

Benjamin Péret and the Ecological Imagination

Don LaCoss

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Those who believe in a staunch ecological stance that subverts the dominant patterns of objectification, degradation, subordination, and commodification should take time to understand the revolutionary force of poetry.

Among those who can help in this regard are the surrealists. When one scrapes below the surface definitions of surrealism provided by universities, museums, and art dealers, one can begin to sense the insurrectionary thirst for liberty that is the core tenet for which surrealism fights.

Dali and Magritte, for example, are very marginal figures in the movement who were ejected for their reactionary views. Oddly, Dali and Magritte are the two most commonly marketed as surrealist artists in the US.

Surrealism is something else—it's not an escape from reality, but a desperate bid to recover social realities in all their intensity and then transform them into deeper, higher, and more real levels of reality. This is accomplished by delivering the means of production (material and mental) into the hands of persons most exploited by the conventional consensual social system built and maintained by the white patriarchal, Christian bourgeoisie. Surrealism subverts the system that has relentlessly robbed people of their ability to imagine alternatives and wild possibilities by denigrating perception, desire, instinct, and intuition.

To combat the poisonous narrow conditions of modern life under capitalism, the surrealists braided together the complexities of individual revolt and the handsome, many-headed beast of collective rebellion. They believed that any revolution for social justice is doomed to failure if it does not allow for the unthinkable, unanticipated models of emancipation that poetry propagates.

Poetry and revolution are as intimately integral to one another as wind and rain, turning words and phrases inside out and knotting them together into stormy new topological geometries. It is language at its most evolved and primordial state, beyond and before the blinders of ideological policing and economic determinism. Like the natural world, poetry is restlessly animate and sublimely turbulent—a riot of energies, colors, sounds and realities that scream out alternatives to the standard concepts and presuppositions of scientific, ethical, and aesthetic vocabularies.

One of the most militant of the surrealist poets was Benjamin Péret. In 1945, he wrote about how poetry serves the revolution only when the revolution serves poetry:

“The poet battles against all oppression: primarily, that of one being over another, as well as the oppression of the mind by religious, philosophical and social dogma. The poet struggles so that humanity may achieve a more perfect knowledge of itself and its world.”

This does not conform to the idea that poets put poetry at the service of political action, however revolutionary it might be. Just by being a poet, one becomes a revolutionary who must fight on all planes, both on the field of poetry by the most appropriate means and on the field of social action, without confusing the two terrains of action. To do so would be to risk a restoration of confusion that is meant to be dissipated, and by this one would cease to be a poet, or which is to say, a revolutionary.

Apropos to my comments about poetry and radical ecology, I want to call attention to an overlooked collection of essays by Benjamin Péret called *Natural History* (originally, *Histoire naturelle*). Falling somewhere between poetry,

cosmogony, and mythology, Péret's Natural History is not only an important contribution to surrealism's thinking on the revolutionary restoration, emancipation, and recreation of wildness and wilderness, but it also can be read as an experiment in radical environmentalist poetry that provides an interesting counterpoint and complement to many of the other texts of radical ecology being passed around today.

A pivotal personality

A pivotal, pioneering personality in surrealism before and after World War II, Péret spent at least forty years of his life working with anti-state communists and anarcho-syndicalists around the world. Motivated by protests against imperialist wars in North Africa, Péret joined the French Communist Party around 1926. Already by 1927, he was living in Brazil where he helped organize an "oppositionist" (anti-Stalinist) communist league in Rio de Janeiro. In 1932, Brazilian authorities imprisoned him, then deported him back to France for his revolutionary activities. In Paris, he bounced between small, anti-Stalinist communist organizations before signing on to the Internationalist Workers Party in 1936. During the revolution in Spain, he worked as a go-between for Trotskyist, far-left communist, and anarcho-syndicalist militias in France, Brazil, Spain, and Mexico. He also served in the Amigos des Durutti militia on the Aragon Front to fight against fascists, counterrevolutionaries, and Stalinists in 1937.

A famous 1926 photograph captures Péret, an unrepentant anti-clericalist, spitting either insults or mucus at a priest. But the victory of Franco's clerico-fascist regime, precipitated Péret's return to France, and when the Nazis invaded, he was drafted by the French army to work as a clerk in a municipal office in Nantes. Unbelievably, his job allowed him access to lists of politically "suspicious" persons being compiled by the police, so he spent his time substituting the names of priests for those of subversives on the intelligence reports. He also built up a clandestine Trotskyist cell, which was later broken up by the police, and resulted in his brief incarceration. After bribing Nazi prison guards, Péret was able to return undercover to Occupied Paris.

Denounced as a threat to public safety by a local collaborationist newspaper, he fled to Marseilles and briefly combined forces with the antifascist underground before making it into exile in New York City. US authorities refused to issue visas to him and his companion, Remedios Varo, because of their revolutionary political pasts. So the couple went on to Mexico, where they connected with a community of exiled Spanish Trotskyists and civil war veterans. There, working alongside Natalia Sedova (Trotsky's comrade and second wife) and Grandizo Munis (formerly of the left-opposition Leninists in Spain and a veteran of the Amigos des Durutti), he produced bulletins critical of the Fourth International's theorists and bureaucrats. In the summer of 1947, after the Fourth International formally endorsed Stalin's USSR, Péret abandoned the organization.

Subsequently, Péret worked within a number of ultra-left groups in Paris comprised of anti-Stalinist veterans of the Spanish Civil War, Mexican anarcho-communists, and radical Vietnamese anti-imperialists. One of these groups was the International Workers Union, an organization aligned to the "Gallienne-Pennetier tendency" of Trotskyism whose membership included Munis, Jean Malaquais, Sania Gontarbert, Marcel Pennetier, and Serge Bricianer. He also wrote columns and signed surrealist proclamations that appeared in some of the dozen or so major anarchist newspapers produced in France at the time.

Until his death in 1959, Péret toyed with ideas on autonomist Marxism, council communism and a number of other left-communist internationalist issues in brochures and newspaper columns. In a glowing eulogy, the revolutionary direct democracy Socialisme ou barbarie group hailed him as one of the "very rare creative spirits" who "defended his ideas" daily and continually renewed "his refusal...to accept the least compromise with bourgeois or Stalinist infamy." Yet in spite of this, his uncompromising ideas and creations remain largely unexplored by contemporary practitioners of radical theory, including his oddly beautiful "natural history" written between 1945 and 1958.

Natural History and Surrealist Ecology

To appraise Péret's *Natural History* as a text of surrealist ecology, one can begin by reflecting upon the attributes and meaning of "natural history" as a discipline of study. In these days of university "ologies" (biology, zoology, climatology, paleontology, physical anthropology), the term "histoire naturelle" is old-fashioned, almost pre-scientific (in the most modern sense of the word "science")—in other words, pre-industrial, pre-capitalist, and low-tech in its technological accoutrements. In contrast to today's scientists most of whom refuse to form a hypothesis for controlled experiments without funding from a major corporation, natural historians—since the Roman writer Pliny the Elder—tend to be obsessed amateurs skilled in the art of observation who meticulously detail even the most obvious elements of the world around them.

Thus, at least ideally, natural history has come to be understood as a systematic consideration of animal, vegetable, and mineral phenomena based on close observation by the writer. (Incidentally, Pliny died while investigating first-hand the volcano eruption at Pompeii in 79 CE.) The empirical and materialistic study of natural history covers all forms of organic and inorganic existence: stars, planets, plants, minerals, fossil remains, birds, mammals, and insects are all fair game.

Natural history changed considerably in the mid-1700s, thanks to the aristocratic sycophant Count Georges-Louis Leclerc Buffon, who produced a sprawling forty-four volume *Histoire naturelle, generale et particuliere* (1749–1788). Buffon's buffoonery quickly earned him an esteemed place among the snooty firmament of the European Enlightenment, and most twentieth-century schoolchildren in France—even a dropout underachiever like Péret—would have had at least a little of his work shoved down their throats. Buffon's studies are of value insofar as they discuss descent with modification and causative influences present in environments, including migration patterns, geography, and population density, thereby providing a vital cornerstone for evolutionists such as Darwin to build upon later. Regrettably, though, Buffon curdles these innovations by adding his own loathsome inflections to the eighteenth-century debates on "race."

The only real use in mentioning Buffon here is to juxtapose his version of natural history to the essays that make up Péret's. Whereas Buffon provides anemic, mechanistic, and reasonably dull explanations for life and nature through carefully detailed accounts and sharply realistic illustrations, Péret's texts are fiery and funny, playfully satirizing the sometimes pretentious conventions of the "natural historian" genre in very deliberate ways.

Péret's assembled essays, "The Four Elements," "The Mineral Kingdom," "The Vegetable Kingdom," and "The Animal Kingdom," demonstrate an unremarkable taxonomic scheme as far as natural histories go, but one that diverges sharply from any other from its opening lines which describe the world as "not spherical but shaped like a bowl, and is one of the breasts of heaven. The other is to be found at the center of the Milky Way." This natural history rings more like the popular myths, legends, and folk tales of Mesoamerica that Péret anthologized, or episodes from the ancient Yucatan Jaguar Prophet that appear in the *Book of Chilám Balám* that Péret translated in 1955. In fact, much of the action in *Natural History* seems pregnant with portent, like the encoded allegorical formulae of medieval alchemical treatises that synthesized philosophy, chemistry, and physics in the service of radical moral change. One need only be a skilled adept to decipher its recipe.

Four Elements

Divided further into "Earth," "Air," "Water," and "Fire" subsections, *Four Elements* spells out the most unnatural explanations and recountings of these allegedly foundational building blocks of nature. Air, Péret explains, secretes pepper that accumulates in the upper atmosphere to give stars their sparkle; evaporated sea water leaves behind female silks that, after one thousand years of maturation, produce four litters of brandy glasses a year; and damp, trembling stones exposed to sunlight yield "soft, sweet, velvety and perfumed" fire "currently used for burning down churches."

Water, air, earth and fire combined to create the world in "The Mineral Kingdom." But rather than the graceful ideals of classical legend, Péret's elements are capricious, vain, and rambunctious, brawling with one another like demonic Three Stooges. The tumult of "The Vegetable Kingdom" is related with the same cruel charm: "Disorder

reigned under the cover of the night. The honeysuckle came from nowhere zigzagging to escape a pine that was tilting at it and threatening to impale it. A pansy was sitting astride a heliotrope pulling out its hair in handfuls...The whole place was an appalling free-for-all, an incredible orgy.”

The last chapter, “The Animal Kingdom”, the final evolutionary stage in Péret’s creation myth, is not only a wicked inversion of the Book of Genesis, but also a radical assertion that nature exists for its own sake well outside of the needs and largesse of humans. It opens with such a revolting scene of havoc that the agave—a significant plant in Mexican culture, among other things, as a central ingredient in the making of tequilla—takes it upon itself to relieve the misery, and does so by accidentally creating an anteater, a grasshopper, a cod and a woodpecker. Each time a new creature appears, the agave reacts with surprise and delight, a far cry from the self-centered braggart in Genesis who wills things into existence with nothing but humorless ostentation. In fact, Péret mocks the anthropocentrism of the Judeo-Christian god when he provides the agave with all-too-human qualities: while soaking a giraffe in grease in order to make “a sparrow or a frigate bird”, the agave bends down to retie its footwear and snaps a shoelace, the discarded useless end of which transforms into a dog-producing primrose bush. The agave also manipulates grammatical, philosophical, scientific, and literary concepts during its paroxysms of creation: sophisms, alexandrines, synonyms, prepositions, Archimedes’ principle, and circumflex accents combine with panthers, pelicans, pinecones, and rhinoceroses. During a fight and yelling match between a starfish, a mouse, and a heron, the agave finally decides to create a man, carving him from a prune and telling him to find a wife on his own, which the prune-man attempts with honey from a hive.

My synopsis does not fully capture the wonder, humor, and rebellious zest of Péret’s *Natural History*, but it does help to show how the essays could be approached as foundational text of a radical ecological agenda. Péret’s casting of his essays under the rubric of “kingdoms” is a farcical swipe at the classification system of eighteenth-century botanist Carolus Linnaeus, the creator of the orderly, rigid taxonomy used by humans to identify and record plant and animal life. In contrast to the self-serving human urge to force order upon the world—the very notion of a “natural history” is supremely conceited in assuming that nature can be squeezed into a human-forged narrative of change over time the kingdoms imagined by Péret are unruly and regicidal, ungoverned and ungovernable save for a chaotic, sleepwalker’s logic outside human ken.

As compared to Buffon’s, Péret’s *Natural History* is an anti-natural history drawn from observing environments much too complex and too alien to fit into storylines produced by a civilization anxious to keep homo sapiens at the apex of the evolutionary pyramid. In this age when computerized models used for mapping (and later, patenting, before finally invading them) genomic patterns claim the ability to unlock the secrets of life itself, Péret’s tales of mystery, imagination, and anarchy remind us all how one cannot control what is wild. Some environmentalists seek a world where nature engages with human nature in a dance of complementary unity, rather than being locked in a death match for superiority as rivals, but surrealists are species traitors who continue to fight for and dream of a violent demolition of a universe where human civilization remains the central value and purpose.

A first step in this direction is poetry that welds together the wilderness of the unconscious with the wildness of nature. The great surrealist poet Aimé Césaire asserted this very position from his tropical home in Martinique while the abominations of World War II befouled Europe, Africa, and Asia. “The unconscious that all true poetry calls upon is the receptacle of original relationships that bind us to nature,” he wrote. “Within us, all the ages of humankind. Within us, animal, vegetable, mineral.” The autocratic rationalism and scientific snobbery of Enlightenment celebrities like Buffon found its oh-so-logical conclusion in the sophisticated railroad timetables that crisscrossed the forests of Eastern Europe to supply the factories of concentration camps and the genie of technological atrocity unbottled at the Trinity proving grounds in the New Mexican desert. Although he does not mention these things, Césaire implies them and more when he demands that people come to grips with “the superiority of the tree over humankind, of the tree that says ‘yes’ over a humankind who says ‘no’. The superiority of the tree that is consent over a humankind who is evasiveness; the superiority of the tree which is rootedness and deepening over a humankind who is agitation and malfeasance. And that is why humankind does not blossom at all.” In the early 1990s, surrealist poet-painter Penelope Rosemont applied Césaire’s philosophy in a short essay that scans the headlines of the day and finds the correspondences linking the Los Angeles uprising, the fight to defend women’s reproductive freedom, and the attempts to protect the spotted owl from extinction. “The struggle for women’s reproductive rights—for women’s freedom—is also the struggle for sexual freedom for all; and for the end of war,

white supremacy and all oppression; for the glorious diversity of wildlife on a living Earth. We shall win or be defeated together.” This is a vision of revolutionary equality where there are no hierarchies of priority or superiority, but rather a mutual organic alliance for existence.

Despite the savage escalation in surveillance, harassment, and oppression by federal, state, and local police forces since September 11, the eco-resistance boldly continues to strike back against suburban sprawl, deforestation, agribusiness tyranny, and genetically-engineered crops. “We need no more words on the matter,” Edward Abbey famously wrote. “Sentiment without action is the ruin of the soul. One brave deed is worth a thousand books.” But direct action without ideas can ruin more than the soul; we should always be on the lookout for new sentiments, and continue to circulate them among ourselves in order to keep up with shifting topographies of direct action and State repression. Péret’s *Natural History* may not appear to be as immediately utilitarian as the ELF’s *Setting Fires With Electric Timers* or that handy manual to biotech crop-pulling, *The Nighttime Gardener*, but all efforts should be made to find a poetry that conveys a vision of wilderness that recognizes the necessity of emancipation—both esoteric and exoteric—from imposed, artificial constraints. As Romanticist revolutionary William Blake wrote, “Nature is Imagination itself.”

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Some surrealist reviews by Carroll S.

Communicating Vessels, July/August 2002

(\$3 from Mutual Aid Portland

PO Box 7328 Portland ME 04112)

Blending marvelous manifesto with biting analysis, CV is an excellent anarcho-surrealist-communist ‘zine from the northeast. Mixing reprints, unsigned narratives, and personal confessions, CV clearly believes in abandoning this society to create life on different terms. While the writings on Palestine, Iraq, economics, etc. were intelligent and interesting, I found the personal pieces more compelling. Of particular note, “The Hellish Underworld of Day Labor” is a reflective critique of the author’s foray into the urban, day-slave racket that exploits unskilled temp workers in intensely humiliating situations. All in all, a highly recommended read.

Surrealist Experiences: 1001 Dawns, 221 Midnights

by Penelope Rosemont

Foreword by Rikki Ducornet

(\$12 from Black Swan Press PO Box 6424 Evanston IL 60204)

Penelope Rosemont, a co-conspirator in the Chicago Surrealists, embodies art, action, and vision. She defines surrealism as a way of “challenging one’s self, of transcending all rationalized excuses for saying yes to miserabilism and tolerating the intolerable” and lives this challenge within these pages. This anthology of Penelope’s prose combines essays, rants, manifestos, games, theory, and more to dance on the perimeter of consciousness where technique, critique, and dissident mystique converge in poetic revolt.

In playful yet precise language, she embraces pleasure and freedom, attacks work and white supremacy. An anarchist before she knew anarchism and a surrealist before she knew surrealism, Penelope Rosemont’s life has been an escapade. This book represents Rosemont’s daily experience as an experiment in revolution, nurturing the energy that guided her at twenty-three to quit work and school and head for Paris to “meet the surrealists” and follow her dreams. As readers, may we also follow dreams and revolt.

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