Review of Richard Spiteri, *Exégèse de Dernier malheur dernière chance de Benjamin Péret,* L'Harmattan, 2008, 143 pp.

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Benjamin Péret, fellow writers and critics insist, was the Surrealists' surrealist. From his periods of imprisonment for his political beliefs, or his engagement on the side of Trotskyites and Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, to his unwavering faithfulness to the poetry of automatism and his refusal of literary compromise and careerism, Péret embodied a kind of ideal type of surrealist revolt. Yet there is little critical work done on Péret and the relative scarcity of his works in French—not to mention in English—underscores the paradox that this most representative among the Surrealists is among the least represented. The poet Charles Simic gives some clues as to the grounds of this correlative: "In comparison to him, Breton's and Eluard's poetries look timid today, and Desnos is clearly a far more traditional lyricist. Perhaps only Artaud can match Péret's unrelenting irreverence."[1]

We thus applaud Richard Spiteri's project: an analysis of Péret's short epic poem *Dernier malheur dernière chance*, which has only been reprinted once since its first 800-copy printing in Paris in 1946.[2] We can only regret that this study of the sources of Péret's text does so little to improve our understanding of it.

Spiteri, a Maître de Conférences at the University of Malta and Péret specialist, brings his considerable erudition to bear on his principal objective: to trace the origins of "encysted" words and expressions of surrealist precursors, collaborators, and enemies and analyze Péret's rewriting of these "intertexts" (13). Among the usual suspects are such precursors as Lautréamont and Jarry and fellow Surrealists such as Breton and Paalen. A less familiar interlocutor is Pierre Mabille, whose works, from *Égrégores ou la vie des civilisations* to *Le Miroir du merveilleux*, informed Péret's work. Among the enemies, Spiteri singles out Aragon as the

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archetype of the Stalinian poet that Péret denounced in *Le Déshonneur des poètes*. Indeed, if Spiteri finds a recurrent theme in his reading of *Dernier malheur dernière chance*, it is the condemnation of Stalinist politics and poetics.

Spiteri's analysis follows Péret's text precisely. His four chapters correspond to the poem's four "chants" (to use Spiteri's term) and each part is broken down further into strophes and thematic sequences. Spiteri examines each verse, picking out words and expressions that merit explanation because 1) they belong to a specific sociolect, for example, the domain of military slang; 2) they constitute an allusion, a reference, or a citation of some previous or future texts by Péret himself or by another writer, or 3) they reference a particular cultural or historical context. An example taken from the first "chant":

> Qu'une rue passante devienne un pont prêt à s'écrouler
> sous le poids des souliers à haut talons qui frémissant l'ont franchi
> comme les chants d'allégresse de l'écorce ivre que fouille un oiseau
> éclat d'yeux épanouis sous la mousse des cils
> et qui passé sous le soleil moins puissant que ne le proclament les
> rivières jetées à bas des montagnes
> ahanant sous le poids de leurs neiges d'ours savants…[3](10)

Spiteri sees in the heeled shoe a reference to the shoe-shaped wooden spoon in Breton's *L'Amour fou* and notes the sexual connotation of the image of the bird. "La mousse des cils" recalls "l'embrun de tes yeux" from a love poem by Péret. Linking the exhortative structure of the verse ("Qu'un rue passante devienne") to similar structures in the poem's last part, Spiteri sees the beginning of this verse thematizing the hope, the "dernière chance" of the poem's title (32-33). He posits that the bridge passing under the sun is a reference to Stalin, making the rivers a reference to Stalin's electrification campaign (34). "Ours savants" is an ironic put down of Aragon, since the latter had used the expression "les ours savants de la social-démocratie" in his infamous poem, "Front rouge" (33).

Through such clever collating of possible sources, Spiteri is able to give a sense of how this poem reflects Péret's concern with denouncing the false poetry of nationalist poets, and his belief instead in the power of the marvelous and of sublime love. Nonetheless, very *parti pris* of giving a linear reading of an automatic text makes Spiteri's own text fragmented and lacking in logical transitions. Too often his analysis is limited to citing a possible source without arguing what this recurrence (often of a single word) tells us about Péret's poem. For example, Spiteri remarks: "Une caractéristique frappante de la strophe 2 est l'emploi d'un lexique galactique

et planétaire: 'voie lactée', 'taches solaires', 'tempêtes', 'éclairs', 'mers' et 'équateur'. Deux des images créées au moyen de ces mots, 'vent de voie lactée' et 'tempêtes de bains de lait', ont une réplique ailleurs dans la poésie de Péret: 'révolte de voie lactée' et 'bains de lait orageux'" (64-65). Yet he does not interpret this recurrence of astronomical imagery.

Throughout there is a tension between wanting to give a univocal meaning to Péret's text (this means that, this is a metaphor for that) and simple affirmations of the text's complexity. Thus, Spiteri asserts that an image of a frog is "a transparent caricature" of Stalin because the poem's frog breathes up all the incense of the churches—a reference to Stalin's personality cult—although elsewhere he merely notes the presence of frogs in another text by Péret (58-59, 97). A quotation from Apollinaire ("un tapis de haute lisse"), on the other hand, simply confirms "la complexité du poème de Péret" (68). One wonders how this specific borrowing makes Péret's text more complex and enriches its meaning. At this level of detail, the grammatical analyses undertaken by J. H. Matthews in his 1975 overview of Péret's poetics go further in helping the reader understand the generative mechanism behind the poet's images. Similarly, the thematic reading given by Julia Costich in 1979 gives a better sense of the poem's movement from despair to final hope.[4]

One of the more curious aspects of Spiteri's analysis is that he largely neglects that Péret is writing this in exile from occupied France. Although he remarks that Péret informed Breton shortly after arriving in Mexico that he was writing a poem caricaturing Pétain—a poem that has never been found (134)— there is no sense that some of the references to Stalin could just as well be references to Pétain. For example, Spiteri sees in the following verse a reference to both Ubu and to Stalin's persecution of Trotsky: " un drame/ dont le héros bicéphale d'une tête dévore son fils/ giclant comme une aorte tranchée par un courant d'air/et sur l'autre lisse des moustaches à flamme de chalumeau" (12). If, as Spiteri argues, the two-headed hero is Ubu because of the Polish emblem's double eagle which Ubu fights to defend, and Ubu is Stalin since both Breton and Péret make the connection elsewhere, then we might follow Spiteri when he asserts that the "blowtorch mustaches" reference the burglary of Trostky papers from the Institut d'histoire sociale by Stalin's secret police using a blowtorch to cut through the service entrance (42). Yet could one not also see the two-headed hero as the image of France split in two? Spiteri himself notes that Péret referenced Pétain's mustache (along with Hitler's, but not Stalin's) in a preface to a Spanish translation of Césaire's *Cahier* (42).

Spiteri ends his book with a discussion of *Dernier malheur dernière chance*'s relation to the epic genre to conclude that, although it does not have the nationalistic overtones that Bakhtin would assign to epic, it shares in epic's seriousness, and

references an epic past as the collective focus. One might also see in this work a counter-epic to the mythologizing undertaken by Vichy's *Révolution nationale*.

Spiteri's search for intertexts often leads to ingenious finds grounded in his extensive knowledge of the poet's work and context. If the claims are sometimes far-fetched, the accumulation of detail is often convincing as to the link between a specific image in the poem and some other text. Yet, as Spiteri himself writes, the poem resists interpretation (134) and, to a large degree, none is offered. Nonetheless, we can thank him for this reminder of the richness of Péret's thought, the force of his imagery, and integrity of his poetic practice.

1 "Péret," in *From the Hidden Storehouse*, by Benjamin Péret, translated by Keith Hollaman (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College, 1981).

2 In the 1971 second volume of Péret's complete works published by Eric Losefeld.

3 Benjamin Péret, *Dernier malheur dernière chance* (Paris: Fontaine, 1945), 10.

4 See J. H Matthews, *Benjamin Péret* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975) and Julia Field Costich, *The Poetry of Change: A study of the Surrealist Works of Benjamin Péret* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).