JOURNAL OF LITERATURE, CULTURE AND LITERARY TRANSLATION

Utopia and Political Theology
No. 2 - Year 5
06/2015 - LC.3

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"Better a disaster of fidelity to the Event": Event and Failure in André Breton's Nadja

Abstract

This essay starts from the premise that André Breton's First Manifesto of Surrealism constitutes the 'event' of that movement (i.e., 'event' as defined in Alain Badiou's Ethics), an event subsequently betrayed by its subject, André Breton, in his encounter with Nadja. Situated between rupture and repetition, the opportunity of the event returns in the Second Manifesto of Surrealism. Taking as its target Breton's novel Nadja, the essay addresses the issue of event as repetition and explores the ramifications of the 'failure' to 'imagine' one's continued fidelity to the event. Consequently, this article reads Nadja as a 'failure': the failure posed by representation itself, but also the failure of representation to completely annihilate the promise of a "beyond" encrypted in the project of surrealist imagination. Thus, I would like to play off the idea of failure in two complementary ways. First, I look at the 'failure' that is more significant than any achievement. Second, I address the failures at particular missed moments in history, expressed as a series of 'returns' in Nadja. Finally, the point of tension between the two types of failures in Nadja elicits a reading of Breton as a reactive, rather than an immortal Subject.

Keywords: modernism, repetition, surrealist manifesto, event, fidelity, failure, Alain Badiou

In the last pages of Nadja, André Breton compares Beauty to "a train that ceaselessly roars out of the Gare de Lyon and which [he] know[s] will never leave, which has not left" (160). The two movements (or rather "jolts and shocks" [160]) expressed in the two verbs sum up the crux of this paper: the potential of the Event to persist despite the subject's failure to acknowledge it. Breton's failure consists in betraying the event of Nadja through various missed encounters. However, the

same failure reopens the possibility of success and hope (thus Nadja's name, expressive of hope and beginnings, represents the Event), because the train that "has not left" might still leave. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, "Better a disaster of fidelity to the Event than a non-being of indifference to the Event" (In Defense of Lost Causes 7).

The following quote from Jameson's Postmodernism provides a "frame" for the concepts of 'failure,' 'imagination,' and 'representation' as staples of a surrealist novel about missed encounters. Jameson's statement that, "It is the failure of imagination that is important, and not its achievement, since in any case all representations fail and it is always impossible to imagine" (209) opens up the discussion of Nadja as 'failure' in an essential way. Jameson identifies the great moments of modernism as failures – the moments of Lenin and Brecht, "illustrious names" we tend to make into "triumphant examples and models in some hagiographic or celebratory sense" (209), rather than see in them landmarks of that special type of 'failure' through which history progresses (209). Within the larger scope of reading Nadja as a 'failure,' this essay also attempts to address the more particular and inevitable failures presupposed by this kind of project: the 'failure' of imagination to 'imagine' (in the terms proposed by Jameson above) and to defeat the limitations posed by representation, but also the failure of representation to completely annihilate the promise of a "beyond" encrypted in the 'failure' of the surrealist imagination. Thus, I would like to play off the idea of failure in two complementary ways: the 'failure' that is more significant than any achievement – a type of failure equivalent to Žižek's idea of repeating a project that retains "a utopian spark in it worth saving" ("A Plea" 566), that opens up a new "field of possibilities" (566). Also, the failures at particular missed moments in history, expressed as a series of 'returns.' Thus, the point of tension between the two types of failures in Nadja elicits a reading of Breton as a reactive vs. immortal Subject.

Paradoxically, a type of 'failure' (or "powerlessness" of truth) appears as necessary in displacing the status quo in the ethical economies of both Badiou's Ethics and Žižek's Tarrying with the Negative. In the section entitled "The Radical Evil," Žižek discusses Good and Evil in terms of alternative sites of radical displacements (97). Insofar as Evil is Good "in the mode of becoming," Good itself must then appear, in its initial "stubborn perseverance" through which it emerges as 'being' from 'becoming,' as "an 'irrational' self-destructive gesture which was 'evil' in the sense that

it cut into the texture of the social body, threatening the stability of the . . . entire social order" (Žižek, "The Radical Evil" 97). Žižek's Evil seems to coincide at times with Badiou's 'madness' of fidelity to the Truth-Event, insofar as they both bear the consequence, and indeed, mark of authenticity, of disrupting the social order. At this point, however, I would like to develop further Žižek's distinction between Evil as act of defiance, which threatens the stability of the status quo, and Evil as the new form of Good which displaces the initial "radical, defiant evil." Subjects of defiance (like Thomas Moore, who threatens the stability of the crown, or Christ, a divisive force among the Jews) are perceived as Evil, since "the very formal structure of [their] act was 'radically evil': . . . an act of radical defiance which disregarded the Good of community" (Žižek, "The Radical Evil" 97). However, once the disrupted status quo achieves a new balance in the wake of the disrupting Evil, the "self-reproductive circuit" reinvents itself as a system which "posits its own presuppositions" (Žižek, "The Radical Evil" 97), according to which "the site of Evil is radically displaced [and] what now counts as 'evil' are precisely the left-overs of the previous 'Good' – islands of resistance . . . which disturb . . . the new form of Good" (98).

Badiou's ethical categories of Good and Evil offer another possible framing of these sites of displacement that wreak havoc within the structure of the status quo (ultimately Breton's aim in the two Surrealist Manifestoes and Nadja). Žižek's conception of 'radical Evil' repositions that of 'radical Good.' The tension in Badiou's relation between Truth-Event and Void parallels the tension in Žižek's radical Evil vs. Good – all presented as sites of displacements. Thus, for Badiou, "at the heart of every situation, at the foundation of its being, there is a 'situated' void, around which is organized the plenitude (or the stable multiples) of the situation in question" (Ethics 68). Žižek's description of the "dialectical process" – by which "the substance which at the end again 'totalizes' the derailed process is not 'the same' as the substance disintegrated by the initial derailment" (Tarrying 98) – recalls Badiou's insistence that "truth punches a 'hole' in knowledge, . . . but it is also the sole known source of new knowledge" (Ethics 70). For Badiou, even though truth "forces" knowledge with the power of a break, thus "violating established and circulating knowledge" (Ethics 70), such truth, once established, returns to the "immediacy" of a situation and "reworks that sort of portable encyclopedia from which opinions, communications and sociality draw their meaning" (Ethics 70). Thus, as soon as an event ends up convoking not the void of the earlier situation but its

plenitude, the Truth-Event, the initial Good (or rather Evil, in Žižek's terms) becomes the Evil of terror (Badiou, Ethics 71). For this reason (and because to totalize truth is to turn it into disaster [Ethics 71]), an ethics of truth is expressed as process. This latter form of Good recalls Žižek's idea that "The difference between Good and Evil concerns a purely formal conversion from the mode of 'becoming' into the mode of 'being'" (Tarrying 97). Thus, for Badiou, Evil is defined as the reversal of the three dimensions of the truth-process itself: the convocation of the plenitude, instead of the void, of a situation; the uncertainty of fidelity; and the forcing of truth as the newly emerged form of knowledge (Ethics 71). For Žižek, the Evil of totalization is necessary for the maintenance of social order (i.e., Badiou's status quo), and he expresses it as the "new mediating totality," that which was originally "a subordinated moment of the organic totality" and which "establishes itself as the new medium of universality" (Tarrying 98).

Breton's anti-representational surrealist gesture aims at annihilating the totalizing power of pure aestheticism isolated from political reality. However, insofar as he seems to seek a unifying vision of art that abstracts the poet from his waking reality and transfers him entirely into the realm of the dream world, of the unconscious, he might seem guilty of a form of betrayal – that is, poetry as transcendence, as totalizing truth. In another sense, however, the nature of the project generated by the Truth-Event is just that: a vision that aims at changing the status quo and bringing on a new reality. However, at some points in Nadja (as when he claims that "People cannot be interesting insofar as they endure their work, with or without all their other troubles" [68]), Breton's project turns into simulacrum, because I claim that it abstracts the poet from the void of the situation, it removes the event from its concrete, historical situation into the "aestheticized" dream-world of imagination, and his entire subsequent attempt to concretize this vision fails. For example, Raymond Spiteri's question, "To what degree was the failure of [Nadja and Breton's] encounter due to insufficiency of the marvelous to reconcile the world of facts and inner reality of the mind?" (189) brings up this very issue. Despite her visionary power, intuition and freedom, Nadja's instinct for the marvelous cannot overcome the economic and social constraints of society. Referring to Breton's political impasse with the PCF, Spiteri argues that "Nadja seemed to prove the PCF correct in suggesting that the world of facts came before or reined over imagination" (189).

In the section titled “The unnameable” of Ethics, Badiou addresses the potential power of truth to become “total” (81), and he explicitly states that this totalizing power would imply the annihilation of the language of opinion. The invention of a completely new language would “eliminate opinion,” would “presume that the totality of the objective situation can be organized in terms of the particular coherence of a subjective truth,” “would manifest itself not by the mere distortion of pragmatic and communicative meanings, but by the absolute authority of truthful nomination,” and “would then force the pure and simple replacement of the language of the situation by a subject-language” (Badiou, Ethics 83). That is to say, the Immortal would come into being as the wholesale negation of the human animal that bears him” (Badiou, Ethics 83-84). A totalizing language, thus, would be rigid and dogmatic, and eventually “blinded” by its “power” (a power that by necessity has to become a mark of failure in the current order, because “the hypothesis of total power here has consequences of an altogether different order” [Badiou, Ethics 83]). These modernist-experimentalist projects, therefore, end up in ‘failure’ by necessity, because in order to succeed they would have to become “totalizing,” to annihilate the void, to betray the particular elements of the situation. Or rather, totalizing is impossible as such because it involves the suppression of self-interest and seeks to replace it and opinions with the “truth” of the commitment. However, this truth is subjective, proceeding from the singularity of the Subject that bears it. To abstract a language of truth from the situation and transfer it into the transcendental realm of the atemporal, asocial, ahistorical, apolitical is to “interrupt the truth-process in whose name it proceeds, since it fails to preserve, within the composition of its subject, the duality [duplicité] of interests (disinterested-interest and interest pure and simple)” and “to organize an Evil” – the evil of disaster, “a disaster of the truth induced by the absolutization of its power” (Badiou, Ethics 85). According to Badiou, at least one element in the situation must remain intact, in the realm of opinion, “inaccessible to truthful nominations,” a “point that the truth cannot force” (Ethics 85). Thus, to speak of the power of truth as ‘failure’ means to speak of the power of truth as “also a kind of powerlessness,” because “Good is Good only to the extent that it does not aspire to render the world good. Its sole being lies in the situated advent [l’advenue en situation] of a singular truth” (Badiou, Ethics 85). The impossibility to name the Truth-Event has also to do with the danger inherent in naming, which would make the Truth-Event susceptible to becoming “eternal” (Badiou, Ethics 86). Thus, “at least

one real element must exist . . . which remains inaccessible to truthful nominations" (Badiou, Ethics 85). The "real" element of the Truth-Event must remain "the symbol of the pure real [réel] of the situation, of its life without truth" (Badiou, Ethics 86). As soon as one names it (Badiou gives the examples of the Nazi's attempt to name a community, or the reactionary use of the word "French" – both of them pretexts to persecute those excluded from nominations), one reduces the truth of two to one. Disaster is the Evil of "[forcing] the naming of the unnameable" (Badiou, Ethics 86).

As a narrative, Nadja is constituted as much by gaps (whether formal "gaps" represented through punctuation, or voids opening in various encounters with the Event), as it is by "totalizing" moments. The tension between lack and plenitude seems to gesture toward an understanding of representation as totalizing, especially as much of the narrative is dedicated to Breton's attempt at explaining Nadja and justifying himself and his own reasons for betraying her. It is as if his voice is that of dissimulated rage against the Other, the beloved, as it seeks to avoid appropriation and totalization through representation, through the filling in the gap. In Subjectivity and Otherness Lorenzo Chiesa mentions that Lacan's points de capiton function as punctuation marks that bind signifiers and signified together to render a meaningful sentence (94). If in Breton punctuation plays a crucial role in situating the gaps, it is interesting to note that instead of bridging, punctuation creates the voids. I will briefly draw into the discussion Chiesa's explanation of the Real to underscore the importance of gaps as linguistic "nonsymbolized Symbolic" (126) in Nadja. Chiesa's Real (drawn from the late Lacan) seems to resonate with the previous discussion of Badiou's unnameable Truth-Event. The early Lacan still believed in an 'Other of the Other,' which seems to place the Real in a sort of transcendental position. As Chiesa observes, "Lacan also unintentionally falls back into a quasi-mystical understanding of the pure Real by promoting the notion of a transcendental real 'Thing' understood as a positive absence," even as "the barring of the Other should categorically exclude any transcendence whatsoever" (126). The late Lacan, however, adopts the position that "there is no Other of the Other," which supposes that "there is no 'pure' Real any longer, and all we are left with is the Real-of-the-Symbolic and a mythical extrasymbolic 'undead'" (Chiesa 125). A possible connection emerges between Chiesa's 'undead' and Judith Butler's 'undead' in The Psychic Life of Power, in which the melancholic subject (i.e., Breton in Nadja as well), rages against the 'dead' (the internalized beloved object) in what might

seem like the destructive death-drive. In Lacan – through Chiesa – the 'undead' seeks to destroy the dependency of the ego on the object – of the self on the other – and thus to annihilate the subject as a trace of alterity and bring about immortality. The project fails, and indeed fails by necessity in Nadja, as Breton fails to relate to Nadja as a Subject and appropriates her only melancholically, through internalization, dissimulation and rage.

In a third Lacanian sense, Chiesa explains the meaning of the Real as a "nonsymbolized Symbolic which should be located within language" (126). If this concept is synonymous with Badiou's unnameable Truth-Event, one must question whether Breton's attempt to render meaning – rational, objective meaning – out of his encounter with Nadja is not to subvert this Real emerging out of the nonsymbolic gap opened up by the unconscious in language – the language of poetry. To explain, or rather represent Nadja as Nadja, is to betray the encounter with the Real, or the void. Or rather, the event that is Nadja resides in the gap between the woman Nadja and the fictional representation of Breton's encounter with her – the latter being a type of misrecognition. As Badiou states in The Century, "representation is a symptom (to be read or deciphered) of a real that it subjectively localizes in the guise of misrecognition. The power of ideology is nothing other than the power of the real inasmuch as the latter is conveyed by this misrecognition" (49). This distancing from the real is constitutive of the art of the avant-garde, claims Badiou, as an art that "wants to exhibit its own process, an art that wants to visibly idealize its own materiality" (The Century 50). It is this passion for the semblance of the real that places political decisions beyond Good and Evil (and in a sense fidelity to Nadja is an aesthetic, as well as a political, decision, that will come to fruition as commitment in the Second Manifesto of Surrealism). Nadja is the essence of absolute freedom, and, in Badiou's words, "freedom-that-must-be-betrayed" (The Century 54). Badiou cautions against the passion for the real that sees itself as a process of purification, because "this passion can only be fulfilled as destruction" (The Century 56).

Reverting to Butler's idea of melancholia as an expression of the impossibility to sever one's attachment to the loss of the Other, and to Chiesa's Lacanian stage of the 'Other of the Other,' it seems that Breton's subversion of the nonsymbolized Other through subjecting the Other to rationalizations, to discourse, is his way of denying his attachment to the Other, of dissimulating the rage against himself and his own betrayal in self-justification. Nadja's madness plays at the

edges of the Real, and Nadja is the ultimate gap – "the soul in the limbo," "the heart of a heartless flower" (Breton, Nadja 71), the yet unseen red of the red curtains in the window which is not yet lighted (83), that "provisional moment of grace," "an abyss into which the splendidly mournful bird of divination has vanished again" (91). She is also the "unless . . ." that reopens the possibility, as in Breton's musings, "No chance of finding her there, of course, unless . . . But 'unless' – is it not here that the great possibility of Nadja's intervention resides, quite beyond any question of luck?" (Nadja 91). In Chiesa's words, "The real object as lack [Nadja] is an 'object which can support fantasies'" (Chiesa 131).

Žižek's employment of the concept of 'absolute negativity' in Tarrying with the Negative offers another way of discussing the failure of representation in Nadja. Žižek points out that the Christian God is posited on absolute unrepresentability (in the "absolute discord between God [Spirit] and the domain of [sensible] representations" [Tarrying 51]). Thus, the Christian sublime is the "point of . . . extreme discord," of the "absolute gap," which is the "divine power of 'absolute negativity'" (Tarrying 50), while the Christian God, claims Žižek, "is this gap itself" (51). The Jewish God also resides in the Beyond of representation, "separated from humans by an 'unbridgeable gap'" (Žižek, Tarrying 51). The shift happens from the "prohibition of representation to the acceptance of the most null representation" (Žižek, Tarrying 51). Nadja originates in the gap opened up by the movement of doubt and uncertainty, of failed commitment, of retracing one's steps in the wake of the opening question of the novel, "Who am I?" Essentially, the inability to answer this question through naming the encounter as constitutive of subjectivity is the raison d'etre of the narrative of missed encounters, of lost steps, but it is also the condition sine qua non of the kind of move posed by Breton's commitment to the search. Žižek expresses the importance of doubt and uncertainty as the very making of belief and fidelity, in Kierkegaardian fashion:

> *We, finite mortals, are condemned to "believe that we believe": we can never be certain that we actually believe. The position of eternal doubt, this awareness that our belief is forever condemned to remain a hazardous wager, is the only way for us to be true Christians believers: those who go beyond the threshold of uncertainty, preposterously assuming that they really do believe, are not believers but arrogant sinners. (Tarrying 247)*

The void opens in the gap of uncertainty, and it is in the same gap that the failure to totalize the void resides as well. Žižek expresses the paradox of the limit as a dialectical paradox, which is "not only that the proposed solution can be part of the problem, reproducing its true cause, but also its reverse, i.e., that what, from our abstract, limited perspective, appears as a problem is actually its own solution" (Tarrying 93). In Nadja, the paradox of failure as event/event as failure has to do with the fact that the true encounter with the void takes place only in the gap (the representational gap in the text – marked by the initial question), and yet the gap itself exists only as a consequence of the failed modes of representation (i.e., the narrative itself) which constitute it. Žižek makes the distinction between the misleading, counterintuitive connection between "empty speech" and "full speech," and indicates that

> *full speech is never to be conceived of as a simple and immediate filling-out of the void which characterizes the empty speech. . . . Quite the contrary, one must say that it is only empty speech by way of its very emptiness . . . which creates the space for 'full speech,' for speech in which the subject can articulate his or her position of enunciation. (Tarrying 94)*

Thus, "only if you fully assume the void of the 'empty speech' can you hope to articulate your truth in the 'full speech'" (Žižek, Tarrying 95).

Breton's idea of 'imagination' in his First Manifesto of Surrealism presupposes the existence of a type of reality, in which, indeed, the "imperative of practical necessity" could be subsumed to "a search for truth . . . not in conformance with accepted practices" (Manifestoes of Surrealism 10). Breton sums up the obvious impediment to such a search in the following two traps. The first one is rationality (manifested in the attempt to represent Nadja): "Our brains are dulled by the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable" (Manifestoes of Surrealism 9). The second one is that of representable reality devoid of imagination – that is, the waking state, the obstacle to the interrelation between the dream world and the real world, which, Breton claims, "I have no choice but to consider it a phenomenon of interference" (Manifestoes of Surrealism 12).

Rationality and common sense are both subsumed under the critical agency of morality – the same sense of moral failure that besets Breton when thinking of Nadja is the same type of morality that informs Badiou's and Žižek's notions of Truth-Event and Good/Evil. What is the place of morality in

relation to failure and to the Truth-Event of surrealism? Breton declares in First Manifesto, “a new morality must be substituted for the prevailing morality, the source of all our trials and tribulations” (Manifestoes of Surrealism 44). A new, radical aesthetics is in order: “Surrealism, such as I conceive of it, asserts our complete nonconformism” (Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism 47). However, does Breton not actually aim for a “totalizing” truth – indeed, the kind of visionary truth required by Revolution – and yet, as we have seen already with other necessary “failures,” a kind of vision that aims to annihilate not just the status quo (Ethical Good), but perhaps take the Surrealist movement out of the Real altogether? Perhaps in the following statement Breton is indeed “imagining” a kind of existence which Jameson claims impossible to ‘imagine’ and which fails by falling victim to representation. Or, perhaps, this is the kind of statement that captures the void, the gap between two types of reality to be avoided: status quo (living as we have done before), and a return to the previous, pacifying, strifeless state of things, the “conservative” death-drive (ceasing to live). Between the two First Manifesto opens the space for Revolution: “It is living and ceasing to live that are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere” (Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism 47). In this case, the defeat remains in the fact that “existence is elsewhere,” in a type of reality that is not “present” and that cannot be replicated through representation, but is perhaps captured in the “gaps” of the narrative. In view of the gap, Breton keeps the movement of the in-between (i.e., the void) open. Fidelity to the Event drives the project of Surrealism from the irruption of the event in the First Manifesto, through the temporary defeat of Nadja, on to the repetition of the Second Manifesto. The mark of commitment follows in Breton’s professing in the First Manifesto, “I believe in the pure Surrealist joy of the man who, forewarned that all others before him have failed, refuses to admit defeat” (Manifestoes of Surrealism 46). The following statement describes the reactionary subject, who has lost touch with the Real of the imagination and is struggling to maintain some form of commitment to love, unsuccessfully, under the pressure of “necessity.” Though marked by betrayal (and not an immortal Subject, anymore, but a mere human-animal), he can be found in the same interim state as Breton in Nadja. This subject has known the “pure Surrealist joy” of the previous stance, and yet, he has made a commitment to an “abortive event,” that of representation:

Though he may later try to pull himself together upon occasion, having felt that he is losing by slow degrees all reason for living, incapable as he has become of being able to rise to some exceptional situation such as love, he will hardly succeed. This is because he henceforth belongs body and soul to an imperative practical necessity which demands his constant attention. None of his gestures will be expansive, none of his ideas generous or far-reaching. In his mind's eye, events real or imagined will be seen only as they relate to a welter of similar events, events in which he has not participated, abortive events. (Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism 4)

This stance describes Breton of the betrayal – of the episode of the failed car ride into the abyss of the Real, of the void. Subsequent to this betrayal, however, the Surrealist movement emerges from a difficult period of conflicts and separations into a new, radical commitment to the project of Revolution in the Second Manifesto. This latter will to act, professing an "unflagging fidelity to the commitments of Surrealism, presupposes a disinterestedness, a contempt for risk, a refusal to compromise, of which very few men prove, in the long run, to be capable" (Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism 129). The reactive subject of Nadja is reborn as the immortal Subject of the Second Manifesto: "We shall prove ourselves fully capable of doing our duty as revolutionaries" (Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism 142). This duty is embodied in the break with tradition:

We know that the adjective "revolutionary" is generously applied to every work, to every intellectual creator who appears to break with tradition. I say "appears to break," for that mysterious entity, tradition, that some attempt to describe as being very exclusive, has proved for centuries to have a boundless capacity for assimilation. This adjective, which hastily takes into account the indisputable nonconformist will that quickens such a work, such a creator, has the grave defect of being confused with one which tends to define a systematic action aiming at the transformation of the world and implying the necessity of concretely attacking its real bases. (Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism 213)

Jean-Michel Rabaté discusses Breton's break with tradition in the context of the latter's post-Hegelianism. More specifically, he focuses on the fact that Breton borrows from Hegel the concept of 'overcoming' (Aufhebung) to lay down the foundation of "a critique of modernity and of a new

way of thinking modernity" (Rabaté 18). In discussing Breton's Les Pas Perdus, Rabaté quotes Breton on what he opposes as idealism in late Hegelianism:

> *After all, who is speaking here? André Breton, a man who lacks courage, who has hitherto satisfied himself with derisive actions perhaps because he felt too strongly that he was unable to achieve what he wanted. It is true that I am aware of having stolen everything from myself several times already; and I find myself less than a monk, less than an adventurer. However, I do not despair of catching up with myself, and now, early in 1922, in this beautiful and festive Montmartre, I still wonder what I may well become. (qtd. in Rabaté 18)*

Failure, however, seems to be accompanied by a refusal to despair sourcing out of the conviction that fidelity, a commitment, a visionary, saving, revolutionary state, is yet to come: transformative, beautiful and festive. That he does not "despair of catching up" with himself indicates his opening to a transforming future, as well as his refusal to measure his future self against his present self rather than against "what [he] may well become." The sense of failure, his nullity as far as courage and faith (i.e., the preparing ground on which he can build a new commitment) form the void within, his confrontation with his own Real.

Rabaté uses the Hegelian idea of 'double negativity' to illuminate further the paradox of failure as event. In the episode in which Breton gives Nadja a copy of the Manifesto and Les Pas Perdu, Nadja, who, as Rabaté observes, is the ideal surrealist reader (because she reads intensely and jumps from text to life, through associations) appears as lost, while she is not lost. She remarks, "Lost steps? But there's no such thing!" (Breton, Nadja 72). Nadja's negation of lost steps recalls Breton's idea in the First Manifesto, in which he refers to Stendhal's heroes: "We really find them when they are most lost by Stendhal" (Manifestoes of Surrealism 9). Thus, the critic further claims, "Breton has to lose the lost woman in order to gain access to his own writing" (Rabaté 23). Nadja captures the Hegelian idea in progress when she "reintroduces negativity as a step forward of the Spirit" (Rabaté 23) because she "intuitively translates negation as serial steps ('pas pas-perdu' or 'pas-pas perdu')" (23). This is Breton's way of announcing that nothing is ever lost for a writer willing to spend some time in the city's waiting room of lost steps [les halles de pas perdus] – stations, halls, tribunals – places where the void is bound to open (also, places where the event – the Revolution – is bound to happen). These are the "neutral spaces in which everything can lead

to a fateful encounter" (Rabaté 23). Thus, to return to the idea of ruin and experiment as failure, if Nadja fails, and if Breton betrays Nadja and his commitment, his betrayal and failure count as a step forward. The failure as necessity, as reopening of the void, is also articulated in Lacan's Ethics of Psychoanalysis: "Freud's thought in this matter requires that what is involved be articulated as a destruction drive, given that it challenges everything that exists. But it is also a will to create from zero, a will to begin again" (212). Or, to return to Jameson's statement, "History progresses by failure rather than by success" (Jameson 209).

Rabaté identifies Nadja with the tenets of Surrealism in living flesh, as a specter of the novel. The ghost-like return to Nadja throughout the narrative is intensified by Breton's motif of the "tribunal of shadows," in front of which Breton must defend himself for having failed Nadja. Thus, Rabaté claims, Breton's "writing finds its impetus in the problematization of its absence of foundations," in the identification with a "negative transcendentalism" (23), a "collapse," "an erosion of values," subsequent to which "purely literary narcissism has been hollowed out by a new sense of responsibility" (24) with a redemptive value. Because, as Rabaté continues, the "lack of moral basis" (24) to which Breton alludes at the beginning of the narrative, connected with the sense of loss – both keen sentiments of failure – can be countered, and not only that – they can be redemptive, the beginning of a new opening, if "Breton manages to accept that time is not fixed in a figure of eternal grief" (Rabaté 24). The critic's words recall the melancholic subject's refusal to mourn. Insofar as Breton refuses to grieve Nadja (i.e., to sever his attachment from her), he still stands the chance to reopen his commitment. Acknowledging the trace of Nadja as the trace of the Other presupposes that he may stop raging against the "dead" and define himself in terms of a new opening: "the invention of a new aesthetics, an aesthetics of surprise leading toward the future" (Rabaté 24).

In Hegelianism, Breton refuses to accept the end of history "once the Spirit has passed through all the stages of its development," claims Rabaté (28). Whenever history reaches a dead end, Breton sees art as the leading force that takes over, because it has the potential to overcome the purely aesthetic domain and cross into the political. Returning to the trope of ruin, Breton himself acknowledges his failure at the beginning of the Second Manifesto (admitting he has not always been a prophet). Thus, Nadja as a missed step, a lost step, Rabaté concludes, has led to the

exploration, and perhaps the discovery that "the problematics of modernity cannot be dissociated from an understanding of the laws of History and an awareness of the laws of Nature" (28).

Significantly, both the void and the ultimate betrayal in Nadja are captured in a footnote. As previously stated, the narrative is organized around, and by, gaps – whether stated as such or indicated formally by punctuation. The novel itself starts with a question, "Who am I?" (11). The narrator, playing the part of a specter, haunting the "waiting halls" of the city, of his own narrative, of his own commitment to the project, confesses that "still alive, [he plays] a ghostly part, evidently referring to what [he] must have ceased to be in order to be who [he] is" (Nadja 11). His statement reflects the sense of haunting, the repetition presupposed in retracing one's steps, which turns Breton's failure into success (in terms of his opening up to the new possibility of a void) rather than "Breton himself" (in Žižek's paradoxical fashion). Thus, the italicized pronoun "who," in its indeterminate state, functions as a gap of identity of the reactive subject who has denied fidelity to the project – though the very fact that he "haunts" the present, instead of seeking to annihilate it, shows that he remains a potentially redeemable subject, and not an obscure one, in Žižek's terminology. In this sense, Žižek uses resurrection as the symbol for the missed, yet still potentially actualizable, encounter:

> *This brings us to a further hypothesis: an Event is necessarily missed the first time, that true fidelity is only possibly in the form of resurrection, as a defense against "revisionism": Freud didn't know the true dimension of his discovery, it was only Lacan's "return to Freud" that allowed us to discern the core of the Freudian discovery; or, as Stanley Cavell put it apropos the Hollywood comedies of re-marriage, the only true marriage is the second marriage (to the same person). ("On Alain Badiou and Logiques des mondes" n.pag.)*

Thus, in writing Nadja, Breton represents the subject who is able to make a statement of truth, to record his commitment to a Truth-Event, but who has also failed by betraying the event. Thus, the haunting is directly related to the topic of failure and repetition, and serves to indicate the potential in Breton as a reactive, but not obscure subject, who has missed the encounter, the recognition of Nadja as the Truth-Event, but who haunts his own failure in hope of redemption. (The purgatory of the repenting is another symbolic gap, or "interval," recording failure as potentiality in the novel). Thus, betrayal is 'represented' by Breton in the image of the ghost – the "finite representation of a

torment that might be eternal" (Nadja 12). Could it be, then, that a subject who has been entrusted with a Truth-Event, with commitment to a project, is pursued by that Truth-Event relentlessly, with the tenacity of doom, leaving the subject no choice but to 'return' in order to repeat and reclaim the project, undoing the Evil and recommitting himself to the Truth-Event? Breton seems to confirm at least this much about return as repetition, as the opening of a new possibility of recognition, revelation, re-encounter with the Truth-Event, in the opening statement of the novel: "Perhaps I am doomed to retrace my steps under the illusion that I am exploring, doomed to try and learn what I should simply recognize, learning a mere fraction of what I have forgotten" (Nadja 12). Žižek expresses the same idea of failure through misrecognition of the event:

> *[H]istorical necessity itself is constituted through misrecognition, through the initial failure of "opinion" to recognize its true character – that is, the way truth itself arises from misrecognition. The crucial point here is the changed symbolic status of an event: when it erupts for the first time it is experienced as a contingent trauma, as an intrusion of a certain non-symbolized Real; only through repetition is this event recognized in its symbolic necessity. (Sublime Object 64)*

Thus, the ethical nature of the encounter requires that the subject respond to the imperative call, over and over. Breton's retracing of his lost steps in this narrative presupposes a formulation of his response to a previously failed call – but the response presupposes, in its turn, the very recognition mentioned by Žižek, the truth of which must arise, by necessity, from an initial misrecognition. Breton's aim is to "recognize what [he] alone [has] been put on this earth to do, what unique message [he] alone may bear, so that [he] alone can answer for its fate" (Nadja 13).

From the very first pages, Breton proposes a reading of the novel in terms of "gap," "void," "interval" – tropes which structure the narrative in its entirety. For example, when speaking of the "exegetic" manner in which to interpret the work of an artist (the painter Chirico, in that context), Breton indicates that the confidences of the artist that "would mean an enormous advance for exegesis" would have to include "the least consequential as well as the most disturbing details" (Nadja 15). In Nadja, Breton assumes the radical synthesis of the two: in his narrative, the least consequential gaps, voids, footnotes, dashes and parentheses record the most disturbing details, the dramas, the betrayals, the encounters with the Real. Insofar as he equates these gaps with 'surprises' (the kind of surprising confidences that lead to breakthroughs in exegetic studies), the

gap in this narrative, the void itself, must be perceived as a unique kind of 'failure,' generator of new possibilities, new openings to new commitments. More significant still is the fact that the potential generated by this gap tends to contradict the natural order in the universe, "creating a new scale of things" (Breton, Nadja 15).

Yet it is the nature of the Truth-Event to appear in the gap created in the midst of the "natural order of things," in "the margin of the narrative" – a narrative which seems to exist solely to frame the many gaps hosting the events – gaps which function as signals: "I intend to mention, in the margin of the narrative I have yet to relate, only the most decisive episodes of my life as I can conceive it apart from its organic plan, and only insofar as it is at the mercy of chance" (Breton, Nadja 19). Notably, the most significant episode – the main event of the narrative, as it were, of Breton and Nadja's drive to Paris at night, in the car, when he refuses to accelerate into darkness – appears recorded in a footnote to the last section of the narrative – and even more significantly, as a footnote to the description of "the only statue I know of with eyes, the eyes of provocation, etc." (Nadja 152). "Eyes" as the mark of the visionary in the novel record the failed attempt at representing the unnameable – the encounter, the Truth-Event. And yet, the symbol of the eyes persists throughout the narrative (the eyes of Nadja arrest Breton and compel him to speak to her, and Nadja's daughter is so unlike the other children "with their mania for taking out their dolls' eyes to see what's there behind them" [Nadja 89]).

Nadja's fidelity to her event – keeping the future open, maintaining faith in the event and in Revolution, not ossifying the opening into a closing – is best captured in statements like, "Lost steps? But there's no such thing!" (Nadja 72); and "But . . . and this great idea of yours? . . . It was really a star, a star you were heading toward. You can't fail to reach it. . . . It's like the heart of a heartless flower" (Nadja 71). Breton's defining (and definitive) question, the one that shapes the novel as a return and quest for the lost steps – "Who am I?" and, to Nadja, "Who are you?" – seeks to close down, to totalize this future, this opening, this subjectivity in constant flux and becoming: "About to leave her, I want to ask one question which sums up all the rest, a question which only I would ever ask, probably, but which has at least once found a reply worthy of it: 'Who are you?' And she, without a moment's hesitation: 'I am the soul in the limbo'" (Nadja 71). Nadja sees what cannot be represented in language – the void of the unhappy people, of the Revolutionaries in the

making – and he is the one who denies the void: In the "lot of unhappy people and a few poor imbeciles" (Nadja 69), as Breton describes the workers in the street car, he sees only the lack of potential, the fact that the "spirit of revolt is not uppermost within them" (68): "Do you suppose these people capable of taking such steps?" (69). While she keeps the possibility open (Nadja not only defies the foreclosure of hope through her very essence, but she also defies, and avoids, representation – "Nadja, because in Russian it's the beginning of the word hope, and because it's only the beginning" [66]), he closes it down repeatedly. It is interesting to note the manner in which he interprets her question, "Who are you?". He follows, "Just then she thinks of asking who I am (in the most limited sense of the words)" (Nadja 67) – or so he thinks, when, in fact, he is guilty of a series of betrayals. For example, when he is arrested by Nadja's eyes, he thinks, "Without a moment's hesitation, I spoke to this unknown woman, though I must admit that I expected the worst" (64). Also, when only moments before the encounter, he watches other poorly dressed people on the street (Nadja herself is described as young and poorly dressed), he remarks, "No, it was not yet these who would be ready to create the Revolution" (64).

In light of Breton's ultimate betrayal, Nadja appears as the vision and the site of the Revolution, while Breton is the betrayer. Even as he claims to be on the path of the event, "the event from which each of us is entitled to expect the revelation of his own life's meaning – that event which I may not yet have found" (Nadja 60), the final act of betrayal takes place in the footnote that records the fantastic encounter (the footnote as another waiting room of the lost steps). However, it is worth looking at one more of the "minor" betrayals, or missed encounters, before reaching the main event of the car drive from Paris:

I have always, beyond belief, hoped to meet, at night and in the woods, a beautiful naked woman or rather, since such a wish once expressed means nothing, I regret, beyond belief, not having met her. Imagining such an encounter is not, after all, so fantastic: it might happen. (Breton, Nadja 39)

The faith expressed in this encounter is immediately denied by the skepticism that accompanies it as soon as the event happens:

At the end of one afternoon, last year, in the side aisles of the "Electric-Palace," a naked woman, who must have come in wearing only her coat, strolled, dead white, from one row to the next. This

in itself was upsetting. Far, unfortunately, from being extraordinary enough, since this section of the "Electric" was the most commonplace sort of illicit sexual rendez-vous. (Nadja 39)

The failure of the narrative is that of attempting to represent, to name the unnameable of the encounter, the Truth-Event. Each time Breton attempts to record the encounter, he records a failure. For example, it is interesting to note that most of the photographic images inserted in the text describe places associated with "gaps" in the narrative, be they literal openings, as the one of "the extremely handsome, extremely useless Porte Saint-Denis" (Nadja 32), which is preceded by a graphic mark of the void anticipating the event: "namely that it (?) will happen here" (32), or openings marked by punctuation. Breton himself acknowledges the failure of representing these voids – the attempt of this narrative to engage in a "double play of mirrors" (Nadja 51): actual experiences "'beyond good and evil' in the dream" (51) explode as "facts of quite unverifiable intrinsic value . . . unexpected, violently fortuitous" (19) into reality. Thus, insofar as this kind of 'imagining' – the intermingling of dream reality and waking reality – fails in the narrative, representing it fails as well. Looking at the photographs, Breton says, "I realize that most of the places more or less resisted my venture, so that, as I see it, the illustrated part of Nadja is quite inadequate" (Nadja 152).

Perhaps the only 'representable' part in the narrative is failure itself. The realization of the betrayal is, in itself, a revelation of sorts: the sudden awareness that Nadja operated on "a more or less conscious principle of total subversion" (Breton, Nadja 152), undermining those very instincts of self-preservation that seek to enforce the natural order which impinges on one to stand up and salute the flag, or at least simulate the gesture. This principle of subversion constitutes the only valid answer to the question initiating Breton's narrative, "Who am I?": the one founded on the Lacanian, "I desire, therefore I am"; or Butler's variation on Freud, "I grieve, therefore I am"; or, ultimately, the Badouian, "I keep going, I maintain fidelity to the event, therefore I exist as an Immortal Subject." Breton's is the voice of common sense, while Nadja is a figure of provocation, the challenge to the beyond. In Žižek's words, Nadja is "the limit of common sense," the path to "what lies beyond [and which] involves a Leap of Faith, faith in Lost Causes, Causes that, from within the space of skeptical wisdom, cannot but appear as crazy" (In Defense of Lost Causes 2). He, retracing his steps, repeating the event if only in imagination – the same imagination that failed

as representation – succeeds as potentiality (i.e., ideally): “In imagination, [original: “Idéalement au moins”] at least, I often find myself, eyes blindfolded, back at the wheel of that wild car. . . . so, as regards love, the only question that exists for me is to resume, under all the requisite conditions, that nocturnal ride” (Breton, Nadja 153).

It is only fitting to conclude on Žižek’s note: the disaster of belief is to be preferred to the nonbelief in the potentiality of the event. Though a failed subject, though a failed text insofar as capturing the move of the imagination that seeks to invert the dream world into reality, and reality into the dream world, both Breton and Nadja have recourse to a subsequent confrontation with the event in the next move, his writing of the Second Manifesto. Thus, “Such an examination of failures confronts us with the problem of fidelity: how to redeem the emancipatory potential of these failures through avoiding the twin traps of nostalgic attachment to the past and of all-too-slick accommodation to 'new circumstances'” (Žižek, In Defense of Lost Causes 3). Even so, if read through political lenses, the “void” generating both failure and Event in Nadja remains open in this very tension. In Spiteri’s conclusive words, the void cannot be reduced to mere sterility, no matter the extent of the betrayal:

> *Nadja thus exemplifies the role of the political in Surrealism. Breton’s achievement was to produce [a] book that witnessed the recent travails of Surrealism. If the impasse reached in terms of relations with the PCF represented the limits of politics, then the articulation of images in Nadja fashioned a space for the appearance of the political. This has implication for understanding the role played by the cultural avant-garde in politics. The repeated failure of the Surrealists’ attempts to engage in sustained organized political action did not result in political sterility, far from it; rather, the limits of action acted as a spur to interrogate the very conditions of the political under modernity. (196)*

Analyzing the ending of Nadja through Breton’s new love-encounter with Suzanne, Rabaté notes a sense of moral uneasiness in Breton’s quoting Hegel as revised by Croce, according to which, “each man hopes and believes he is better than the world which is his, but the man who is better merely expresses this same world better than the others” (Breton, Nadja 159). Therein lies another instance of betrayal: the most Breton hopes to do, at the end of his narrative of pas perdus, is “to be superior to the world but in an attempt to reproduce it better than the others. The transparency

aimed at in the first pages is thus an ethical effort geared towards the best reproduction of a complex world" (Rabaté 24). The failure is double, yet complementary in nature: First, the failure of idealism (of which he accused Hegelianism). In the end, he chooses the realism in Hegel (after having ironically blamed Hegel's idealism for not being radical enough): "Hegel's realism states that the course of the world always proves the idealist wrong and ultimately crushes her or his pretensions" (Rabaté 24). This is, of course, what happens to Nadja. Second, the failure of passion, truth, love to save Nadja and himself – or rather, the failure of truth, passion, love to be totalizing – captures the powerlessness of truth Badiou discusses in "The unnameable." Thus, Breton's attitude, Rabaté observes, combines pride in having known such passion, as well as humility because, "having known it, he must admit to being powerless" (24). The powerlessness, however, seems to lead to false humility, as he "accepts" that his only "power" stands in replicating the world better than others, nothing more. This strikes one as an even higher type of betrayal, because it uses the virtue of humility and brokenness, which should recognize the idea of the plan in the ruin, even if ruin is all there is left of the project. Instead, this type of "humility" seems to negate the plan itself in declaring the opposite of fidelity, of "keeping going"; in stating that there is nothing more to be done in regards to the commitment; that all one can hope to do is reproduce this world better than others. In a sense, this is the failure of totalizing truths, which cannot rise above the Real, but must remain entangled in opinion. In this sense, then, Breton's passion and love for Nadja had to fail as totalizing truths; yet, his fidelity to that love would require that he never give up, that he "keep going," or else, his false humility in settling down for mere reproduction of the world conjures up the Evil of denying the void and its project.

The "glass house" trope that accompanies this vision of reality at the end of the book triggers Rabaté's reflection that Breton views the relationship between the subject and the world through the trope of the crystal, which "inscribes passion and desire as natural" (Rabaté 25). The interesting description of the trope reminds one of the train symbol – roaring in the train station and yet never taking off – and perhaps provides an explanation for it as well. For Hegel, "the figure in its reality is the Crystal" (Philosophy of Nature 569). The figure includes the three stages representative for the "mechanism of individuality through which form manifests itself in a material way" (Rabaté 25): the stage of magnetism, followed by that of electricity, culminates in the totality

of chemical processes. Crystals develop so gracefully that people "will not take them for natural productions but will attribute them to the art and the work of men" (Hegel, Philosophy of Nature 566). Insofar as they "crystallize" the first two stages of individuation, they still lack something (and this indefinite lack explains the trope of Beauty as convulsive, the roaring train that does not take off): magnetism lacks finality, while crystal lacks movement, and so the missing element must be supplemented by the intervening Spirit of Nature (Rabaté 25). Thus, Breton uses the trope of the crystal to express the move of finality without movement, which Rabaté translates into his realization that the Hegelian system, even as he adopts it partially, has failed colossally and must be replaced by historical materialism. However, in Nadja Breton still uses the formulations of Hegelianism. His definition of Beauty in Nadja "convulses" in tension, "half-way between magnetism and crystal-like transparency" (Rabaté 25). The new Surrealist vision remains caught between the Real and the Surreal: "Everything I love, everything I think and feel, predisposes me towards a particular philosophy of immanence according to which surreality would be embodied in reality itself and would be neither superior nor exterior to it" (Breton, Surrealism and Painting 46).

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