

**RADOVAN IVŠIĆ**

**TRANSLATED BY JON GRAHAM**

However, in very short order, the activity of the café quickly shifted [from the activities surrounding the EROS exhibition of international surrealism] to spending the next several months working on the *Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie* [Statement on the right of conscientious objection in the War of Algeria] better known as the *Manifesto of the 121*. I took part in most of the meetings and preparations, but once again, because of my status as a foreigner, I did not have the right to be a co-signer of the final text. During the whole of 1960, France was shaken by the Algerian War, which was then at its height. The danger that the extreme right would take power was very real. Around November of that year, serious rumors began circulating about the existence of lists of intellectuals and other figures to be liquidated immediately after the right seized power—which was then considered an imminent possibility. As one of the primary signers of the *Manifesto of the 121*, Breton was warned that his name appeared among those at the top of this black list and that it would be wise to temporarily leave his apartment at 42, rue Fontaine. All of the individuals who were most at risk decided it would be wise to find new places to stay. You can imagine my surprise when Breton asked if he could stay at my place. This was not long after the time I had taken up residence, after years of living in cramped garrets, on 42, rue Galande, in the Latin Quarter. In fact, thanks to the generosity of Joan Miró who had illustrated my poem “Mavenna” with a lithograph a short time earlier and had made me a gift of the entire print run, I had finally been able to rent a real apartment. Even better, this apartment was in a house from the Middle Ages. It was two rooms, one of which was quite large and almost perfectly square. An enormous twenty-five foot oak beam traversed the room without any stays. Breton was familiar with this location, having come previously on several occasions to attend surrealist meetings that had been held there.

I rushed to improvise a way to house André, Elisa, and their parrot Lorito. Luckily, the large room offered a number of possibilities. As I had only recently moved, the apartment was not fully set up, but what was important to Breton was that no one could imagine a better hiding place. Who would ever dream of looking for him at my place? Not to mention the humor in this situation: despite my own precarious position as a little-known foreigner in the land where I had come seeking asylum, here I was giving one of that land's most illustrious citizens a refuge. It was truly a case of the world turned upside down.

A dark and tragic atmosphere was then ruling over France. Despite all this, there was something magical about the days that André and Elisa lived at my apartment. Since 1954 and the time of my first visits to Breton's, I had met him almost every day at the “café,” but more rarely one on one, as I described earlier. This time it was different and we talked

about this, that, and everything. As often as I could I would also invite surrealist friends like Toyen, of course, but also Jean Benoît, Mimi Parent, or Joyce Mansour, to join us for dinner.

This time also gave me the opportunity to learn that, when called for, Breton took great pleasure in sharing the poems he loved. I have never heard anyone read poetry like he did. He knew a considerable number of poems by heart, which he could recite for hours. On one of these days, he confided in me that he never felt as free as he did when reciting a poem. Anyone who heard him could entertain no doubt that he was in his world at these times, or more exactly, in his element. I was struck and even touched by how naturally he was able to return to a place where he had never stopped being. “Real life” was no longer somewhere else. His whole being tended to offer convincing proof of that. When he interpreted a poem, he cast a greater light on it than any explanation of the text could ever hope to do. One evening after dinner he began reading. To be more precise, the books were there, he merely opened them to assure himself of finding there the texts almost all of which he knew by heart. It was a cascade of masterpieces whose reading will forever live in my memory: Germain Nouveau, “L’Agonisant,” Guillaume Apollinaire, “La Chanson du mal-aimé,” Victor Hugo, “Booz endormi,” Charles Cros, “Vocation,” Tristan Corbière, “Rondel,” Benjamin Péret, “Les Puces du champ” and “J’irai veux-tu,” and Philippe Soupault, “Georgia.” He followed these by reciting works by Francis Jammes, Pierre Louÿs, Gérard de Nerval. Arthur Rimbaud, François-René de Chateaubriand, Henry J. M. Levet...

There were several other occasions following this dinner that he gave us readings of other poets. One evening, after reciting Baudelaire’s “Le Vin de l’assassin,” “Le Voyage,” and “Les Bijoux,” he exclaimed, as if speaking to himself: “They will never take Baudelaire from us. He will never be one of theirs!”

After ten days or so, the danger threatening the intellectuals who had been most at risk receded and André and Elisa were safe to return home.

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