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TOUCHED BY SURREALISM:

Reflections on a New Sensory Approach to Literature

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In this paper, I discuss a new sensory approach to literature. Literature might be studied in order to trace the perceptual effects of cultural, political and technological transformations. First, I develop a historicizing method, which maps the sensory practices and discourses of a certain period and analyzes their appropriation in contemporary literature. Next, I demonstrate the fruitfulness of this approach by taking Surrealism as a case study, focusing on the role of touch or “haptics” in the works of Benjamin Péret. The concluding remarks will serve to hint at the new routes of research which this sensory approach discloses.

There is a striking photograph of the French Surrealist Benjamin Péret (1899-1959), taken during the Spanish Civil War, which seems to capture the poet's entire career in just one snapshot. Jean Schuster, the first archivist of the Surrealist movement, recalled this picture as follows: “rappelons cette photo de sentinelle assise en plein soleil, la main droite tenant ferme le fusil, la gauche caressant un chat” (cited in Péret, 7: 6).¹ Schuster essentially saw in this photograph the posture of a Trotskyist sentry in the Republican camp, that is, a portrait of Péret as a life-long rebel against reason and capitalism: “le teigneux, le jamais content, l'objecteur de conscience et d'inconscience, le fou qui a toujours raison” (idem). I would rather suggest a more literal reading, as uncovering the predominance of the sense of touch in Péret's poetics. In that case, we should get closer to the depicted scene, trying to imagine the various sensations on our skin of the sun's profuse warmth, the soft fur of the cat, the cool steel of the rifle and the sharp pain which an eventual bullet could inflict. In addition, we should also try to understand what these sensations actually

meant to Péret in the tangible yet extremely politicized landscape of the Spanish front. Why did Péret consider it to be part of a true poet's task to stand up and take physical action, apparently not even shrinking back from using violence?

In this essay, the works of Benjamin Péret in the context of Surrealism will serve to illustrate a new sensory approach to literature.² Sensory perception constitutes the primordial channel through which a person acquires knowledge about the material world. Consequently, it is not the least surprising that perception is deeply interconnected with that person's other basic tool to make sense of the world, i.e. language. Yet, how should we conceive of this interconnection between language and perception? More specifically, to what extent does perception inform such complex linguistic phenomena as literature? The picture described above points at still another problem, because we might wonder whether it is really possible to recuperate sensory experiences from the past. Will we ever know what the poet exactly felt at that particular moment? If not, how could we adequately interpret the verbal representations or otherwise mediated forms of similar sensations from the same period, in order to enrich our understanding of the functioning of the senses within that culture and society?

I will deal with these fundamental theoretical and methodological questions in the first section of this article. By drawing on insights from cultural history, I will gradually come to a concrete approach to study sensory perception in literature. The sense of touch or "haptics" thereby requires special attention, since the omnipresence of touch in our daily life contrasts strongly with the imprecise vocabulary we tend to use when talking about its many aspects. In the second section, I will apply this approach to offer a new haptic reading of Surrealism. It will be shown that Surrealists like Péret emphasized the role of touch in order to restore a prelogic unity of mind and body. Moreover, this rehabilitation of touch in avant-garde art and literature will be framed by tracing parallel tendencies in early twentieth-century science and philosophy. By way of conclusion, the third section broadens the scope again and suggests several routes to follow when applying sensory analysis to other problems, genres and periods in French literature.

Reflections on a sensory approach to literature

The humanities have taken a lively interest in the senses during the last decades. Specialized research institutes where scholars from different fields exchange their findings concerning sensory perception, were founded in Canada (Concordia University; www.thecentreforsensorystudies.org) and

more recently The Netherlands (www.access-emotionsandsenses.nl). Yet, in view of our question how to study sensory perception from the past, we should more particularly turn to cultural history.

Cultural history was one of the first disciplines to delve into the richness of perception (Burke, 110-12), with in the 1980s, for example, Alain Corbin dedicating notable studies to the sounds and smells of the French countryside in previous centuries. Where did this interest in the senses suddenly come from? According to Gabrielle Spiegel, cultural historians had grown dissatisfied with the structuralist view of culture propagated after the so-called “linguistic turn” of the 1970s and 1980s. This structuralist or semiotic view, once born as a sound reaction to the objective truth claims of social history, presupposed underlying discursive patterns determining all forms of social action as well as the production of cultural utterances. The opponents of this structuralist view however pointed out that it left too little room for subjective agency or deviating behaviour. As a result of this criticism, attention shifted from the semiotics of culture, i.e. the underlying sign systems, to the pragmatics of culture implying that concrete actions and utterances, rather, produce and construct meaning. This pragmatic or performative approach to culture had to ensure a return to lived “experience”, because historians basically recoiled from accepting that “experience, the bedrock of social history, might be a mere 'effect' of discourse, since it seems to deny a host of putatively pre-discursive, bodily sensations that could be thought both to exceed and to escape discursive construction” (Spiegel, 18).

It is clear that the emergence of the cultural history of perception, or sensory history as it is usually called, fit within this trend to move away from collective, discursive patterns in culture towards a reaffirmation of individual experience. Terms such as “sensation” or “impression” – quite inevitable in regard to the senses – seemingly designate the extratextual materiality of the human body. However, one may wonder whether perception can really be situated outside language and its context-bound frames of reference. Some historians, like Peter Charles Hoffer for example, tend to stress the universality of the human perceptual apparatus, so that according to them it should be possible to relive sensory experiences from former times (Hoffer, 3). These historians suppose that, as long as the original setting is faithfully reconstructed, we could presently see, hear and smell the way people perceived in the past. In recent years, this reasoning has also motivated the massive introduction of multi-sensory practices in the popular segments of history, such as the re-enactment of legendary battles and the use of interactive installations in historical museums. This is not the appropriate

place to discuss the instructive or pedagogical value of such sensory “time travelling”. When it comes to scientific research on the senses, however, it seems more prudent not to postulate any straightforward continuity between past and present.

I would like to signal two basic difficulties. First, although it is probably true that over thousands of years the human sensory apparatus has not undergone any significant biological changes, we need to take into account that the definitions of that sensory apparatus show many variations over time and across cultures. Whereas in the West the traditional hierarchy of the senses was always dominated by sight – witness the many dead metaphors in Indo-European languages comparing light to knowledge – non-Western, oral cultures such as the Incas from ancient Peru rather attributed the highest rank to hearing (Classen 1993, 106-20). Besides, as important scholarship has recently shown, the predominance of vision in Western thought was not any warrant for conceptual stability either (Havelange; Jay). During the Enlightenment, the eye was mainly conceived in mechanistic terms, as if it were a camera obscura merely registering the inverted image from the external object on the retina. This apparent truthfulness of vision was gradually undone in the nineteenth century, when in the wake of physiological discoveries, such as the retinal afterimage and the optical nerves for colour perception, the objectifying camera obscura model of the Enlightened eye was replaced by a more embodied understanding of vision (Crary). In short, people's uses of their senses are always informed by collectively accepted, variable conceptions of the sensory apparatus; consequently, sensory practices and bodily sensations can never be situated “outside language” or culture.

Once these intercultural and conceptual differences in perception are acknowledged, there remains a second obstacle obstructing any direct, sensory access to the past. That is the fragmentary and mediated nature of contextual information. For instance, like any historian, the researcher of the senses has frequently to cope with a lack of data. In the case of the picture of Benjamin Péret described in the introduction, we merely have a vague notion of the time and place of its making. It must have been taken somewhere during the autumn of 1936 or early winter of 1937, the only period when Péret was serving in Spain, most probably at the Aragonese front near Huesca, but this last point is rather based on deductive guesswork than on established facts. Did Péret, at that particular moment, still belong to the ranks of the POUM – the Marxist labor movement so famously immortalized in George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1937) – or had he already made the switch over to the

more radical anarchosyndicalists of Buenaventura Durruti? We just do not know. This kind of information could help us to imagine the exact material circumstances (temperature, the landscape outside the picture, the weapons being used, and so on) and the sensations they might have provoked in the seated sentry. But, even if we had all those details at our disposal, we would only be able to reconstruct them by means of documents like photos, texts, radio reports, in short mediated forms of representation. This is problematic, in the sense that through the process of symbolization, all media transform, select, disembodiment and depersonalize private experiences. Suppose that, thanks to an enormous amount of documentation, we could stage a perfect re-enactment of the depicted scene, then the actor replacing Péret would never feel the way the poet did. He would not have suffered any unpleasant bodily reminiscences Péret may have endured, associating the physical discomfort in Spain with his former days in the trenches of the First World War, nor would our actor clutch his gun with the same obstinate belief in the justice of the Republican cause. Accordingly, as Mark Smith has argued, the historian would do well to respect the contingency of any sensory experience as much as possible. It should therefore not be extracted from the discursive and cultural context within which it occurred, so as to avoid any false illusion of a perceptual journey into the past (Smith, 847).

How, then, can these theoretical principles be integrated into a feasible method for literary studies? A good starting point would be to consult a wide variety of sources from the society or period under scrutiny, in order to take stock of its recurrent sensory practices and discourses. By “sensory practices” I mean the habitual modes of using the senses (the sensory interaction with other living creatures, technology, architecture, etc.), whereas “sensory discourses” indicate the way people conceive of their senses (how many are there? Is there any hierarchy among the senses? If there is, which is the highest, which the lowest? etc.) In the next stage of research, this global inventory will allow the literary scholar to analyze how writers engage with contemporary sensory practices and discourses, and how their works may influence their readers' understanding of perception. That is why I combine sensory history with a New Historicist approach to literature, by confronting the primary corpus of selected literary texts with another secondary corpus of non-literary texts (selected from the global inventory) that serves to contextualize the contemporary sensory practices and discourses. The secondary corpus helps to clarify which discourses and practices the authors from the primary corpus tended to appropriate for their own literary ends, and which ones they would rather reject. The notion of “appropriation”, taken

from Jan Verwoert, reveals that the current interest in the senses does not at any rate imply a return to the structuralist or semiotic model of culture. Instead, sensory studies proceed from the pragmatic point of view that perception consists of what people do with and think of their senses, operating within collective, yet never all-determining cultural frameworks. Writers are among those agents who can, through texts, alter or at least attempt to modify those collective frameworks.

To make things more concrete, I will now turn to the early twentieth century, the decades when the historical avant-gardes in general and Surrealism in particular emerged. This period was characterized by many changes at the sensory level. On the side of practices, for instance, many Europeans and Americans were getting used to new modes of perception typical of an urban environment, e.g. going to the movies, listening to the radio, travelling in fast trains or walking through crowded, noisy streets. In such a modern, chaotic environment, many people felt overwhelmed by stimuli and felt like they were losing their overview in a sensory overload. It is therefore not so surprising that, on the side of discourses, we find much debate on the reliability of the senses in science, philosophy and in literature. These widespread doubts concerning the epistemological status of the senses not only arose from the metropolitan overstimulation but also, as was mentioned above, from the growing interest in the formative impact of psychosomatic processes on the results of perception. In his impressive study *Downcast Eyes*, cultural historian Martin Jay mapped one of the related major shifts in early twentieth-century French thought, when philosophers like Bergson, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty fiercely criticized the “transparent”, Enlightened mind and the objectivity of vision it had presupposed. In spite of their diverging angles, these prominent thinkers instead assumed the subjective gaze or the embodied consciousness as being constitutive of one's reality. To some extent, the Surrealists can be said to have partaken of the same critical enterprise, although with their own artistic programme and political agenda foregrounding the sense of touch.

The poet Benjamin Péret, who was one of the founders of the Surrealist movement in 1924, was very much aware of the crucial role of touch in Surrealist poetics. Looking back in 1956 at more than thirty years of the group's endeavours, Péret maintained: “La réhabilitation de la chair reconnue dans toute sa splendeur [...] est justement une des grandes tâches que le surréalisme s'est assignée” (7: 290). But what did he exactly mean by “la chair”, the flesh that so much needed to be rehabilitated in all its splendour? In the scientific terminology of today, one would say that it covered the tactile

level of the skin as well as the kinesthetic and proprioceptive levels of movement and body awareness. Yet, in line with the previous caveats to leave the contingent sensory experience from the past intact, Constance Classen cautions us against such anachronistic terminology: “however valuable [such a description] may be, it cannot in itself reveal the significance of touch in other times and places” (2012, xii). Consequently, in the second part of this article, I will restrict myself to the Surrealists' own terms to discuss three fundamental components of their haptic way of thinking.

The haptic poetics of Surrealism: receptivity, activism, metamorphosis

It is once again Péret's picture that may function as an index for the three basic aspects of his haptic poetics, namely 1) his caressing left hand indicating the receptivity towards the sentient other, 2) the rifle in his right hand exhibiting his activism or willingness to take (violent) political action, and 3) the sunny, Spanish landscape around the sentry, subtly foretelling Péret's future concern with spatial perception and metamorphosis. As will soon become clear, these three aspects represent as many phases, both in Péret's personal career and Surrealism in general to which he showed a life-long devotion.

In order to understand the first notion, receptivity or the openness to as well as the desire for the other, we might best go back to the Parisian origins of the Surrealist movement. Its founders, among whom were André Breton, Philippe Soupault and Péret himself, were former Dadaists who sought to transform the absurdistic, playful protests of Dada into a more substantial programme for aesthetic and social renewal. Their main target was not so much literary tradition, as the bourgeois society which they held responsible for the economic exploitation and mental deadening of its citizens. The Surrealists considered the First World War, during which most of them had been mobilized, as the ultimate excrescence of that inhuman, disciplinary system. Péret compared his military service in the trenches to “un véritable bagne, où les gradés de tout rang n'avaient envers les soldats que les insultes les plus grossières à la bouche accompagnées de continuelles menaces de sanction” (cited in Bédouin, 23). Yet, how to shake such a disciplinary society to its foundations?

For the Surrealists, it was crystal-clear: they had to demonstrate that the strong confidence in Reason, the cornerstone of bourgeois ideology, was utterly misguided. Rationalism and its promise of technical control over the world not only led to catastrophes like the Great War, it also put an end to the individual's creative imagination. Hence, from the beginning onward the Surrealists engaged in all kinds of artistic experiments to restore an unbound

imagination, that was no longer censored by reason and roamed freely in the “chaos” of bodily sensations and desires. As Paul Éluard still put it in 1932: “Le plus noble des désirs est celui de combattre tous les obstacles posés par la société bourgeoise à la réalisation des désirs vitaux de l'homme, aussi bien à ceux de son corps qu'à ceux de son imagination, ces deux catégories étant d'ailleurs presque toujours étroitement confondues et se déterminant l'une à l'autre” (25).

A famous practice they used to reach that imaginative state – appropriated from psychoanalysis – was the so-called “écriture automatique”: it entailed sitting down and writing incessantly what immediately came to one's mind. This associative technique often led to intriguing poetic images. The more heterogeneous the constitutive elements of the image, the better it was (according to the Surrealists at least), the more beautiful and surprising the results. A classical example of such an image, which the Surrealists frequently cited, was “la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie” from Lautréamont's *Les chants de Maldoror* (Ducasse, 233-4). The structure of such an image is haptic in nature, in the sense that it stems from the haphazard juxtaposition of completely unrelated elements. The visual overview needed for any calculated composition had been rejected. Writing a Surrealist text could therefore be compared to groping one's way in a unfamiliar dark room, not knowing which objects or obstacle one would encounter, step by step adding something to the temporary picture one had of a room and yet destabilizing it once more.

This is how André Breton described the making of similar images in their first manifesto from 1924: “La valeur de l'image dépend de la beauté de l'étincelle obtenue; elle est, par conséquent, fonction de la différence de potentiel entre les deux conducteurs” (1977, 51). It is significant that Breton used an electric metaphor in this passage. He thereby appropriated a contemporary psychophysical discourse on nervous energy, in which perception was conceived as electric impulses sent from the sensory nerves to the brain. Artistic creativity was thus fuelled by the thermodynamic machinery of the body rather than by a contemplative mind. This electricity discourse was also sexually charged. Good readers of Freud as they were, the Surrealists knew that, as soon as rational control is turned off, all sorts of repressed desires and fears will manifest themselves more freely. Accordingly, they believed that their poetic images were born from the sublimation of sexual energy. Seen from this angle, it is no longer a coincidence that, in the aforementioned image of Lautréamont, the phallic umbrella and the femininely connoted sewing machine meet, exactly when Maldoror gets

sexually excited. But let us take a look at an example from Péret's own writings, namely his poem "Homard" from the collection significantly titled *Je sublime* (1936):

HOMARD

Les aigrettes de ta voix jaillissant du buisson ardent de tes
lèvres
où le chevalier de la Barre serait heureux de se consumer
Les éperviers de tes regards pêchant sans s'en douter toutes
les sardines de ma tête
ton souffle de pensées sauvages
se reflétant du plafond sur mes pieds
me traversent de part en part
me suivent et me précèdent
m'endorment et m'éveillent
me jettent par la fenêtre pour me faire monter par l'ascenseur
et réciproquement (2: 123)

In this poem, we may for instance notice the heterogeneity of the components: body parts, architecture, animals and plants, all intermingle in an ongoing stream of images. One image hooks onto the other in an endless, unsettling metonymy. All things within this poem make love, as the painter Max Ernst used to say about his collages (cited in Bailly, 54). Take for example the desired kiss from the first lines, where the "burning bush" of the lover's lips turns into a stake for the chevalier de la Barre, a celebrated eighteenth-century martyr of freethinking. Body and mind are completely interdependent, as we could also read "la barre" from this freethinker's name as referring to an erection. Likewise, the lover's thoughts traverse the speaker's body. Although the text alludes to other senses like hearing and taste, it mainly thematizes the reciprocal character of touch. This brings us to the core of the Surrealist receptivity, earlier symbolized in the caressing hand of the sentry.

In the poem we have just read, the speaker yearns to merge with his lover, even to be eaten by her. As the Mexican poet and close friend of the Surrealists Octavio Paz stated, we already carry the Other within ourselves, as lack, as thirst (181). Consequently, the automatic writing of the Surrealists would always reveal the otherness within oneself, or as Péret called it in his *Anthologie de l'amour sublime* (1956): "le sentiment inné de son insuffisance individuelle" (7: 262). This "innate feeling of the individual's insufficiency" was clearly at odds with the notion of the unified, rational subject of the Enlightenment. In response to that "feeling of insufficiency", Péret developed a theory of "sublime love", similar to Breton's "amour fou". This theory of

sublime love was based on the belief that every individual will be united with his or her true love at some point. But as no-one has the slightest idea when this will happen or with whom it will be, it does not make much sense to search for that person. One should rather wait for that marvelous moment of meeting him or her by chance and recognizing One's "sublime love" from the image unconsciously carried along.

Thus, in this sublime model for gender relations we retrieve the same haptic scheme as on the poetic level of language: the haphazard encounter of two unrelated people will lead to a sudden, mutual transformation. This "amour sublime" may perhaps sound like a romantic reverie, and yet, it adds to our cultural-historical understanding of the Surrealist discursive and practical "rehabilitation of the flesh". First of all, we have taken into account that, in the 1920s and 1930s, this "flesh" was still very much surrounded by social taboos and moral restrictions. The Surrealists wanted to contribute to the sexual liberation whose promising signs they had already discerned in scientific disciplines such as psychoanalysis and sexology. Accordingly, the Surrealists' overt way of speaking about sexuality caused a lot of scandals. But that was the turmoil they wanted, since they hoped to reach social reform through sexual liberation. As Péret wrote in his essay on sublime love, the freeing of the flesh would mean the beginning of an equal treatment among men and women, as well as the abolishment of marriage, in his eyes an outdated, bourgeois institution merely preserved on economic grounds. However, I should also mention that such plans for social reform would not prevent the Surrealists from being the target of severe feminist criticism of the traditional representations of women in their texts, or of their narrow-minded scorn for homosexuality.

All the same, the bellicose tone of their second manifesto from 1930 had already announced that the Surrealists would not stick to the receptivity initiated by automatic writing and carnal love in order to overthrow the established power structures. The 1930s brought a new phase of political radicalization of the movement, in Péret's case leading even to the handling of weapons during the Spanish Civil War. For, in Péret's own terms, someone could only be considered a true poet on the express condition that both his/her writings and actions aimed at revolutionizing social relations: "sa qualité de poète en fait un révolutionnaire qui doit combattre sur tous les terrains: celui de la poésie par les moyens propres à celle-ci et sur le terrain de l'action sociale sans jamais confondre les deux champs d'action" (7: 8). In these few lines, we find the essence of the haptic poetics of Surrealism intertwining life and art.

Thus the Surrealists sought to embody the will to transform society in word and physical deed.

Nevertheless, some remarks on Péret's unique position within the movement are still required. On the one hand, of all the members Péret took activism the most literally. Although many Surrealists presented themselves as the artistic defenders of the suppressed proletariat, Péret was the only group member who was constantly involved in Trotskyist organizations and did not shrink from travelling to Spain after the army's uprising against the Republic. His leftist activism would ultimately result in several months of imprisonment in Rennes, when in the early spring of 1940 he refused to fight again under the French tricolour he so utterly detested. On the other hand, Péret did not at all agree with Breton's bold statement that "L'acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolvers aux poings, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu'on peut, dans la foule" (1977, 78). Péret rejected any arbitrary recourse to violence, as this would deteriorate into pure barbarism. He distinguished both sides of the true poet's task very clearly: while writing, the poet ought not to recognize any political cause so as to avoid any form of propaganda; while taking political actions, however, he ought to follow a stipulated plan and revolutionary programme (Péret, 7: 8). Given the fact that their troublesome alliances with communists and Trotskyists have recently received quite a lot of critical attention (Asholt and Siepe; Prévan), I will not delve any further into the political adventures that the Surrealists undertook.

Instead, I would like to conclude this brief case study by bringing up a lesser-known chapter concerning the Surrealist poetics of space. This covers, next to receptivity and activism, a third haptic aspect: metamorphosis. In the light of all I have said before, it will not come as a surprise that the Surrealists opposed the traditional bourgeois architecture of the nineteenth century, with its sharp demarcation between the private sphere of the household and the public sphere of the city street. Nor were they charmed by the innovative rationalistic projects, introducing open areas and huge window panes, that the great modernists like Le Corbusier proposed in order to increase the circulation of air and light. In their writings, the Surrealist rather designed what Anthony Vidler has called an "uncanny architecture". This implied a kind of dream house we have known since Romanticism, where the inhabitants are haunted by their own repressed affections (Mical). In the designs of the Chilean Roberto Matta, for example, the biomorphic furniture and soft rubber walls could be shaped and replaced according to one's wishes, thereby blurring the lines between inside and outside, nature and culture, human and animal life. By tactile stimulation, Matta believed, such moldable

constructions would trigger the inhabitant's desire to return to the prenatal state of the uterus. Considering that such dream houses were hard to realize in practice, the Surrealists also transformed existing spaces into unhomely places. In novels like Aragon's *Le paysan de Paris* or Breton's *Nadja*, the protagonists' nightly strolls through the streets of Paris turn the modern capital into a mysterious labyrinth full of unexpected passages and encounters (Mahon, 23-52; Mileaf, 85-118).

In short, the Surrealists were convinced that certain material settings could haptically spur the observer on to the creative, non-rationalistic way of life they so eagerly propagated. In order to better understand why they thought so, it is important to invoke the contemporary notion of "the mimetic faculty" that was studied by the so-called "Collège de sociologie". The Collège was a group of intellectuals (among them Roger Caillois, Georges Bataille and Walter Benjamin), who had several meetings throughout the 1930s. Some of these thinkers were quite sympathetic to the Surrealist project, with which they shared similar fascinations (Cheng). One of these fascinations was the process of mimicry, which they saw as an example of nature's creativity. By mimicry, animals adapt their colour and shape to their immediate surroundings. According to Benjamin, there existed a direct link between animal mimicry and the mimetic faculty of human beings:

Nature produces similarities; one need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's. His gift for seeing similarity is nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically. There is perhaps not a single one of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role. (3: 721)

The whole human sensory apparatus may be involved in such a mimetic adaptation. But touch was the fundamental force, as Benjamin pointed out that this is the level where habits are formed, constituting the embodied memory. Benjamin gives the examples of premodern societies in which ritual dances followed the movements of heavenly bodies, or children's play, as they not only imitate other human beings but also machines like windmills, trains and aeroplanes. Accordingly, Benjamin argues, the mimetic faculty is essential to cultural innovation, as people adapt their behaviour to their changing environments, incorporating them and thereby providing them with new meanings.

The Surrealists may not have been familiar with Benjamin's essays, but they certainly knew Roger Caillois' ethnographic book *Le mythe et l'homme* (1938) that dealt with the same problem. It inspired many of them to look for

alternative uses of space in non-western cultures. During the Second World War, Benjamin Péret went into exile in Mexico, where he dedicated himself for several years to the ethnographic study of the Maya and Aztecs. This ethnographic work would result in several fascinating poems, most notably *Air mexicain* (1952). It also yielded the first French translation of *The book of Chilam Balam*, one of the only surviving sacred texts of the Maya. In the preface to this translation, he explains the mimetic function of ritual architecture, as he saw it during a visit to Chichén Itzá, a famous Maya monument for the feathered snake Kukulkán (a central meso-American god better known by his Aztec name Quetzalcoatl):

cette pyramide, dédiée au culte de Kukulcan, était manifestement destinée à rappeler dans tous ses détails le serpent sacré. Les quatre-vingt-onze degrés des escaliers sont si étroits et si hauts qu'ils obligent à une ascension oblique, en sorte que l'imposante procession des sacerdotes et des dignitaires empanachés, gravissant lentement les degrés de la pyramide [...] devait donner au spectateur resté sur le sol l'impression d'un immense serpent déroulant ses anneaux emplumés pour s'engouffrer dans le temple couronnant le monument. (7: 173)

Péret was very much intrigued by the fact that this monument was constructed in such a way that it obliged the procession to perform like a snake, reminding the mortal humans of nature's divine power as well as strengthening the internal, communal bonds. Just like the dream houses we discussed earlier, such descriptions of premodern, non-western architecture remained ultimately utopian alternatives to the modern, functional approach to space. In spite of their ineffectiveness, such ideas concerning the mimetic metamorphosis of the observer remained an integral part of the Surrealist haptic way of thinking.

The future of the sensory approach to literature

The preceding case study was not meant to offer any exhaustive analysis of Surrealism. It rather intended to highlight Péret's life-long preoccupation with haptics or “la chair”, underlying a rich variety of strategies to undo any artificial separation between mind and body. As I have indicated, the central role of touch in his poetics was significantly informed by the appropriation of contemporary scientific discourse, from disciplines such as psychology and ethnography. On the practical level, his “rehabilitation of the flesh” was mostly concerned with liberating sexuality as well as with the observer's mimetic metamorphosis. Meanwhile, to make sure that the Surrealists would never be satisfied with any purely intellectual type of social engagement, Péret

did not hesitate to include political activism and violence among the ideal poet's tasks.

By means of this case study, I have tried to suggest how deep the haptic model of reciprocity was embedded in Surrealist thinking, leading to various forms of interdependence: a) of heterogeneous elements in literary text, b) of subject and object in social relations, and c) of observer and material surroundings in space. I would argue that, at the epistemological level, it was the centrality of haptic reciprocity that turned Surrealism into the most radical poetics of the historical avant-garde. The ultimate aim of their literature and art was nothing less than getting rid of the rational, visualist divide between subject and object, observer and world. The Surrealists rejected notions such as overview, control and transparency. Their alternative way of perceiving and knowing the world was fragmentary and explorative, yet, perhaps also dangerously affective.

The specific relation between Surrealism and haptics undoubtedly requires more scholarly debate. More importantly for the present article, however, is the fact that the sensory approach to literature has proven to be very fruitful in this case. Most probably, this method could very well be applied to other types of literature, that belong to different styles and historical periods. It might be true that, due to their many new sensory experiences, early twentieth-century writers were very sensitive to the creative potential of perception, but I would still insist more generally on literature as constituting a privileged working field for the cultural study of the senses. First of all, literary texts tend to combine the evocation of concrete sensations with more abstract ideas on perception, the latter being implied in the chosen mode of description or stylistic features. Following Edmond Cros, we might for example scrutinize the contemporaneous emergence of Symbolist poetics and the scientific interest in synesthesia. Moreover, the sensory approach can also help us to determine to what extent certain literary texts undermine or rather affirm the prevailing perceptual frameworks (that is, discourses and practices). Thinking for example of the fascinating oeuvres of Aimé Césaire, Marguerite Duras or Joe Bousquet, we might wonder how predominant ways of perceiving are being altered by (post)colonial, gender or disabled perspectives.

Similar questions like the ones just proposed could be addressed by the cultural-historical method which has been developed in this article, focusing on the discursive and practical contingency of sensory perception. But the sensory approach also enables literary scholars to collaborate with researchers from other disciplines. What could linguists or philosophers of language teach

us about the sensory foundations of metaphors? Could we not learn from anthropologists how to compare modes of perception on a cross-cultural level, in order to transcend the boundaries of national literatures? And why not turn to media theorists, if we want to chart how digitalization affects our senses and contemporary modes of representation? Those are all very complex questions that require separate studies and methodologies. Yet, I hope that these suggestions for future research once more hint at the immense range of new possibilities that the sensory approach to literature may disclose. Ultimately, this approach will allow us to better understand how both text and body are equally involved and profoundly intertwined in the way we make sense of the world. This interaction of text and body is also the reason why I introduced the untraceable photograph of Péret as a recurrent motive throughout this paper. Even though the picture is not available, it still takes a tangible shape in untouchable words.

Notes

1. Please note that references to collected works usually contain two numbers, the first before the colon indicating the volume, the second after the colon referring to the page. As this famous picture has nowhere been reprinted, I asked in Spring 2013 for more information about it at the Association des Amis de Benjamin Péret which is responsible for the poet's legacy. The president of the Association, M. Gérard Roche, assured me of the picture's existence, pointing out that it must still be kept in an unopened archive.
2. The methodology as well as the case study that are discussed in this article, are based on my recent PhD thesis (until present only available in Dutch university libraries): *Talend lichaam: de visuele en haptische waarneming in de avant-gardepoëzie van Huidobro en Péret*, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2013.

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