



REDUNDANT PENS AND STUPID WRITING

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The fact remains that it is totally impossible to speak about style.

—Louis Aragon

“I call *well written* that which is not redundant,” Louis Aragon declares in his work *Treatise on Style*, which is not so much a work on style *per se*, but on a specific kind of style denouncing redundancy generated by stupidity. Beginning with deliberations on who is a clown and who is a stable boy in the literary arena of the 1920s, Aragon exercises his activist literary skills to help him distinguish between normative truth and authoritative text. The work culminates with a denouncing of “the dragon Not-conforming-your-acts-to-your-words” as the monster which controls the out-of-control writings, as it were, of surrealist writers. Reserving his right to ultimately “shit on the entire French army” Aragon’s rally against *stupid writing* hinges on the importance of eliminating redundancy from the activism involved in the surrealist project. As, however, Aragon himself remains true to surrealist ideas of writing, this article argues that good activism is activism which is not redundant. Here, the question of redundancy will be seen from three angles: 1. To what extent is a redundant discourse powerful? 2. What is the role of the particular in literary activism? 3. Can redundancy lend authority to the text which denounces it?

One of the marks of modernity which legitimizes attacks on the very tradition that forms the background of one’s writing—such as Aragon’s—is freedom. André Breton sets the pace in his *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924) when he proclaims that “only the word freedom can still fill me with enthusiasm” [Calinescu, 1987, 111]. Freedom for Aragon, however—four years later when he is writing his *Traité du Style*—marks a point of departure from surrealist ideas. Aragon’s emphasis is on the thought that writing is neither neutral nor having an automatic function. For Aragon, writing and reading become metaphors for the neutrality of style that either incorporates, resists, or opposes automatic messages. As freedom in surrealist writing follows its own excesses, bliss and pleasure, in order to settle in the transformations that it sets up, freedom for Aragon marks a style of writing that looks back on what constitutes it, what makes it repetitive, and resolute. Insofar as style is defined by freedom, mapping literary experiences, as Aragon does in his

treatise, is an enterprise which calls thought into action. While style is seen as analytic thought, action (here in terms of literary activism) is seen as a redundant potential. However, as style actualizes the potential in action, style then takes literary experience into the realms of a thought's universality and an action's particularity. My contention is that style mediates between action and thought and is the constituent of freedom.

Within these parameters Breton's freedom is only a fragment of a potential for a poetics whose concern is with explaining the essence of automatism in surrealist writing—such as, for instance, the innermost recesses of the subconscious—rather than the significance of what constitutes the basis for the literariness of the surrealist project. That is to say, where the surrealists stop at the significance of systematic nonconformism, Aragon launches into a discourse which stresses the significance of redundancy while trying to eliminate it. Hence, redundancy for Aragon has both negative and positive connotations.

The negative view of redundancy can be extracted from any dictionary where the term designates mainly that which is superfluous, unnecessary, and unusual in a text, a sentence, or a word. Linguists on the other hand see redundancy as a positive term without which communication would not be possible (Jakobson). In her rendition of texts which form the genre *roman à thèse*, or the novel of ideas, Susan Suleiman charts 23 types of redundancy. To the modernist novel whose concern is with the multiplication of meanings, she opposes the *roman à thèse* which aims at "a single meaning and total closure." Her claim is that redundancy as repetition is what closes or puts a limit on the possibility of offering different interpretations to the text. Repetition is, however, different from the notion of redundancy and it manifests various degrees of predictability. Whereas an ideological text is more likely predictable than not predictable, the *nouveau roman* employs repetition in unpredictable ways. It goes without saying that redundancy as repetition, as Suleiman points out, has to figure differently in a text in order for it to be effective [Suleiman, 1983, 153].

Now, while Aragon was of course not familiar with either Greimas's semantic redundancy, nor Roland Barthes's idea of the type of redundancy that informs the *writerly* text, he was familiar with the French rhetoric that goes by the name of *la dissertation française*. Suleiman puts this category in a nutshell when she asserts that it is "characterized by the redundant triad: saying what you are about to say; saying it; saying what you have just said" [153]. Beyond the political message, this triad lends itself poetically to the surrealist text which consciously uses it in a playful way, at all levels, whether linguistic, lexical, or discursive. It could even function as a subtle indication of the writing which, although confined to the stable, aspires to be humorous.

One of the few examples Aragon actually uses to analyse stylistic structures is his discussion of tautology in Valéry. Aragon sees a sentence like *Je me voyais me voir* (I saw myself see myself, lit. I saw me see me, trans. note) as Valéry's *play of mirrors*. These mirrors merely lend one's sentences *ghostlike depths* [Aragon, 1991, 77]. Consequently Aragon declares himself unimpressed by what he calls such "tricks" which ultimately are neither

redundant nor stupid, but merely tautological. After a page-long analysis of the phrase, he goes on to conclude:

What remains as far as the eye can see is M. Valéry in front of his mirror, making no discovery, and having only a banal and repetitive glimpse of himself: *je me voyais me voir*—he could just as well have said *je me voyais, me voyais*, which like certain streets, goes only one way. [77–78]

Semantically, Aragon's proposition is a prompt example of redundancy which takes a one-way street, but only to get to a roundabout. Insofar as humour is the roundabout of poetry, or as he puts it, "the sine qua non of poetry" [69], humour in the mirror, as it were, defines a clown, and thus sets him aside from the aspiring philistine. It is redundancy—via predictability which is contingent on unpredictability—that allows Aragon to engage in defining things in relation to their potential. That is to say, when Aragon writes: "Definition of a clown: a gentleman who wants to be worthy of the events of the day" [8], he is making manifest—or explicit—what literary activism implies.

A literary text which exhibits activist slogans is a text which is able to define its own statements according to a formula which allows for the interchangeable application of form to content. At the end of the day, what the clown has to overcome is the state of immobility, where being, worthy or not, becomes a question of doing. The whole idea of the redundant potential rests in a series of 'dichotomic' relations: acting/being, acting/dreaming, acting/resting. In Aragon's scheme any logical consequence of the idea of acting becomes, in a literary text, a syllogistic aphorism. Literary activism, as opposed to political activism, is what redundancy is to discourse. One is defined by the other. Activism takes the one-way street to get to the literariness of the roundabout.

What is interesting in Aragon's *Treatise on Style* is the way he employs the negative connotations of redundancy to emphasize the positive ones. Whereas redundancy that is defined by the unnecessary can still ensure coherence in a text, what interests Aragon is not redundancy that ensures the possibility of communication, but the conditions under which communication depends on the kind of redundancy which makes everything ambiguous, yet explicit on a poetical level.

By making his own writing redundant, Aragon demonstrates that the function of writing is always conditioned and a conditioning element of a preconceived system, and as such relies on a pre-existing tradition. In his advocacy of a resolute style of writing Aragon is more modern than the modernists. Whereas style for them is experimentation itself—roughly put—style for Aragon is the condition for the dynamics of experimentation. The redundant potential, in other words, is for Aragon a manifestation of a performative fragment that reiterates the already written. Aspects of style cannot manifest themselves other than through that kind of precision which he says "is born of itself; it has no creator" [38]. In this equation precision stands for the performative function of style which exhibits the capacity to express a truth that determines actions, speech acts, motivations and intentions. However, as soon as precision is made necessary, it becomes

redundant, and unreliable. Says Aragon: "In a treatise on style it is necessary to study the episodic forms of rebellion, their origins, their evolutions, for the first question is: how in hell does history get written?" [37]. Aragon's examples mark style as a sign able to produce references to oppositions between a multiplicity of potentially contradictory signifying events: "Before it reached his heart, the bullet that killed Dovalle in a duel pierced a poem written for a woman. More could be said about romanticism" [37]. What is redundant here is also what is most interesting in the sense that the redundant element relies on the potentiality of different events to be synchronic. Insofar as history cannot render duels without the corresponding love letters, the possibility of writing without reiterating what is already written is rendered grotesque as a matter of necessity. As Aragon puts it:

Humanity loves: speaking in proverbs, pigeonholing, cloaking a worrisome thought in comforting words. It thinks in delegations. Words that impressed it return and it uses them the way one absentmindedly hums a tune. In this way, its poets and thinkers contribute to its moronification. The influence and power of a mind can be measured by the number of stupidities it inspires. The ideas of an era are crudely gathered around certain spontaneous crystallizations. This is what constitutes historical intellectual development: this is what one alludes to when speaking of progress, civilization, enlightenment. It is also what university professors comprehend only vaguely, since all their teaching tends to confirm a few truisms, and to draw out of good little students the Answer that sheds darkness on everything. [34-35]

A central claim in Aragon's tirade revolves around the idea that what outlives the mere historical rendition of facts is the sovereignty inherent in proverbs and maxims. The epigrammatic fold embedded in what humanity remembers is a variant of the humorous structure that informs redundancy as the *sine qua non* of style. That is to say, what a proverb implicitly expresses is the explicit expression of the historical context in which the proverb appears. For Aragon, what is redundant situates itself as a potential for the authority a text is able to exhibit. Furthermore, Aragon's insight is that humanity's take on redundancy becomes the normative truth for literary establishments. Insofar as normative truth, for Aragon, can only be expressed in aphoristic form, a text becomes authoritative only to the extent that it addresses the question of stupidity. Consequently, stupidity is turned into a measuring stick and a mediator between past and present. Conversely, what measures the measuring stick are proverbs and aphorisms which express implicitly what is explicitly self-evident in stupidity. Thus, Aragon understands redundancy as a synthesis, which prompts him to pose a second question:

What, then, is the relation between the past and the present? [...] The answer is as plain as the nose on your face. What seems to unite these various factors of rebellion is not their nature, but the opposition they encounter. After an entire century, stupidity has not budged. [38]

One of the reasons why Aragon is continuously up against stupidity is that stupidity has marked entire generations of writers. While seemingly

recognizable, stupidity, however, is difficult to denounce. The difficulty arises from the fact that stupidity is fluctuant, yet flagrant, it is everywhere and nowhere. In her recent book tellingly titled *Stupidity* (2003), Avital Ronell sets out to denounce stupidity in a manner similar to Aragon's style. She begins her 'task' after a few considerations on how stupidity might be defined, setting herself a double goal: to denounce stupidity and do it with style. As she puts it:

It is undoubtedly someone's responsibility to name that which is stupid. In the recent past the task of denouncing stupidity, as if in response to an ethical call, has fallen to the "intellectual" or to someone who manages language beyond the sphere of its private contingencies. [Ronell, 2002, 37]

Yet where Aragon operates with oppositions that frame stupidity from the outside as it were, Ronell operates with stupidity from its inside, and the movement is towards the margins of what frames intelligence. "Stupidity exposes while intelligence hides" [10], Ronell further asserts, thus underscoring the fact that stupidity is not "that stupid," insofar as it is "pervasively inside" [11] and always ready to expose itself. Aragon's own bewilderment regarding the question of how the relationship between the past and the present is exposed in history books—how, why, when, and above all, in what style history gets to be written—is clearly marked in Ronell's discourse on stupidity as "the purveyor of self-assured assertiveness." She writes:

Neither a pathology nor an index as such of moral default, stupidity is nonetheless linked to the most dangerous failures of human endeavor. I hesitate to say here what stupidity is because, eluding descriptive analysis, it switches and regroupes, turns around and even fascinates [...] While stupidity is "what is there," it cannot be simply located or evenly scored [...] To the extent that morality teaches hatred of too great a freedom, it implants the need for limited horizons and immediate tasks, teaching the narrowing of perspectives. [3]

Ronell here seems to follow writers such as Aragon for whom writing is a call for an ethical and aesthetic style. Humanity must be rendered in response to what is seen as moral, political, and intellectual failures. The form of humanity is also measured by the content in one's writing which specifically deals with denouncing stupidity. Yet one of Aragon's factors of rebellion is the writer's prerogative to trample all over his text to the point where what is encountered is the indistinguishable form of the opposition form/content, insofar as the kind of redundancy that renders a text powerful is the opposition between form and content. As Alyson Waters—Aragon's translator—observes in her introduction, "if at one point he tells us that he 'tramples syntax because it must be trampled,' we bear witness to that 'trampling'" [xviii]. Aragon thus positions himself as if in the middle of writing, and this position allows him to also engage in acts of denouncing that which only pretends to go by the name of style. As he pertinently explains:

I am in the midst of style, and I hold fast to it. I ask at this point for critical rigor, and in particular for a long and conditioned judgement

of style. Bear in mind that I use the word *style* intentionally, and not the word *language*, which would allow me to avoid repeating myself. First of all because I am not afraid of repeating myself. What is worth saying once is worth saying twice and more. [Aragon, 1991, 28]

Making form indistinguishable from content (and not just making the two informative of each other) is Aragon's idea of the particular in the kind of literary activism he is engaged in, namely simultaneously to defend what is implicit in surrealist writing—from a stylistic point of view—and attack what that writing makes explicit—from an ideological point of view.

Literary activism is at its best when it seems to support a negative view of style as a mere obstacle to effective ideological action. However, as soon as an ideology is stylish it becomes redundant. Aragon's argument orbits around the idea that only through redundancy is one able to identify what is valuable in a discourse. Here, Aragon draws on oppositions that inform surrealism. First, there is freedom, and then there is rigor. Insofar as freedom informs the formal level of surrealist writing, rigor constitutes its content. However, Aragon seems to say, what elicits freedom in one's writing is not the idea which is inherently rigorous, but the pen. One writes with a pen. Here, Aragon endows the pen with a will and a voice of its own, quite literally. Typographically, the only place in the book that emphasizes a word in block letters and sets it apart from the marks that it makes is the word 'Pen.' Freed from the page, the pen positions itself as if *en garde* and is ready to duel in the name of the glove thrown in the text's face, as it were. In the first part of his book, Aragon thus works with a formal ritual that the pen as the master musketeer designs in the name of freedom. Freedom is also what confers on Aragon's writing the right to define and then retract from defining. His own *definitions* illustrate the point:

I confer a very elevated meaning on the word style. I put its beautiful cloak back on I return its pure gaze to it. I call style the accent adopted by the flow of the symbolic ocean, reflected by a given man, that universally mines the earth with metaphors. And now, groom, untether this definition! Let it kick and break your teeth. [105]

Freedom, however, is condemned to follow in the footsteps of four types of texts governed by the regular employment of four categories of verbs that make literature redundant: to depart, to travel, to escape, and to kill oneself [47]. What unites these verbs is their degree of difference in what Aragon sees as the unnecessary: departing is, for instance, unnecessary whereas to kill one oneself is totally unnecessary.

The picture that Aragon portrays of the surrealist movement is a sketch that completes itself. Arguing that "surrealism defines itself by those whom it defends and by those who attack it" [100], Aragon adopts a position that allows him to stand in a contingent relation to surrealism. Neither affirming nor denying the values of surrealism, yet precisely reiterating these values, Aragon points to the redundancy objective inherent in reiteration. Being contingent means, for Aragon, "giv[ing] in to your own arbitrariness" [95]. This kind of contingency finds reverberation beyond Aragon's text. That is, one cannot say much either about Aragon's ideas or style that Aragon himself has not already said. One's critical essay on Aragon is already made redundant by Aragon himself. Aragon's move to

reconcile freedom and rigor grounds rigor in the kind of freedom which elicits dogmatism. However, what the reader is made to read dogmatically occupies in fact a higher position in the text.

In an interesting essay on psychic automatism and its link to the idea of an “original creative principle,” Arthur Danto argues that “Breton was a dogmatist raised to a higher power” [Danto, 1999, 17]. On the premise that “actions are considered ‘automatic’ when they take place without their agents being conscious—or fully conscious—of their taking place,” Danto goes on to analyse several theses on automatism proposed by the artist Robert Motherwell—who worked in the 1970s—in a letter to Edward Henning. And here I quote Danto to Henning on Motherwell. First Motherwell: “Psychic automatism ‘cuts through any a priori influences—it is not a style.’” Then, says Danto: “because the psychic automatism of an artist A is not a style, one cannot speak of, or logically even think it sensible to look for, the influence of artist B on A.” And Motherwell again: “Psychic automatism is ‘entirely personal’ [...] Psychic automatism ‘is by definition original’” [28]. Motherwell’s conception of psychic automatism is compared in art to the act of “doodling.” Danto’s take on Motherwell’s proposition two is by saying that, if two automatist artists should resemble each other it would be purely accidental, while in the third case originality is achieved, so to speak, by overcoming the distinction between being and doing. As he puts it: “One is what one *does*” [29].

Now, by a metaleptic reversal we can look at Aragon’s ‘danto-esque’ take on dogmatism and its redundant correlative in literary activism, which deals with influence, resemblance and originality. If one could imagine an exchange between Motherwell and Aragon, Motherwell’s thesis on automatism which is not a style would be countered by Aragon’s premise: “one must dismiss the useless reiteration of facts that have already been proven” [Aragon, 1991, 98]. When Aragon says in the next sentence: “I call *well written* that which is not redundant,” he refers here to the idea of impulse which comes between action and thought. That is to say, if one writes impulsively, thought cannot precede the act of writing. What can nevertheless be deemed thoughtful in impulsive writing is not the thought as such, as much as it is the image of thought that action puts forward.¹ Using the first sentence as a premise to the latter, Aragon construes via action that precedes thought what can be named the matrix of redundant contingency. Basically, if action precedes thought, then thought must stand in a redundant relationship with the self. In this sense, activism could be defined as the thought’s redundant potential, yet able to manifest the self. This gives rise to the particular in literature, where the redundant is made contingent, as it were, on the idea that action is not the site of being. That there should be any dilemma in treating such subjects as action and dream, Aragon sees as a sign of “stupidity in full force.” What works for him here

¹ Aragon’s translator, Alyson Waters, makes a reference to one of Benjamin’s texts, “Surrealism,” which furthermore illustrates my point: “For in the joke, too, in invective, in misunderstanding, in all cases where an action puts forth its own image and exists, absorbing and consuming it, where nearness looks with its own eyes, the long-sought image sphere is opened... so that no limb remains unrent” (xix).

are some common-sense bottom-lines which are presented as answers to the question:

Who could have gotten the idea into his head that dream and action were opposites? The dream is the opposite of the absence of a dream, and action is the opposite of inaction. Obviously dream and action are not compatible, like vermicelli and caramel. The idea of hitching them to one another is one of those brilliant ideas of a nitwit. It responds to nothing in the reality whose door we have all gone through. [...] Dream and action. Action and dream. The day will come when students will be taught this unbelievable cliché of recent times and they will be bored shitless by it. Dream and action. Try some, oh constipated ones. Dream and action. Brochure sent free upon request. [114–115]

Aragon is not engaged in defining. He does not define influence, whether it comes in the disguise of either dream or action. However, *Treatise on Style* abounds with examples of redundant contingency based on the ability to imagine what it means to be influenced. He says: “André Gide is neither a stable-boy nor a clown but a bothersome bore. In fact he thinks he is Goethe. That is, he would like to be funny” [9]. While it cannot be denied that if Gide looked at himself in the mirror, he would probably see what he would perceive as the original version of himself, there is no guarantee that Gide’s self would not emerge in the mirror as that of Goethe. Valéry’s formula in Gide’s hand would be penned down as: ‘I saw myself see myself as Goethe’. Resemblance and originality, Aragon would inform Motherwell, go hand in hand.

An example of originality contingent on resemblance as redundant influence is given in Aragon’s most accurate picture of surrealism, which also tends to look at itself as if in a mirror. Departing from the premise that: “Surrealism is inspiration recognized, accepted and put to work” [94], Aragon claims that the surrealist quest is the mirror quest. And we ask: mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all? In Aragon’s aphoristic vein the mirror would answer on behalf of the surrealist, “I saw myself see myself as Goethe, the poet Valéry.” For says Aragon: “In reality, all poetry is surrealist in its movement. This is what makes monkeys who dutifully try to reproduce poetry’s gestures in front of their mirrors think they are poets” [95].

Efficient literary activism is the activism which leaves the poet’s ‘rhetoric of nothing’ to prove itself redundant. For as he says:

To speak in order to say nothing: the devil if this is what poets are all about. For one must compare this ‘nothing’ to the ‘something’ of people who aren’t poets. The claim to substance is passed off as substance. Between true poetic expression—I am not saying the poem—and other kinds of expression lies the distance between thought and chatter. Still, poetic emptiness is an idea which is so universally accepted that even poets have been known to grab on to it and adorn themselves with it. They have been the plaything of this mirage, and they have demanded the right to say nothing, with pride. [115–116]

Indeed, contingent redundancy is dependent on a process of klysmatic a(ra)gonization, which consists in using the pen as enema. Duelling, for Aragon, is action preceded not by thought, but by the emptying of one's colon of the stupidities one has been forced to digest. There is a great degree of style in the idea of shitting on the entire French army, as a manifestation of one's activism against the army's refusal to acknowledge the writings of those who hate it. Indeed, it is as well a most redundant 'doing,'² which is yet followed by another action, namely flushing, so that one can enjoy one's sitting with the refreshing sound of criticism and its a(ra)gon.

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² Aragon informs us in an epigraph to his first chapter in *Treatise on Style* on the etymology of the verb to do in French: "'To do' in French means to shit. For example: Let us not force our talent: We would DO nothing with grace" (Aragon, 1991: 8).