

# BRETON, André. "The Lighthouse"

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**It was in the black mirror of anarchism that surrealism first recognized itself, well before defining itself, when it was still only a free association among individuals rejecting the social and moral constraints of their day, spontaneously and in their entirety [1].**



Among the higher spheres in which we encountered each other in the days following the war of 1914, and whose rallying power never failed, was Laurent Tailhade's "Ballad of Solness," which ends :

Fair-eyed Goddess, send us now thy dawn,  
Bathed in vermillion, Salaminian light !  
Strike our hearts so tattered and forlorn,  
Anarchy ! O torch-bearer of morn !  
Crush the vermin, banish now the night  
Raise high to heaven, upon our tombs be borne  
Above the raging tides that Tower bright ! [2]

At that time, the surrealist refusal was total, and absolutely incapable of allowing itself to be channeled at a political level. All the institutions upon which the modern world rested—and which had just shown their worth in the First World War—were considered aberrant and scandalous by us. To begin with, it was the entire defense apparatus of society that we were attacking : the army, "justice," the police, religion, psychiatric and legal medicine, and schooling. At that time, both collective declarations and individual texts (by Aragon ; by Artaud, Creval, Desnos, and Eluard ; by Ernst, Leiris, Masson, Peret, Queneau and myself) attested to our shared willingness to see them recognized as plagues, and to fight them as such. But to fight them with some chance of success, it was still necessary to attack their armature, which, in the final analysis, was of a \*logical\* and \*moral\* kind : the so-called "reason" which was in current use, and, with a fraudulent label, concealed the most worn-out "common sense," the morality falsified by Christianity for the purpose of discouraging any resistance to the exploitation of human beings.

A very great fire smoldered there—we were young—and I

believe I must insist on the fact that it was constantly fanned by what was taken from the works and lives of the poets :

Anarchy ! O bearer of torches !

whether they were named Tailhade, or Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Jarry—whom all our young libertarian comrades should know, just as they should all know Sade, Lautréamont and Schwob (of the *Livre de Monelle*).

Why was an organic fusion unable to come about at this time between anarchist elements proper and surrealist elements ? I still ask myself this twenty-five years later. It was undoubtedly the idea of efficiency, which was the delusion of that period, that decided otherwise. What we took to be "triumph" of the Russian Revolution and the advent of a "workers' State" led to a great change in our perspective. The only dark spot in the picture—a spot which was to become an indelible stain—consisted of the crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion on March 18, 1921. The surrealists never quite managed to get beyond it. Nevertheless, around 1925 only the Third International seemed to possess the means required to transform the world. It was conceivable that the signs of degeneracy and repression that were already easily observable in the East could still be averted. At that time, the surrealists were convinced that a social revolution which would spread to every country could not fail to promote a libertarian world (some say a surrealist world, but it is the same thing). At the beginning, everybody saw it this way, including those (Aragon, Eluard, etc.) who, later on, abandoned their first ideal to the point of making an enviable career out of Stalinism (from the point of view of businessmen). But human desire and hope can never be at the mercy of traitors :

Drive away the night ! Crush the vermin !

We are well enough aware of the ruthless pillaging to which these illusions were subjected during the second quarter of this century. In a horrible mockery, the libertarian world of our dreams was replaced by a world in which the most servile obedience is obligatory, in which the most elementary rights are denied to people, and in which all social life revolves around the cop and the executioner. As in all cases in which a human ideal has reached this depth of corruption, the only remedy is to reimmerse oneself in the great current of feeling in which it was born, to return to the principles which allowed it to take form. It is as this movement is coming to its very end that we will encounter anarchism, and it alone. It is something that is more necessary than ever—not the caricature that people present it as, or the scarecrow they make of it—but the one that our comrade Fontenis describes "as socialism itself, that is, the modern demand for dignity of humans (their

freedom as well as their well-being). It is socialism, not conceived as the simple resolution of an economic or political problem, but as the expression of the exploited masses in their desire to create a society without classes, without a State, where all human values and desires can be realized."

This conception of a revolt and a generosity inseparable from each other and (with all due respect to Albert Camus) each as limitless as the other—this conception the surrealists make their own, without reservation, today. Extricated from the mists of death of these times, they consider it the only one able to make appear again, to eyes more numerous with every passing moment,

The Lighthouse that towers above the waves !

January 11, 1952

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## Notes

[1] Translated from French by Doug Imrie and Michael William. This text appeared originally in the French Anarchist paper *Le Libertaire*, and an earlier version of the translation was published in the Canadian anarchist publication *Any Time Now*. This translation has since appeared in *Mesachabe*. The translators note that the poet who wrote "The Ballad of Solness," Laurent Tailhade, was blinded in one eye by a bomb thrown into a cafe by an anarchist during the turbulent period of the 1890s which saw widespread despair and resort to "propaganda of the deed" Yet Tailhade wrote his "Ballad" in praise of anarchism only four years later, in 1898.

I am grateful to Dan Clore for bringing this translation to my notice

[2] \*translation by John P. Clark (inserted into text by editor)