarette: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press: 1989).

²⁶ Situationist critique turned into an ideology.

²⁷ English in original.

²⁸ English in original.

²⁹ But see what Guy Debord had to say about *Lipstick Traces*: “I thank you for the copy of your book, which our [mutual] friend Tom Levin sent to me a while ago. I understand that you have completed your research according to a conception – very personal to you – of the history of our century. With respect to those domains that I have personally known, I am largely in sympathy with your conception, of course. You have had the merit of discovering from far away in space and time several notable things that have long been hidden by the people who do not like them. There are errors of facts, and too many to attempt to rectify before your imminent second edition. But this is unavoidable in the very particular and assuredly difficult-to-access milieus in which you have gathered testimony” (letter to Greil Marcus dated 2 September 1989):

<http://www.notbored.org/debord-2September1989.html>

³⁰ In 2008, this book was published in translation under the title *The Reality Overload: The Modern's World Assault on the Imaginal Realm* (Simon & Shuster).