

## **Redefining Resistance**

Esther Rowlands, Postgraduate Student,  
University of Nottingham

The concept of resistance exists in current, literary and cultural studies as a tool used to analyse the ways in which discourses written by minorities seek self-reconstruct and self-express in an attempt to escape hegemonic discourses. The general modern understanding of resistance discourse is of a reactionary message - expressed, for example, through feminist, anti-colonialist, anti-fascist or any other form of anti-hegemonic writing. As such, the notion of the political and the subversive has become restrictive.

In order to broaden, and to some extent redefine, the modern understanding of resistance within discourse, it must be viewed not simply in relation to an historical anti-oppressive text, but re-contextualised within the broader field of language. A reversion towards the function of language presents an elucidation and a greater identification of the fundamental principles of resistance which, in turn, will lead to a more accurate understanding of resistance discourse. Linguistic resistance may be perceived as an 'oppositional practice'<sup>1</sup>, a term employed by Ross Chambers to refer to the functioning of language within the power structure to which it is subjected. Language is rendered political by its capacity to be conditioned and 'subversivised' through appropriation and manipulation. For example, the self-constructed power of the press and of marketing associations demonstrates the appropriation of language in order to acquire force. The manoeuvres of oppositional practice authorise the resister to remain as a component *within* but not *of* the oppressive system. As such, linguistic resistance must be detached from the usual understanding of resistance as an act performed on separate territory to the power holder. In De Certeau terms<sup>2</sup>, linguistic resistance is essentially 'tactical' rather than 'strategic'. Unlike the 'strategic' which demands separateness of location, the 'tactical' thrives on manipulation from within.

---

<sup>1</sup> Chambers, R., *Room for Maneuvre, Reading Oppositional Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991:72).

A principal source of tactical power within language relies upon semantic instability, resulting from the elusiveness of the signified and the materiality of the signifier. This instability recovers the life world of experience and, in the process, opens up political possibilities. By divesting itself of fixity, language alters and resists its own functionalist identity. This alteration implies a perception of language as being resistant itself rather than existing merely as a vehicle of resistance.

All resistance, by definition, must be seen as primarily political, an act central to the exchange of power within the social, political system. Regarding the operation of written discourse within the political system, it must be established whether or not there can exist a form of linguistic resistance which is both immersed in, yet different from the oppression into which it speaks. Must the attempt to move beyond the concept of an anti-oppressive, factual message adhering to conventional semantic forms, necessarily lead to a conception of an isolated, disengaged and thus non-resistant discourse? Conversely, if language by its very existence cannot be assigned away from its own historicity, then ought there necessarily to exist a tension between a factual historical referential discourse and a non-referential discourse?

In order to provide a ground for this discussion, I will give particular attention to the Surrealist theories regarding the function of poetics and politics as expounded by the Surrealist leader André Breton during the socialist uprising against Stalinist capitalism in the early thirties and against the propagation of fascism during the Second World War.

According to Breton, poetic language possessed its own dynamism and did not require any superficial bestowal of this upon it by lyrical conventions. The capacity of poetic language to fulfil a political function relied on its capacity to liberate the human unconscious and the imagination and thus accommodate a form of revolt by undermining accepted values. Breton described language as possessing its own ‘germanitive power’<sup>3</sup>, its own ever-developing style and form. This self-proliferating

---

<sup>2</sup> De Certeau, M., *L'invention du quotidien, 1. arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990:57).

<sup>3</sup> Breton, A., *La Clé des Champs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953:16).

capacity of language that refuses to conform to any man-made style is also referred to by Barthes:

It works as does Necessity, as if, in this kind of floral growth, style were no more than the outcome of a blind and stubborn metamorphosis starting from a sub-language elaborated where flesh and external reality come together. Style is properly speaking a germanitive phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

Although there exists an evident dichotomy in terms of Barthes' reference to 'style', a term which, through its implications of fixture and formulae, was refuted by the Surrealists, the implication by Barthes is that the poetic voice clearly lends itself to a resistant role. Neither style nor resistance are predictable in format, neither are harmonious or symmetrical, neither follow a single definable trajectory. Both are unpredictable yet decisive, ever-changing in format, multipliable and disperse. Poetry, for the Surrealists, could thus be a challenge within the contemporary political situation because as an unfixed, unrestrained voice it undermined accepted values. If, as Barthes states, style arises from the presence of a *necessity* - whether this be a moral necessity which deals with ones own cultural values, or a political necessity pertaining to power relations, then resistance may also be viewed as the product of necessity. It must not be seen as a gratuitous act but rather as an act that takes place according to a compulsion to confront the imposition of another force. In this context, the concept of necessity defines itself as political. If necessity is political in so far as it relates to obligation then it may be said that within necessity there exists a margin of movement, or in the terms of Chambers, 'room for manoeuvre'.<sup>5</sup> Necessity then, whilst it relates to a sense of obligation, must not in this context, be viewed solely in terms of constriction, for the paradoxical nature of necessity is that it is an *unrestricting constriction* - that is to say, compulsion which leads to a freedom to express oneself politically. If this argument is pursued within the context of the Surrealist ethos then it may be stated that necessity is paradoxically a 'key' to self-liberation in so far as room to express oneself politically results in self recreation. That is to say, room to express entails room to 'break free'. Style for Barthes is not only a necessity but 'the natural

---

<sup>4</sup> Barthes, R., *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. A. Lavers and C. Smith, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967:17.

<sup>5</sup> See Chambers, R., preface for further explanation.

product of Time and of the person as a biological entity'<sup>6</sup> Style is thus a subjective phenomenon which arises out of an innate need (a necessity) for self-expression and this necessity relates to and is conditioned by a specific historical time Necessity pertains to the presence of an imperative need,<sup>7</sup> an inevitability, an obligation. The existence of necessity, according to this definition, may equally then be seen as an integral characteristic of resistance. Whether the act of resistance takes place through physical expression or through linguistic expression, it always pertains to an in-built necessity to simultaneously create and self-preserve.

Breton makes clear that 'political aim' and 'historical referentiality' cannot be seen as antagonistic or mutually exclusive terms, but that there exists a need to achieve a balance between the two.

Surrealism has continued to go farther and farther beyond the strict framework within which certain of us have struggled fiercely to maintain it, to avoid seeing it turn aside onto an apolitical plane where it would lose all its historical meaning, or commit itself exclusively to the political plane, where it would be merely redundant.<sup>8</sup>

Political effectiveness he sees as tainted not by historical allusion but by the attempt to generate and propagate fixed political ideologies and thereby subject written discourse to the dictates of political party dogma. It was on the basis that late patriotic work of Resistance writers was rejected.<sup>9</sup>

The return to fixed traditional, structural, poetic forms represented, for Breton, a negation of the use of the poetic voice and the attachment to an entrenched dogmatic, formula. In 1942 his need to liberate poetry from fixed traditional forms was expressed.<sup>10</sup> The capacity of poetic language to fulfil a political function relied on its

---

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, R., 1967:19.

<sup>7</sup> 'Necessity' is defined by the french dictionary as *un besoin impérieux*, *Le Petit Robert, Dictionnaire De La Langue Française* (Montreal, Canada, Paris: Les Dictionnaires Robert-Canada S.C.C, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Breton A., 'The Political Position of Surrealism' in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. R. Seaver and H. Lane (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1969:233).

<sup>9</sup> For example, the late patriotic and nationalistic work of Louis Aragon was criticised for its inclusion of such content

<sup>10</sup> (Breton, A., *La Clé des Champs*, p68).

fluidity and its flexibility of structure. The rules accorded by Françoise Proust to the nature of resistance within the political arena, are clearly extendable to a definition of resistance within the context of poetic language.

To resist is to never move with a regular step or with a regular rhythm but always with two feet which do not go together [...] In an act of resistance, there coexists a straight line and a curved line, an orthogonal line and an oblique line<sup>11</sup>

Resistance, according to Proust is essentially an act pertaining to ‘the joy of invention and the affirmation of something else.’<sup>12</sup> By contextualising the act of affirmation in terms of linguistic practice, it may be viewed as synonymous with the act of witness, in so far as both acts stand in an antithetical relationship to the act of denunciation.

The term witness clearly pertains, in our modern understanding, to present and past. It is both an experience of the present moment and the recounting of an historical event which may later be recounted and referred to. To be *witness of* is to provide evidence of this moment. In artistic terms, written discourse may be equated with such ‘evidence’. The present experience soon becomes a moment of history recounted. Witness will thus always be historical in terms of its temporality. Likewise, it may be defined as political in so far as it involves an assertive force, the imposition of evidence, the imparting of a truth onto a moment of time. One must question, however, whether language which is not ‘explicitly’ political, which is not ‘historical’ in terms of factual reference, which fails to communicate any direct, comment on the external world, may still exist as a form of witness? The criticism by Maurice Nadeau, a member of the Surrealist group regarding contemporary discourse during the war pertained to a certain idea of witness. As he stated:

---

‘The greatest benefit to the quality of lyrical expression has been the will to break obsolete rules’ (my trans.) ‘la qualité de l’expression lyrique n’a bénéficié de rien tant que de la volonté d’affranchissement de règles caduques’

<sup>11</sup> Proust, F., *De la Résistance* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1997:182) (my trans.) ‘Résister, c’est ne jamais se déplacer d’un pas et d’un rythme égal, mais toujours sur deux pieds qui ne vont pas ensemble [...] Dans un acte de résistance, coexistent un côté droit et un côté courbe, une ligne orthogonale et une ligne oblique.’

Among the newcomers to literature, many of these reports on the war, the concentration camps, the Resistance, do not accede to a literary existence. They are valuable, and often very moving as documents. Literary works need to step back and ‘disengage’ themselves from the event.<sup>13</sup>

Here Nadeau implies a restrictive view of the term witness that suggests an incompatibility between historical referentiality and literary existence. Firstly, it must be acknowledged that witness will always be historically referential - due to its enactment of a certain historical moment and secondly, that it primarily stands as witness not through its existence as *réportage* but through its existence as *affirmation*. Indeed in dictionary terms the act of witness is defined more according to the affirmative than to the recountative.

To witness: to confirm the truth of (something) by words, declarations or simply by ones acts, even by one’s existence<sup>14</sup>

If, according to this definition of witness, we work on the basis that linguistic resistance relates to the act of ‘*confirming*’ and must, in order to perform its role, involve an impartation, the ‘affirmation of something else’<sup>15</sup>, a process of ‘giving witness to’, then any equation of linguistic resistance to the act of witness must not be restricted to the realm of pure ‘historical’ fact.

For Breton the practice of writing is essentially a form of political affirmation. In qualifying the position of Surrealism during the war period he states that Surrealism ‘is born from an affirmation of faith.’<sup>16</sup> As an affirmative voice it was essentially active rather than reactive. This conception of art as an affirmation reveals a clear relationship between resistance and witness. In 1935 Breton’s exhortation regarding resistance to Stalinist capitalism was contextualised according to the act of witness:

---

<sup>12</sup>     ibid, p12

<sup>13</sup>     Nadeau, M., *Le Roman français depuis la guerre* (Paris: Idées, 1970:36), trans. M. Atak in *Literature and the French Resistance, Cultural politics and narrative forms, 1940-1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989:18).

<sup>14</sup>     Témoigner: Confirmer la vérité, de (qch) par des paroles, des déclarations ou simplement par ses actes, son existence même. (definition of the verb ‘to witness’ according to *Le Petit Robert Dictionnaire De La Langue Française, 1991*).

<sup>15</sup>     Proust, F., p12

A gaping wound opens before our eyes; we are witnesses of the fact that great evil continues to be perpetuated, and our first task is merely to measure our participation in it.<sup>17</sup>

Witness was thus not conceived in purely abstract terms, it was always a specific response to a situation. Hence David Schalk's definition of witness as 'the direct consequence of the overwhelming effect of contemporary events on the life of the individual writer'.<sup>18</sup> Witness implies a relation of immediacy with particular circumstances. The impact of witness referred to here by Breton, did not however, in the surrealist view, rely on the referentiality or non-referentiality of language but on the specificity of the latter as an act inscribed within history. Hence the Surrealist practice of automatic writing was equally perceived within the context of witness. This implies the impossibility and over-simplification of any conception of witness as being either referential or non-referential, for within the context of written discourse, the affirmative voice will always respond to a specific circumstance whether or not it directly alludes to it.

In so far as affirmation entails denunciation of the 'other' then it may be seen as a resistant act. Françoise Proust describes resistance as 'a mixture of negation and affirmation'.<sup>19</sup> The implications of this paradox are harsh: Witness may be seen as a purely destructive act: an act of 'anti-resistance'. Within the context of linguistics, therefore, the acts of resistance and witness can not be seen as interchangeable for whilst linguistic resistance, in so far as it is affirmative, will always entail an act of witness, this equation can not be reversed - for the affirmative voice and the destruction born out of it, is as much a tool of the hegemony than a tool of the resister. This duality is extended in André Labarthe's conception of propaganda:

It is essential that we stop the Germans deceiving their victims. We must make all the oppressed nations understand what the new order means in reality. In

---

<sup>16</sup> Breton, A., *La Clé des Champs*, p27 - here Breton states that Surrealism 'est né d'une affirmation de foi'

<sup>17</sup> Breton, A., 'The political Position of Surrealism', p216

<sup>18</sup> Scalk, D., *Roger Martin du Gard, The Novelist and History* (Ithaca, 1967:16)

<sup>19</sup> Proust, F., p11 Here Proust refers to resistance as 'un mixte de négation et d'affirmation'

this sense, propaganda must become, in the service of the Allies, a weapon of the first importance.<sup>20</sup>

In so far as propaganda, is concomitant to its original Greek meaning: ‘propagation of faith’ (this first meaning implying no adherence to party politics), it may be viewed as a potential channel of good as much as of evil. Clearly therefore, the act of bearing witness, whether this be an individual impartation or collective propagation, defines itself, like resistance, as a tactical act operating on the same ground as the enemy.

Resistance writing, as expressed by Jewish holocaust writer Etty Hillesum, is essentially an act of defiance, a process of self-affirmation that thereby implies the overcoming of a detrimental force:

To simply record the bare facts of families torn apart, of possessions plundered and liberties forfeited, would soon become monotonous [...] I shall wield this slender fountain pen as if it were a hammer and my words will have to be so many hammer-strokes [...] I shall become the chronicler of our adventures. I shall forge them into a new language and store them inside me should I have no chance to write things down. I shall grow dull and come to life again...until life begins to bubble up in me again and I find the words that bear witness where witness needs to be borne<sup>21</sup>

Suggested here is the inadequacy of any definition of witness that restricts it to the identity of a historical chronicle. Instead we see a call for art to accommodate a resistance to oppression which may be energised not exclusively through the impartation of fact, but by imparting the creation of something more profound. Hillesum’s statement perfectly encapsulates the existence of an interrelation between ‘language’, ‘resistance’ and ‘witness’. Like linguistic style and like resistance, the political act of witness may also be defined as an act of ‘necessity’. The act of *wielding the pen*, represents an in-built necessity to resist, an in-built necessity to create and to

---

<sup>20</sup> Labarthe, A., ‘L’exploitation économique des régions occupées’ in *La France libre*, (London), 1(2), 1940:112.

<sup>21</sup> Hillesum, E., *Letters from Westbork*, trans. A. Pomerans, (NewYork: Pantheon, 1986:23) and Hillesum, E., *Etty: A Diary, 1941-1943* trans. A. Pomerans, (London: Jonathon Cape, 1983:146-165).

invent. Political necessity then, the obligation to affirm, in its relation to linguistic resistance, exists as the incentive to bear witness through written discourse.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Breton, André, *La Clé des Champs*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), 'The Political Position of Surrealism' in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. R. Seaver and H. Lane (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1969).
- Atak, Margaret, *Literature and the French Resistance, Cultural politics and narrative forms, 1940-1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).
- Barthes, R., *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. A. Lavers and C. Smith (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).
- De Certeau, Michel, *L'Invention du quotidien, 1, arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).
- Chambers, Ross, *Room for Manoeuvre, Reading Oppositional Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- Hillesum, Etty, *Letters from Westbork*, trans. A. Pomerans (New York: Pantheon, 1986), *Etty: A Diary, 1941-1943* trans. A. Pomerans (London: Jonathon Cape, 1983).
- Labarthe, André, 'L'exploitation économique des régions occupées' in *La France libre* (London),1(2):1940.
- Proust, Françoise, *De la Résistance* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1997).
- Schalk, David, *Roger Martin du Gard, The Novelist and History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

