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Annette Becker

The Avant-garde, Madness and the Great War

If the Great War was not the creator of the surrealist movement, it was certainly its catalyst. The majority of future surrealists, writers or artists, were part of the war generation. Joë Bousquet, like Paul Eluard, fought on one side of the trenches; Max Ernst on the other. And it was the war poet Guillaume Apollinaire who invented the term 'surrealism' in his 1916 play, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*.¹ It is striking to note other links between the war and the history of the surrealists. André Breton, Théodore Fraenkel and Louis Aragon served as doctors or orderlies in the medical services which treated physically and psychologically disabled men. Several were severely wounded: Joë Bousquet never fully recovered, living a bedridden existence in the rue de Verdun in Carcassonne until his death in 1950. He had become, he said, 'the cross that we raise above the theatre of a catastrophe'.²

Can we locate in the slaughter of 1914–18 the origins of the surrealist vision of the dismembered body and soul, their familiarity with slaughterhouses, both real and symbolic? During the second world war, André Breton wrote that surrealism was defined by its relation to the two wars. 'Surrealism in effect was the only intellectual movement which succeeded in covering the distance separating them.'³ 'I insist', he noted, 'on the fact that surrealism cannot

1 'Pour caractériser mon drame je me suis servi d'un néologisme qu'on me pardonnera car cela m'arrive rarement et j'ai forgé l'adjectif surréaliste . . . qui définit assez bien une tendance de l'art qui si elle n'est pas plus nouvelle que tout ce qui se trouve sous le soleil n'a du moins jamais servi à formuler aucun credo, aucune affirmation artistique et littéraire . . . Quand l'homme a voulu imiter la marche, il a créé la roue qui ne ressemble pas à une jambe. Il a fait ainsi du surréalisme sans le savoir.' Guillaume Apollinaire, préface aux *Mamelles de Tirésias, Oeuvres poétiques* (Paris 1965), 865–70. The first article published by Aragon, in 1917, was devoted to *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. The poet Jacques Vaché, then in uniform, decided to let off a salvo of gunfire during the play, in which he and his friend André Breton assisted. Vaché objected to Apollinaire's 'surrealism' in this play, which to Apollinaire was an appeal to repopulate France.

2 Louis Aragon, in 1942, wrote an account of Bousquet's work, entitled *Traduit du silence*. Here Aragon noted: 'Le mal du siècle, notre mal du siècle . . . il faut lui reconnaître un seul visage et un seul nom: la guerre . . . C'est un mal à l'échelle de notre connaissance du monde, et des machines toutes puissantes qui le peuplent, et de la grande inversion sociale qui nous courbe, c'est une peste ancienne qui s'est fardée aux couleurs d'aujourd'hui, la guerre. Et cela est si vrai qu'on a beau n'y parler d'elle nulle part, elle est partout présente dans *Traduit du silence*, elle domine ce livre, elle en est la lumière de cruauté.' As cited by Alain Freixe, 'Une folie d'après Lacan', *Revue du Littoral*, 37 (April 1993), 130. I am grateful to Alain Freixe for having shared with me his deep knowledge of these authors, and particularly of Bousquet.

3 These remarks were made at Yale, during his exile in the USA in 1942. Henri Béhar, 'André

be understood historically without reference to war — I would say from 1918 to 1938 — both the war it left behind and the one to which it returned.⁴

The linkage between war and surrealism appears unsurprising. The war was the period of the movement's gestation; but there the problems and paradoxes begin. If the surrealists locate their origins in both war and madness, then why is it that they almost never discuss the specific forms of 'madness' produced by the war? This article offers some reflections on this paradox.

In the 1920s and 1930s, many surrealist and expressionist artists and poets wrote that they were marked by war, trapped between beauty and violence, between despair and fascination. One case in point is the painter André Masson:

For me, violence is part of existence, and one must express it. That is why I returned from Switzerland to serve in the army, to be a common soldier, to see violence — not to inflict it, but to see it — but I was in it and had to be in it. I gave and received blows If war had had the continuous horror described by Barbusse in *Under Fire* or by Remarque in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, it would have been unbearable. There were compensations, huge compensations. They have since been described time and again by psychologists. There were moments of real happiness, even under fire. There were things which were crudely beautiful to see The rockets, the smell of the battlefield which was intoxicating. Yes, all that. 'The air was drenched in a terrible liquor.' Yes, all that Apollinaire had seen. Only a poet could say that. My God, he even mounted a defence of war. No. It was merely a defence of life in death. He defended peace in war. Because peace within war, that is something. Relaxation, all of a sudden.⁵

The French painter Fernand Léger and his German colleagues Otto Dix and Max Beckmann, shared similar reactions. 'I had to have that experience: how someone near me suddenly fell and was finished I am a man of reality. I must see everything. I need to experience all the abysses of life. That is why I volunteered.'⁶ Beckmann was a hospital orderly; he tended soldiers suffering from typhus and worked in an operating theatre. After a nervous breakdown, he returned to civilian life in 1917. His war letters have these reflexions:

My will to live is stronger than ever, though I have passed through horrible things and faced death more than once. But when death is everywhere, you live more intensely. I have made several sketches, which protect me from death and danger (3 October 1914) I oscillate constantly between great joy about everything I see anew, and depression for the loss of my individuality, and a profoundly ironic sense of myself and the world. After all that, one can only admire its indescribable variety and inventiveness (2 March 1915) It was

Breton, 'l'histoire et le sens du mythe' in Paule Plouvier et al. (eds), *Trois poètes face à la crise de l'histoire, André Breton, Saint-John Perse, René Char* (Paris 1997), 13.

4 André Breton, *Situation du surréalisme entre les deux guerres* (Paris 1945).

5 Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec André Masson* (Ryôan-ji 1985), 38–40 (edited from a radio interview of 1957).

6 Otto Dix, as cited by Iain Boyd Whyte, 'Otto Dix's Germany: From Wilhelmine Reich to East/West Divide', *Otto Dix* (London 1992), 28.

marvellous here; despite the savagery and the mass killing, I still hear music all the time, and I can't temper my pleasure (28 March 1915).⁷

Even Jacques Vaché, in 1914, left for the war 'full of fervour and extraordinary things'.

In all these moments I had revelations of humanity, revelations positively dizzying, yes that's the word, this vacuum disconcerted me — this slaughter — this extraordinary moment for those who know how to see — all that gave me moments of astonishment that I have kept to myself.⁸

If a great many combatants, and not only poets and painters, shared this aestheticized vision of consent to the violence of war during the war itself, few had the courage to say so, and then to explore these feelings after the event.

There was another attitude registered in these memoirs. It is a rarer rejection of the war during the war itself. This is the case with respect to Philippe Soupault, distraught by the death of his cousin at the front in 1917: 'I was no longer a civilian . . . I was different . . . Henceforth I would be a rebel . . . I understood that this war was a slaughter which those in power refused to stop.'⁹ For the majority, the rejection of the war was a postwar phenomenon. It was something the surrealists rarely mentioned. It was only in 1964 in the foreword to *Anicet ou le Panorama, roman*, that Aragon wrote:

To ignore the war was for us a system, false without doubt but directed *against* the war. We thought that to talk of the war, even to damn it, was still to advertise its wares. Our silence seemed to us a way of *deleting* the war, of arresting it. Don't waste your time by telling me this was puerile, or of telling me about *Under Fire* (for which we had at least a certain respect) . . . If suppressing the war seemed an efficient way of combating it, this simply expressed our faith in the written word. To us everything written was an advertisement, or what today we would call propaganda. Breton called religion an advertisement for Heaven.¹⁰

The young medical aid Aragon seems to have forgotten 50 years later that he

7 As cited by Carla Schulz-Hoffmann, 'War, Apocalypse, and the "Purification of the World"', *The Romantic Spirit in German Art, 1790–1990* (London 1994), 198.

8 Unpublished letter of Jacques Vaché to Jean Sarment, cited in *Le rêve d'une ville, Nantes et le surréalisme* (Nantes 1994), 201.

9 Philippe Soupault, *Mémoires de l'oubli, 1914–1923* (Paris 1981), 33.

10 Aragon in 1964, *Oeuvres romanesques complètes*, La Pléiade, vol. 1 (Paris 1997), 10. The novel was written between the autumn of 1918 and the spring of 1919, when Aragon was at the front, between the Chemin des Dames and the Orient. In chapter 3, the war is mentioned three times, through Jacques Vaché and Guillaume Apollinaire. 'On ne lui a connu que deux amants heureux lesquels sont morts assez rapidement pour donner à réfléchir. Le dernier avait gagné ses bonnes grâces en transfigurant pour elle les horreurs de la guerre, aussi trépassa-t-il le jour-même que la guerre se termina.' *Anicet*, 53. Citation by Breton in a letter of 16 April 1919 to Aragon: 'Pour moi la poésie, l'art, cesse d'être une fin, devient un moyen (de réclame)

La réclame cesse d'être un moyen pour devenir une fin,

Mort de l'art (pour l'art)

Démoralisation.

Il faut naturellement prendre le mot réclame dans son sens le plus large. C'est ainsi que je menace la politique, par exemple. Le christianisme est une réclame pour le ciel.' *Ibid.*, 1028.

had not received the Croix de Guerre at the front for his militant (or silent) rejection of the war. Much earlier he had written:

We loved the war like a negress. And with what emotion . . . We never sufficiently regret this exceptional state. I voluntarily sacrifice humanity to the dreadful. The sun of fear is an incomparable brew. War, despite its little poisons, has the grandeur of the wind.¹¹

The future surrealists were, during the war, neither bloodthirsty combatants nor pacifists, dedicated, as Paul Eluard put it in 1916, to 'do their duty'. As such they were representative of the vast majority of those who fought in the war.

The Dadaists were the inventors of the metaphor of madness as a form of war resistance. For instance, Jean Arp, who was discharged from military duty on the grounds of mental illness (which he simulated), wound up in Switzerland where he met the founders of what soon enough would be called Dada. One way of posing the question of origins is the following: when did faking madness start, and when did opposition to the war begin to take the form of simulating insanity? 'We were looking for an elementary art which would be capable of saving humanity from the furious insanity of the times. We aspired to a new order which could restore the equilibrium between heaven and hell.'¹² 'Each man must cry: there is a great destructive, negative job to do: sweep away, clean up.'¹³

In Berlin, George Grosz and John Heartfield organized the first International Dada Fair in 1920. They invited Otto Dix to participate; he contributed his canvas entitled 'War cripples: a self-portrait'. Four invalids, with stumps, prostheses, facial wounds, broken bodies, disfigured faces, broken spirits. Thus Otto Dix. But where is the nihilism of Dada?

Dada hovered between a kind of mad individualism and nihilism. From this point of view, the way to see war is as a destructive agent which must be embraced in order to turn its destructiveness in on itself. Julien Gracq put it this way:

The Dada movement, born in the year when the world war showed its first symptoms of complete decomposition, was the most determined and direct outcome of destruction and sacking that literature had known . . . A filiation without division — and this is what matters — unifies Dada with surrealism. All the founders, like Vaché, were marked by the sacramental signs of their own suicide.¹⁴ As Breton put it: 'Vaché is the surrealist in me.'¹⁵

11 In *Littérature*, no. 15, 1920, with respect to Drieu La Rochelle, *Fond de cantine*. Cited by Marguerite Bonnet, *André Breton, Naissance de l'aventure surréaliste* (Paris 1975), 47.

12 Jean Arp cited by Evan Maurer, 'Dada and Surrealism' in *Primitivism in XXth Century Art*, vol. 2 (New York 1984), 537.

13 Tzara, *Dada 3*, Zürich, December 1918.

14 Julien Gracq, 'Le surréalisme et la littérature contemporaine', *Oeuvres complètes*, La Pléiade, vol. 1 (Paris 1989), 1012.

15 Gracq, *André Breton, quelques aspects d'un écrivain*, La Pléiade, vol. 1 (Paris 1948), 412. Note these Dadaist sentiments:

Suicide was indeed the path of several of these people; it signified both a rejection of the war and a kind of poetic incarnation.¹⁶ Jacques Vaché's suicide can be seen clearly in this light. His was a masquerade of death, arising out of an overdose at an opium party in January 1919.¹⁷

The last letter he sent to Breton, on 14 November 1918, is symptomatic of these young writers' style converted at times to tragedy. The war is over; he is still in uniform, and he spins his metaphors like a cinema reel.¹⁸

I left the war sweetly spoiled, even well, in the manner of a village idiot, just as I wanted . . . well, well . . . which film will I play in . . . How will I do it, my poor friend, to get through these last months in uniform? (They told me the war was over.) I was at the end of my tether, and still THEY lied . . . They suspected something. As long as they don't lobotomise me while they have me in their power.¹⁹

For the young medical student André Breton, the experience of working at the military hospital at St Dizier between August and December 1916 was fundamental. His friend Théodore Fraenkel noted that

Breton in the asylum was deeply disturbed to see that the inmates were greater poets than he. There was a terrifying cannon burst . . . During evening visits to St Dizier with A.B., I confirmed my diagnosis of mental degeneration . . . He forced me to hear the sound of dementia, which interested me only passively, as always.²⁰

'DADA lui ne sent rien, il n'est rien, rien, rien

Il est comme vos espoirs: rien

Comme vos paradis: rien

Comme vos idoles: rien

Comme vos hommes politiques: rien

Comme vos héros: rien

Comme vos artistes: rien

Comme vos religions: rien.'

(Francis Picabia, *Manifeste cannibale dada*, *Ecrits I*, Paris 1975.)

'Plus de peintres, plus de littérateurs, plus de musiciens, plus de sculpteurs, plus de religions, plus de républicains, plus de royalistes, plus d'impérialistes, plus d'anarchistes, plus de socialistes, plus de bolchéviques, plus de politiques, plus de prolétaires, plus de démocrates, plus d'armées, plus de polices, plus de patries, enfin assez de toutes ces imbécillités, plus rien, plus rien, rien, rien, rien.' 'Manifeste du mouvement dada', *Littérature*, no. 13 (May 1920), 1.

16 Here may be found a kind of art of mortality, perhaps anticipating Body Art of more recent times. In a period of mass death, that of the individual may be 'created' as a work of art.

17 Scholars of Vaché's work and life tend to share the view of his friends in Nantes at the time, that he died in an accident. But André Breton wrote that his voluntary choice of death was logical. Vaché had written to Breton in May 1918: 'J'objecte à être tué en temps de guerre'. Cette fumerie serait une dernière 'fourberie drôle', mais Vaché n'avait probablement pas l'intention d'emmener aussi son ami Paul Bonnet dans la mort. Michel Carassou, 'Jacques Vaché, le groupe de Nantes et le "pohète"' in *Le rêve d'une ville, Nantes et le surréalisme*, op. cit., 173.

18 See Philippe Dagen, *Le Silence des peintres* (Paris 1996) for a similar interpretation: the image, fixed or mobile, replaced traditional representation in painting and sculpture.

19 Jacques Vaché, *Lettres de guerre* (Paris 1970). 'À Monsieur André Breton, 14-11-18'.

20 Théodore Fraenkel, *Carnets 1916-1918* (Paris 1990), 19 August 1916, 56, and 29 October 1916, 61. This close friend of Breton was a medical student and auxiliary at the front.

At the neuro-psychiatric centre, Breton became interested in psychiatry through meetings and lectures, in particular with Janet, Dr Régis, and through Constanza Pascal's book *La démence précoce*. He transcribed entire pages of this reading (including a French translation of Freud by Régis).²¹ Breton became fascinated with war psychiatry and thought seriously about giving up poetry altogether and becoming a psychiatrist. Then, at Val de Grâce military hospital in Paris, working with Professor Babinski, he became both student and subject. In later years Breton returned to this critical moment in his life:

I was sent to a centre for disabled men, men sent home due to mental illness, including a number of acutely insane men, as well as more doubtful cases brought up on charges on which a medical opinion was called for. The time I spent there and what I saw was of signal importance in my life and had a decisive influence in the development of my thought. That is where I could experiment on patients, seeing the nature of diagnosis and psychoanalysis, and in particular, the recording and interpretation of dreams and free association. These materials were from the beginning at the heart of surrealism. . . . I took from these experiences a lively curiosity and a great respect for what is conventionally termed these deviations of the human spirit.²²

In the midst of the Battle of Verdun, Breton noted: 'Dementia, paranoia, twilight states. O! What German poetry, Freud and Kraepelin.'²³ The physicians whose works Breton read were the most important of the period, and he sent his reactions to his friend Fraenkel. In later years, the theme of madness was central to his work, but only rarely did he explicitly refer to the kind of psychiatric casualties he saw during the war.

'During my time in uniform, two questions returned time and again: with whom was France at war? And what do you dream about at night?'²⁴ Thereafter, Breton was drawn to the linkages between art and madness, and in particular, to the link between madness and poetry. 'Nothing affects me more than the logic of the mad . . . I instinctively interrogate the artist in the same way.'²⁵ However, the physical deterioration of many patients and their bewilderment left him cautious. Later he wrote, 'Perhaps I also learned how to guard against these wild people and the intolerable lives they led.'²⁶

With respect to his poetry, he was explicit about what he brought to it from his confrontation with the neuroses of the war. Three times he referred to this subject: in an article in 1918, in a note to the catalogue of a 1929 exhibition, and later in his interviews:

21 On the different languages adopted in different countries on the subject of 'shell-shock', see Annette Becker, 'Guerre totale et troubles mentaux', *Annales* (1999).

22 André Breton, *Entretiens (1913–1952) avec André Parinaud* (Paris 1973), 36–8.

23 André Breton to Théodore Fraenkel, 25 September 1916. As cited in Bonnet, op. cit., 99.

24 A. Breton, letter to Paul Valéry, 7 August 1916 in Bonnet, op. cit., 108.

25 A. Breton, letter to Guillaume Apollinaire, 15 August 1916 in Bonnet, op. cit., 110.

26 Breton, *Entretiens*, op. cit., 39.

I saw someone there whose image has never left me. A young man, cultivated, marked by a deep temerity: standing on the parapet during a bombardment, he traced the trajectory of shells with his finger. He explained to the doctors that he was untouchable. Contrary to what might have been expected, he hadn't been wounded. He had an unusual point of view: the so-called war was really just a show, the so-called shells were harmless, wounds were innocent, asepsis defied dressings. Bodies from the hospitals were spirited away and at night strewn across the battlefields. His point of view, which he stuck to tenaciously, left on me a deep impression. I have often thought about what he said as the direct descendant of the idealist point of view of Fichte and the radical doubts of Pascal.²⁷

This is not just a long-delayed reminiscence. In 1916, Breton wrote:

One of the patients, in a disturbed state, thought that his inkpot had a will of its own, that his saucepan was damaged after an episode, that a crumb fell deliberately on a precise spot, that the water sprinkler made very precise patterns. Nothing exists except in relation to him. (I would like to read Fichte.)²⁸

This particular patient impressed Breton at the same time as his friend Vaché was writing him letters on similar themes. He speculated on the difference between the true and the false war, and imagined that he was on the German side. 'Do your visionaries have the right to express themselves? I would like to correspond with a visionary or even an ordinary catatonic madman.'²⁹

There have been many studies of the link between surrealism and madness. Julien Gracq has pointed out that

. . . madness represented for the surrealists a kind of imaginative health, or rather the boundary condition of the dreamer who judges and offers a corrective which the real world tries to stick to the man who offers it. The madman, in his exemplary isolation, finds in his universe sufficient charm in order to accept that which is valid only for him.³⁰

Here, we are still dealing with 'ordinary' madness rather than with shell-shock *per se*. In reviewing Breton's writings of the 1920s, one is struck by how little reference there is to war-induced madness.

In Breton's *Les Champs magnétiques* of 1920, a key creative work, we can find some resolution of these poetic and existential issues. There is some disagreement among scholars about the origin of his interest in automatic writing and *Les Champs magnétiques*. But what seems clear is that we can bypass disputes about the influence of Janet, Myers or Freud, and still see that Breton's wartime experience at the hospital of St Dizier had a decisive effect on his

27 Ibid., 37–8.

28 Letter to Fraenkel, 18 November 1916, Bonnet, op. cit., 113.

29 Béhar, op. cit., 42.

30 Gracq, 'Le surréalisme et la littérature contemporaine', op. cit., 1018. Breton, *Manifeste du Surréalisme, Oeuvres complètes*, La Pléiade, vol. 1, 313: 'Mais le profond détachement dont ils (les fous) témoignent à l'égard de la critique que nous portons sur eux, voire des corrections diverses qui leur sont infligées, permet de supposer qu'ils puisent un grand réconfort dans leur imagination, qu'ils goûtent assez leur délire pour supporter qu'il ne soit valable que pour eux . . . Les confidences des fous, je passerais ma vie à les provoquer. Ce sont des gens d'une honnêteté scrupuleuse, et dont l'innocence n'a d'égalé que la mienne.'

literary career. Following Soupault, co-author of *Les Champs magnétiques*, we can accept the importance of Pierre Janet and his notion of *l'automatisme psychologique* in the genesis of surrealism. 'Janet had the idea of automatic writing, and used it in therapy, just as we used it in literature. . . . It was critical for the early years of surrealism that Freud was not yet translated into French.'³¹ Two years later, Breton recalled the preparation of the Surrealist Manifesto:

I was still preoccupied with Freud and tried to familiarize myself with his methods of treatment which I had little opportunity to practise on patients during the war. I tried to find in myself what one tried to find in them, that is, a flowing monologue, as rapid as possible, on which the critical mind cannot pass judgment.³²

It is hardly surprising that in 1920, automatic writing and hallucinations followed the obsession with death. Apollinaire was dead, Vaché was dead, it was a time when hundreds of thousands of corpses were being exhumed on the battlefields. But this particular practice also came out of the protest of Dada. Philippe Audoin noted:

Dada was limited to denial. The surrealists went further, and with the discovery of automatic writing in 1919, and with the reception of the theories of Freud, to try to express 'the real functioning of thought' The results of these experiments were so unanticipated, so surprising, that they felt they had an inkling of a deep truth, a truth so profound that those seeking it were really being initiated into a cult likely radically to transform human understanding.³³

The double impact of mass death in the war and the demise of the Dadaist movement, in which automatic writing was born, seemed so serious to Breton that he would be disappointed by the reaction to his work. As he told Julien Gracq, 'Right after the publication of *Les Champs magnétiques*, people continued to write poems and novels as if nothing had happened. Lightning had struck and no one saw it.'³⁴ Perhaps we may apply this metaphor of Breton to the disappearance, in his work and in that of his colleagues, of the memory of shell-shock in wartime.

Two other of Breton's works, *Les Pas Perdus* (1924) and *Les Possessions (L'Immaculée conception)* (1930), provide further evidence of this point. *Les Pas Perdus* is a collection of texts composed between 1918 and 1923, in which the figure of Vaché is predominant. Therein is an 'interview with Professeur Freud', reported without enthusiasm by Breton, who refers to other figures, Charcot and Babinski, for example.³⁵ In *L'Immaculée conception*, a book

31 Soupault, *Mémoires de l'oubli*, op. cit., 71. If Breton never talked of the subject, as Soupault suggests, it may be partly due to his falling out with Janet. But most scholars today emphasize the importance not of Janet but of Freud for the surrealists in general and for Breton in particular.

32 A.B., Manifesto, cited by Bonnet, op. cit., 164.

33 Philippe Audoin, *Les Surréalistes* (Paris 1973), 30.

34 Gracq, 'Le surréalisme et la littérature contemporaine', op. cit., 1021.

35 Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, op. cit., 198–202 and 255–6.

written by Breton in collaboration with Paul Eluard, the authors linked their work to that of Salvatore Dali and Max Ernst. The subject of possession is the critical issue, one central to the whole surrealist project. ‘*L’Immaculée conception*’, Breton affirmed,

. . . will remain the experimental core of our work, a point of reference to which we must return to appreciate the way thought can adopt all the facets of madness; and recognizing that power is tantamount to accepting the reality of madness and to affirming its latent existence in the human spirit.³⁶

The title, ‘Possessions’, suggests a state of mental illness, located in a dual context: at one and the same time anti-religious and anti-psychiatric: ‘The psychotic’s flight from the real world expresses an alternative subjectivity and not its “disappropriation”, as physicians wrongly put it.’³⁷ As against the psychiatric view, Eluard and Breton argue that ‘madmen’, far from being ‘dispossessed’, are able to take possession of their true selves. The book follows this intuition. They include in it five ‘essays in simulation’: mental deficiency, mania, paralysis, delirium and dementia. Aside from mental deficiency, the four psychotic states chosen for this surrealist simulation are associated with imagination, passion and hyperthymia: all states of mind praised by the surrealists.³⁸

Breton was familiar with the studies of Drs Porot and Hesnard on war psychiatry, in which they argue that if war did not create new forms of psychosis, in its duration and in its mobilization of the emotions, it did create a quantitative leap in madness — or, as they put it, ‘un coefficient numérique impressionnant’.³⁹ To psychiatrists, mental confusion and hallucinations were characteristic wartime syndromes, and the numerous case studies discussed seemed to the surrealists to be poems in prose suited just for them. Breton dedicated *Nadja* to Dr Hesnard, ‘who virtually alone in France shone his bright lamp into the mansions and ruins of the human spirit’.⁴⁰

In the deliria described by the two poets, military events and in particular references to the Great War are more evident than they were in their ‘simulations’.

Military rank is not given by fiat or error; Marshal Foch deservedly was Marshal Foch. Free thinkers should have been placed in the service of France . . . The same thing happened to executed sailors, and in the same spirit I will approach the League for the Rights of Man.⁴¹

‘And on a soap box proclaim that on the shores of the Rhine, France is grate-

36 Ibid., 1632.

37 In 1927, at a congress of psychiatrists and neurologists, there were many discussions on the so-called ‘syndrome de dépression’. Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, op. cit., introduction by Marguerite Bonnet, 1638.

38 Alain Rauzy, *À propos de ‘l’immaculée conception’ d’André Breton et Paul Eluard. Contribution à l’étude des rapports du surréalisme et de la psychiatrie* (Paris 1970).

39 Porot and Hesnard, *Psychiatrie de guerre* (Paris 1919), 12–13. See also Becker, op. cit.

40 Henri Béhar, *André Breton, le grand indésirable* (Paris 1990), 43.

41 Breton, ‘Essai de simulation de la débilité mentale’, *Oeuvres complètes*, op. cit., 851.

ful, to the Rhine, we offer our modern regrets, and to our Lorelei we lower our standard.⁴²

In the 1930s, Breton and the surrealists continued to pay tribute to the trauma of the war, though in an indirect manner. Though the affirmation of the creative energy of madness in the poetic and artistic worlds remained constant, the specific contribution of shell-shock was not consciously affirmed. This separates surrealism as a profoundly French movement from other currents in Britain and Germany, where shell-shock was central to the wider discourse on the war, and where, to this day, much more scholarly attention has been focused on this problem than has been the case in France.

The first exhibition of art created by ‘madmen’ was organized in Heidelberg in the early 1920s. This followed earlier contacts made by psychiatrists in 1917, during their active service in different parts of the front. But at the heart of this interest were pre-war paintings, such as those collected by Hans Prinzhorn.⁴³ These pioneers, who championed the notion that psychosis was an important element in artistic production, both gathered such works in the aftermath of the war and somehow managed to deny completely the psychological consequences of the war on the population of the combatant countries. One example will suffice. In 1919 the director of the psychiatric clinic of Eickelborn in Westphalia sent the work of a patient to the Heidelberg collection. It was a little wooden statue of Hindenburg, with pronounced and rounded cheeks. The doctor’s accompanying letter did not refer to this image, but simply added: ‘The patient is in the midst of a magnificent work, the Ten Commandments, and awaits the Day of Judgment. He is not going to produce any further religious work.’⁴⁴

This silence concerning the shadow of the war on these works and on their creators is even more paradoxical when set against the spate of contemporary publications, in newspapers, magazines and other journals at the time. But Prinzhorn, like many of his colleagues, wanted to prove that his patients’ art was authentic precisely because the artists ‘didn’t know what they were doing’.⁴⁵ And this was their claim despite the fact that a number of these artists/inmates were familiar with design and craftsmanship.

On the other hand, Prinzhorn’s book, which appeared in German in 1922, had an important influence on the avant-garde, and on the surrealists in particular.⁴⁶ The Dadaists and later the surrealists followed the cubists and expres-

42 Breton, ‘Essai de simulation de la démence précoce’, *Oeuvres complètes*, op. cit., 863.

43 Bettina Brand-Claussen, ‘The Collection of Works of Art in the Psychiatric Clinic, Heidelberg’ in *Beyond Reason, Art and Psychosis, Works from the Prinzhorn Collection* (London 1996). Prinzhorn estimated that 75 per cent of the work produced in asylums was the product of schizophrenics.

44 *Ibid.*, 9.

45 *Ibid.*, 28.

46 Breton told Joë Bousquet about the Prinzhorn collection in 1928.

sionists in their interest in this new kind of art. They privileged three forms until then neglected: that produced by infants, by ‘primitives’, and by madmen. In parallel, this ‘pre-logical’ thought was being explored by anthropologists, child psychologists and psychiatrists. Since 1911 Max Ernst had been familiar with certain works in the hospital in Bonn. It is possible to locate his affiliation to Dada, his rejection of the dominant culture, his appreciation of the creativity of the mad, his great interest in primitive art, in his four years of military service on the Western Front. This is how he put it in his autobiography:

(1914) Max Ernst died on 1 August 1914. He was resuscitated on 11 November 1918 as a young man who aspires to become a magician who will find the myth of his times. Here and there he consults the eagle who hatched the egg of his pre-natal life. You will find the bird’s advice in his work.⁴⁷

Ernst’s shamanism — symbolic death and resurrection — emerged from the war, from his enthusiastic participation in Dada to his return to the front.

A terrible and stupid war thwarted our existence for five years. We did our bit in this general collapse through ridiculing and shaming everything we had deemed just and beautiful and true. My work in this period was not aimed at seducing but at howling.⁴⁸

In 1923, Paul Klee underscored this same convergence of the avant-garde and the art of the insane.

In the work we did that we hope succeeded, is it really equilibrium or calm that we wanted to express and communicate, or was it not more agitation? . . . You know the excellent work of Prinzhorn . . . There are the best Klees! Look at the religious paintings: they have a profundity and a force of expression which I never achieved. A truly sublime art.⁴⁹

Ernst, like Klee, and later like Dubuffet, the inventor of the term ‘crude art’ (*l’art brut*), made no distinction between the art of the insane in wartime or peacetime. But their interest in spiritualism, in mediums, in prophesy and in religious fervour born out of the war points clearly to the long-term effects of the wartime discourse on trauma.⁵⁰ For these artists, the madness or sanity of the artist was beside the point. ‘There is hardly more sense in the claim that there is insane art as there is dyspeptic art or the art of those with knee troubles.’⁵¹

47 Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting and Other Writings by the Artist and his Friends*, ed. Robert Motherwell (New York 1948), 29.

48 Max Ernst, as cited by Patrick Waldberg, *La Partie de boules* (Paris 1958).

49 Paul Klee, as cited by Michel Thévoz, *L’Art brut* (Geneva 1995), 16.

50 Georges Dumas, *Troubles mentaux et troubles nerveux de guerre* (Paris 1919), 19: ‘Mon Général, je ne suis pas fou. C’est par la voix de Dieu que je parle. Jeanne d’Arc, que j’ai vue en rêve, me dit d’aller vous trouver; grâce à elle j’ai su, trois mois avant la guerre, tout ce qui devait se passer.’

51 Dubuffet, cited by Thévoz, *op. cit.*, 150.

In the 1920s and 1930s, many artists collected what they termed ‘crude art’, a concept developed for radically different purposes by those detractors who wished to rid the world of ‘degenerate art’. First the nazis wanted to destroy such work, then kill mental defectives as ‘euthanasia’, in the ‘T4’ programme which began in 1938, a year after the opening of their celebrated exhibition on ‘degenerate art’.⁵² In the catalogue of this exhibition, there is a direct quotation from Hitler, who in 1934 said: ‘Those who look for novelty above all can only go mad’.⁵³ Modern art, and in particular German expressionism, contradicted root and branch all the aesthetic and social values of nazism. In Dix, or Grosz or Beckmann, where is respectability, order, security? Their work is a cry of despair of men trapped in a personal and collective drama, one in which the war had played a decisive part. With the exhibition, and with the destruction of a number of works from it, the nazis wanted to prove the moral decadence, the degeneracy of Weimar. They juxtaposed the works selected by Hitler and his circle for the annual exhibition of German art, which opened in Munich also in 1937. What better illustration of the ‘Judaic aesthetic gangrene’ of the 1920s?

Of all their enemies, the nazis chose Otto Dix and George Grosz as exemplary degenerates in the exhibition. Is it surprising that this was so, given the importance of the war in their art, the place of the disabled and the disfigured, who constituted a veritable ‘imagery of military sabotage’?⁵⁴ In particular, they highlighted Dix’s cycle ‘The War’, which he had created in the late 1920s. Their traumatic shock and madness defy all attempts at sanitization, all lies, all efforts to forget these horrors. Dix, the young volunteer of 1914, had gone a long way since then, and so had the entire world.

In a letter to Arnold Zweig in September 1935, Léon Feuchtwanger managed to bring together his condemnation of the nazis, the Great War, and the metaphor of madness.

I don’t like to make political prophesies, but an extensive study of history has informed my scientific conviction that reason must triumph over madness, and that the outburst of madness such as that in Germany cannot last more than a generation. As superstitious as I am, I hope dearly that the current German madness will not last longer than the madness of the war [of 1914–18]. And we are already at the end of its third year.⁵⁵

52 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Exhibition ‘Entartete Kunst’, 1937. *Degenerate Art, the Fate of the Avant-garde in Nazi Germany* (Los Angeles 1991).

53 Cited by George L. Mosse in ‘Beauty without Sensuality; The Exhibition *Entartete Kunst*’ in *Degenerate Art*, op. cit., 25–31.

54 *Gemalte Wehrsabotage*, cited in the catalogue to the 1937 exhibition, with respect to Dix’s ‘War-wounded as self-portrait’ of 1920, exhibited at the Dada Fair, and destroyed in 1937 as an ‘insult to the heroes of the Great War’.

55 Léon Feuchtwanger to Arnold Zweig, 20 September 1935. Cited by Saul Friedländer, *L’Allemagne nazie et les juifs, 1, Les années de persécution (1933–1939)* (Paris 1997), 178.

Note the denial in this rationalist's words: here there is no mention of the madness generated by the war itself.

Hitler too was a master of denial. He took upon his shoulders the mantle of the 'real unknown soldier' of the Great War and rendered homage to the sacrifices in the mud and the blood of the Western Front; how far he was, or thought he was, from the psychologically damaged, deemed by him and many others as malingerers, deserters and outcasts.⁵⁶ But consider the opposite, as dreamt up in *Le Témoin oculaire* (1938), written by the German Jew Ernst Weiss. Hitler, suffering from hysterical blindness, pursues the doctor who helped him at the front, a man who merited his personal hatred. Weiss transformed the image of a soldier's traumatic shock into a central metaphor of the history of the century as a whole.

A.H. had been gassed during his last patrol in the trenches facing the British lines He was tended to not in a field hospital, but in a ward of psychiatric casualties. The corporal refused to have his eyes tended to by one medical officer because he was a Jew. His hatred of Jews was so strong that he refused to eat at the same table. He avoided them and their 'smell' The fate of a man suffering from hysterical blindness is always difficult. He is worse off than a man moving ahead on two false legs. He is worse off than a 'real' blind man Here in hospital, H . . . was housed by the state But he had no doubt that the war was drawing to a close. What could happen to such a man? Who would take him in? . . . He was not an officer . . . but he was a good soldier, this corporal. He was a soldier, a soldier, a soldier, and nothing else He had preferred blindness to being present at the fall of Germany. His blindness was a sign of his extraordinarily strong will. In his megalomania, he was an unbridled visionary There was a terrible tension in him; he was afraid I would repeat to others, including the Jewish doctor who had told him that he was faking, that his eyes were healthy, and that he did not want to see But I said the opposite I told him his eyes had been badly damaged by the gas. I wanted to offer him some relief. I added that it was out of the question that an Aryan, a good soldier, a holder of the Iron Cross, and first class at that, would lie and pretend to something that wasn't there I am not a charlatan, I don't produce miracles, I am a simple doctor, but perhaps you have that rare force that appears only once in a thousand years, to realize a miracle. You must believe blindly in yourself, and thereby you will cease to be blind You know that Germany needs men of energy and with a blind faith in themselves Everything passed as I had wanted. I played the role of destiny, of God, and I gave back to a blind man his vision and sleep. The next day I wrote to Helmut, who worked at the Ministry of War, to find an easy job for a corporal A.H. The kind of job that a man like him could go back to.⁵⁷

Ernst Weiss left Germany in 1933, and while in exile in France, committed suicide on 14 June 1940, the day the nazis entered Paris.

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⁵⁶ George L. Mosse, 'Shell-shock as a Social Disease', see pages 101–8, below.

⁵⁷ Ernst Weiss, *Le Témoin oculaire* (Paris 1988), 147–64, *passim*. (The book was only published in Germany in 1963.)

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