LES DEUX CENTS FAMILLES: A CONSPIRACY THEORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

1. The Attack of the Two Hundred Families

This essay takes as its point of departure the invitation to the January 21, 1936, meeting of Contre-Attaque, the group founded by Georges Bataille and André Breton in 1935 as a reaction to the rise of fascism in France. Contre-Attaque not only marked a brief moment of détente between the two writers after their acrimonious split several years prior; it also represented surrealism's revolutionary attempt at participating in the mass political movements of the interwar era. For the intellectuals who participated in Contre-Attaque, the group was intended as precisely that: a counterattack, a movement that would remain on the offensive against the Right, appropriating fascism's tools in order to use them against it. In formulating its response to fascism, Contre-Attaque broke with other existing movements on the left, deeming the Popular Front's unifying of socialists, communists, and radicals as too “defensive” and thoroughly rejecting the Communist International's insistence that intellectuals abide by a set aesthetic program preapproved by the Soviet Union. Within eight months of the group's founding, amid political tumult and interpersonal disagreements, it had disbanded, thereby representing just a brief chapter in the political history of the avant-garde.¹

The January 21 card displays a simple drawing of a severed calf's head on a platter, over which is superimposed the necessary information—time, date, and location—for the session, at which Bataille, Breton, and Maurice Heine were scheduled to speak (Figure 1).² The announcement reminds its bearer of the symbolic value of the meeting's date: “21 janvier 1793–21 janvier 1936. Anniversaire de l'exécution capitale de Louis XVI.” The interplay between text and image here comes to the fore: the calf's head on the platter recalls the decapitation of the French monarch, a visual commemoration of the moment when France became a people without a leader. As Simon Baker has suggested,

¹. For a history of the movement, see Robert S. Short's essay “Contre-Attaque.”
². The announcement is reproduced in Bataille and Breton, “Contre-Attaque”: Union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires (139).
this invitation—the only one produced in the context of Contre-Attaque—ought to be understood as a visual corollary to Bataille’s writings on crowds from the 1930s (314). In essays like “La Structure psychologique du fascisme” (1933) and “Front populaire dans la rue” (1935), Bataille cautioned the Left against reproducing the model of domination and subservience that fascism enacted through its charismatic leader. Rather than channel the people’s energy into outmoded political parties, Contre-Attaque insisted on the creation of mass political manifestations, headless crowds capable of moving swaths of individuals without offering up a new leader in the place of the fascist one. It was the hope, in Baker’s formulation, of “the ability and potential of a leaderless fraternity to effect radical political action” (326).

The double reminder inscribed on the Contre-Attaque announcement of the severing of a people from its leader finds even deeper resonance when one considers the proposed topic for the January 21 meeting: “LES 200 FAMILLES qui relèvent de la justice du peuple.” “Les deux cents familles” were a widespread—if today somewhat forgotten—myth of the interwar era: two hundred families who controlled France from behind the scenes, two hundred families whose decisions determined the nation’s fate. Appearing in regular editorials in the popular press across the political spectrum, the two hundred families represented a conspiratorial view of French history,
the idea that certain select interests, embodied by real people, held the fate of an entire nation in their hands. Articles attacking the Rothschild and Mallet banking families, the steel magnate Wendels, and the industrialist Schneiders (to name just a few of the most commonly cited families) were a commonplace in interwar political discourse; the two hundred families were routinely accused of everything from corruption and price-fixing to warmongering and profiteering. In but one example, the magazine *Le Crapouillot* published in March 1936 a special issue dedicated to the two hundred families emblazoned with the photos of several well-known financial leaders (including Wendel and Schneider). Inside, the magazine laid out in a graphic the various spheres of influence held by the members, tying the two hundred families to politicians and other business leaders, in the process detailing a vast web of secret influence and power (Figure 2). To many, then, the two hundred families were the bogeymen of the interwar years, the source of the era’s instability and uncertainty.

Figure 2. Detail of graphic from the March 1936 issue of *Le Crapouillot* dedicated to the two hundred families
The subject’s ubiquity in 1930s France might thus seem to both explain and diminish its selection by Contre-Attaque for its January 1936 meeting; Michel Surya refers to the theme as a virtual “requirement” among members of the interwar Left (24). Part of the difficulty in understanding the significance of Contre-Attaque’s tract is that we lack the actual speeches given by Bataille, Breton, and Heine on the subject. In the hopes of filling that gap, Baker has proposed a reading of the card in the larger context of Bataille and Breton’s political thought. As Baker suggests, the two hundred families were used as a rallying cry by members of various parties, yet their status as myth made them no more a real source of power than a traditional political figure. In Bataille and Breton’s logic, the myth of the two hundred families would only serve to reinforce the hand of political parties, particularly the Popular Front. Thus one possible purpose of Contre-Attaque’s meeting might have been to question the myth itself in order to reassert the power of crowds, what the tract refers to as “la justice du peuple.” Or as Baker puts it: “On the 21st of January 1936, the ‘200 Families’ were to be relinquished to the judgment of the crowd. That is to say, the bankrupt, empty gesture indicating a non-existent and unnecessary conceptual head was to be served on a plate” (331). It seems reasonable to conclude with Baker that Contre-Attaque’s focus on the two hundred families could be considered a way to lay bare the very processes of political manipulation, the use of propaganda and myth by political parties to harness and tame the powers of crowds.

If Baker’s reading of the invocation of the two hundred families helps us better understand its potential role in articulating Bataille and Breton’s political thought, I would also propose here an additional reading focusing on how the myth functioned in terms of interwar literature. While Contre-Attaque can be considered a political movement, a radical reaction to fascism’s rise, it also remains inscribed in the history of the avant-garde, representing the moment when surrealism took to the streets. The remainder of this essay thus attempts to understand how and why the myth of the two hundred families was articulated in relationship to the avant-garde from two authors at opposite ends of the political spectrum: Louis Aragon and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. In both Aragon’s defense of the socialist realist novel and Céline’s anti-Semitic pamphlets, the reference to the two hundred families serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it represents a politically populist gesture, aligning the author against the perceived masters of the French economy. On the other hand, the paranoid vision implied by the two hundred families ends up doubling as a critique of surrealism, one that takes the shape of a literary history in which the avant-garde emerges as part of a conspiratorial plot against France. In tracing the interplay between the two hundred families and surrealism, I show how it is the conspiratorial discourse that is itself put on
display, the way that authors can make use of a logic and rhetoric of paranoia for both political and literary ends.

2. One Hundred Years of Anticapitalism

So who, then, are the two hundred families? The popularity of the phrase itself is most commonly attributed to an October 1934 speech given by the former prime minister Edouard Daladier to the assembled congress of Radical Party members:

Deux cents familles sont maîtresses de l'économie française et, en fait, de la politique française. Ce sont des forces qu’un État démocratique ne devrait pas tolérer, que Richelieu n'eût pas tolérées dans le royaume de France. L'influence des deux cents familles pèse sur le système fiscal, sur les transports, sur le crédit. Les deux cents familles placent au pouvoir leurs délégués. Elles interviennent sur l'opinion publique, car elles contrôlent la presse. (Sédillot 13)

Daladier's formulation laid the foundation of the myth: the two hundred families are a vast conspiracy, controlling fiscal policy, transportation, politics, and the press. But Daladier did not pick the phrase “deux cents familles” out of thin air. The number refers to the two hundred largest shareholders of the Bank of France, who, since the Napoleonic era, had the authority to elect the twelve members of the Bank’s Council of Regents. Selected from the ranks of these same two hundred shareholders, the Council of Regents in turn helped shape French monetary policy. With the economic tumult of the 1920s and 1930s, the Bank of France came to be seen as the key force in the financial and political crises, what Pierre Birnbaum characterizes as “le lieu privilégié de l'exercice du pouvoir” (35). The two hundred families became the personalized face of that institution, the embodiment of political and financial influence.

On both the Left and the Right, the attacks against the two hundred families and the Bank of France became a widespread protest throughout the second half of the 1930s. From 1934 to 1936, the communist newspaper L’Humanité called for the struggle against the two hundred families on an almost daily basis, decrying their exploitation of the common worker. In February 1936 the magazine La Flèche began publishing a weekly section highlighting a particular family, outlining the various influences the group held in economic

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3. For the historical reasons behind two hundred as the particular number of choice, see Sédillot, 13–24.
and political circles.\[^4\] After the formation of the Popular Front in the wake of the fascist riots of February 6, 1934, the fight against the two hundred families became a centerpiece of political action. The two hundred families served as a slogan for rallying communists, socialists, and radicals under the banner of the Popular Front, and the reform of the Bank of France became a key part of the movement’s 1936 electoral platform. As Julian Jackson notes, by popularizing the image of a small cabal in opposition to the entirety of the French people, the Popular Front helped burnish its unifying mystique, its ability to move beyond the “class-against-class” politics that defined the Left in the immediately preceding years toward a politics and rhetoric of national unity (49). In addition, the mythic struggle against the two hundred families represented one of the points of contact between the Left and the Right in the interwar era: while the Left criticized the families for their oppression and exploitation of the proletariat, the Right attacked them for their internationalism and subjugation of the “common” Frenchman. Seen as warmongers and profiteers who put their own financial interests above any ideal of national fealty, the two hundred families came to embody (particularly for the Right) economic globalization, money that crosses borders with impunity at the expense of the people. Thus the philosopher Bertrand de Juvenal, recently converted to right-wing politics, could inveigh in 1937 in the rightist newspaper *L’Émancipation nationale* using terms much like those of his communist counterparts, decrying the influence of “les familles financières, les fameuses deux cents familles” (Birnbaum 54).

The slogan “deux cents familles” proved enduring partly because it managed to capitalize on a particular image of the French economy and, consequently its government, at the mercy of a secret cabal of financiers. It represents a popular and populist vision of the nation: the masses suffering at the hands of the few. In fact, Daladier’s reference to two hundred “families” as opposed to two hundred “owners” or “shareholders” can be explained by how the myth of the two hundred families grew out of almost a century’s worth of populist anticapitalist discourses in France. Throughout the nineteenth century, on both the left and the right, reactions to the Revolution and the industrial development of France targeted certain groups seen as the “maîtres de l’économie française.” Specific groups became common targets. Foremost among them were Jews, accused of being a financial elite intent on dominating the French economy, as illustrated by the title of the utopian socialist Alphonse Toussenel’s 1845 text, *Les Juifs, rois de l’époque: Histoire de la féodalité financière*, a work that ran through seven editions before the end of the century.

\[^4\] Both Birnbaum and Sédillot give detailed surveys of the two hundred families in the popular press of the interwar years.
The attacks on Jews as financial speculators would culminate at the end of the nineteenth century with Edouard Drumont’s notorious *La France juive* (1886), in which the author pilloried Jews as a foreign element exploiting the “true” French people.\(^5\) Jesuits were also a common target of this nineteenth-century anticapitalist rhetoric. The Catholic society was called out as a select group of priests who used religion for individual profit, an image popularized by Eugène Sue’s successful serial novel *Le Juif errant* (1845), featuring the rapacious Père Rodin intent on robbing a family of its inheritance.\(^6\)

These popular critiques of capitalism set in place a prevalent rhetorical opposition in which the “ordinary” or “common” French (“le peuple”) were subjugated to a select group of financial powers (“les gros”). As Birnbaum demonstrates in his book whose very title—*Le Peuple et les Gros*—underlines this opposition, the French people were presented as victims of powerful and often secret economic forces defined not so much by class, or even by property. Instead, the “gros” were more often identified by terms like “maîtres,” “intérêts,” or “rois,” slogans that Birnbaum qualifies as “metaphors lacking any sociologic or economic meaning” (25). The lack of analytic heft behind these terms gave them a certain populist appeal while conferring on them an ideological flexibility: economic control was defined less by Marxist analysis than by a general critique of capitalism shared by both the Left and the Right. And as historians have argued, the importance of the Rothschild family cannot be overstated in tracing the development of this common anticapitalist rhetoric. The subject of anti-Semitic attacks throughout the nineteenth century, the Rothschilds came to be seen as the preeminent “maîtres” of the French economy. Progressively their image as an actual banking business was eclipsed by one of a “dynasty” or a “house” defined by the transfer of wealth from one generation to the next (Dard 139–40). As a result, the repeated insistence on the “Maison Rothschild” allowed for a semantic shift from thinking of wealth as a function of property to one of personality. Even into the interwar era and beyond, the multiple generations of Rothschilds who served as regents on the Bank of France were a prominent symbol of the power of the two hundred families (Anderson 168).

The focus on wealth in terms of houses, dynasties, and families had an additional historical resonance, one that linked the two hundred families to the prerevolutionary aristocracy. Particularly during the Third Republic, the opposition between the *gros* or *maîtres* and the *peuple* came to be articulated

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5. For an overview of anti-Semitic anticapitalism in the nineteenth century, see Anderson’s “Myth of the Two Hundred Families” and Birnbaum’s *Le Peuple et les Gros*.
through an additional recurring metaphor: “la nouvelle féodalité.” Hence Toussenel’s subtitle for his anti-Semitic diatribe—*Histoire de la féodalité financière*—or Drumont’s attacks on “la grande féodalité industrielle et financière” in 1889’s *La Fin du monde* (Dard 142). With the Popular Front, this vocabulary took on a particularly charged meaning: the fight between the *peuple* and the *gros* became a call for a new Revolution, but one devoid of any class identification. Instead, the image of the unified French people as a new Third Estate took hold: leftist publications called for a new revolution, and in 1935 the communist daily *L’Humanité* regularly advocated a new storming of financial Bastilles (Birnbaum 29). This vocabulary will have a particular literary as well as historical import, as I show. But it is important to note here how the Revolution functions in terms of the conspiratorial vision of the two hundred families. Faced with the perceived power of a select group of interests, the Left posed a new revolution as the best means to fight the conspiracy. In this sense, it suggests the historical thinking that Richard Hofstadter famously characterized as the paranoid style of politics: “History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade” (29). The two hundred families become a myth of conspiracy at the point at which their existence is not taken as a simple reality—the fact that the two hundred shareholders elect the regents of the Bank of France—but as a sign of a more pervasive and extensive power, what Hofstadter refers to as the “motive force of history” (ibid.). Within this conspiratorial discourse, then, the Revolution does not just represent a historical moment or a political ideology; it also serves rhetorically as the commensurate response to the power and influence of abstract, complex, or hidden economic and political forces.

3. Aragon: From Defense to Offense

When invoked in terms of literature, the myth of the two hundred families entails a similar conspiratorial narrative, yet one focused on literary history, with the avant-garde standing as both the product of and double for the secret

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7. Birnbaum attributes the celebrity of the notion of a “new feudalism” to a nostalgia for the vocabulary of a pre-industrial France, especially among those on the right in the nineteenth century (23).

8. Ironically, the Revolution itself was initially seen as the product of a conspiracy, most famously in the abbé Augustin Barruel’s anti-Masonic *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du jacobinisme* (1797), in which the Jesuit priest argued that the ancien régime was overthrown by a plot orchestrated by Masonic lodges that had been infiltrated by the Illuminati. The flexibility of the conspiratorial logic can be seen by the fact that, over a century later, the Left and the Right would exhort the people to rise up against a “new feudalism,” now depicted as the source of a conspiracy, rather than its target.
masters of the French economy. The relationship between this anticapitalist discourse and literature can best be seen in an article by Aragon, “Défense du roman français,” published in the communist journal Commune in January 1936. Aragon’s text was nominally intended as a defense of one French novel in particular, Louis Guillaux’s Le Sang noir, which had lost out to Joseph Peyre’s Sang et lumières for the 1935 Prix Goncourt. However, Aragon mounts a wider-ranging defense of the French novel in the name of its ability to accurately represent the voice of the unified people, what Aragon calls at one point “l’esprit profond de tout le peuple français” (568). The article’s conclusion is what stands out the most: for more than just offering a defense of one novel (or even of the novel as a genre), Aragon’s essay ends by making an offensive turn, posing the novel as a weapon against the financial masters of France. Near the end he proclaims that the novel is “une arme de la France véritable contre les deux cents familles qui y gèrent les banques, les tripots et les bordels” (ibid.). Given Aragon’s status as one of the preeminent communist authors in France, this turn to the two hundred families could be seen as reflecting the rhetorical shift away from the class-against-class doctrine of the Communist Party toward the antifascist coalition of the Popular Front. Yet I would also contend that there is something else at work, a reasoning related to his distinction between the avant-garde and the novel.

To arrive at his concluding argument, Aragon spends many of the previous pages articulating a history of the realist novel. Realism for Aragon is not limited to what we tend to think of as the standard post-Romantic canon of Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, and Zola; his history of realism begins in the eighteenth century, with works of literature that reflect to their readers the revolutionary struggles of the common man. In the text’s opening pages, authors from Voltaire and Marivaux to Beaumarchais are characterized by Aragon as realists in some capacity, for the various ways in which their works bear the traces of a world in transition (what he calls “les reflets d’un monde changeant”) (ibid.). Realism, then, refers not simply to the mimetic representation of the material world; it signifies instead the faithful depiction of man’s conflicts within that world. In framing the history of realism in the novel through a return to prerevolutionary France, Aragon takes up the language of anticapitalism: “La lutte pour et contre ce réalisme . . . c’était un reflet de la lutte pour le libre échange, pour la nouvelle économie qui a besoin de dénoncer pour la briser la réalité féodale” (563). This return to the Revolution, and in particular to the notion of the “réalité féodale,” is significant, since it transposes a political myth onto the aesthetic realm; just as the political fight against the maîtres of the interwar years was framed as the birth of a new Third Estate, the literary history that Aragon is sketching to defend the contemporary French novel must also be traced back to the Bastille. As he puts it, “Notre roman français n’est pas celui des marchands de gloire et des marchands de canon. Notre roman français est . . . celui qui
JASON EARLE

traduit ce peuple français plus admirable quand il sait vaincre ses maîtres, que quand il se fait tuer pour eux, le peuple des barricades et de l’Encyclopédie” (568). Aragon thus establishes an opposition between the peuple—seen here at once as on the barricades and writing the Encyclopedia—and its vanquished maîtres, with the novel “translating” or “reflecting” that struggle.

The references to these maîtres as “marchands de gloire” and “marchands de canon,” the opponents of the people mounting the barricades, receives an additional historical resonance a few lines later, when Aragon writes that the definition of the French novel is not fundamentally a question of nationality. To do this, he returns to canons. A French novel based on exploiting the people, he writes, “n’est pas plus caractéristiquement français que n’est caractéristiquement français un canon Schneider en face d’un canon Krupp ou Vickers” (568). For Aragon, a canon is a canon is a canon, an arm against the people on the barricades. But the choice of brand here is revealing: Schneider, Krupp, and Vickers are not only major industrialists but figured prominently on lists publicizing the names of the two hundred families. The revolutionary weapon thus finds itself transformed into a symbol of modern war profiteering.

Aragon’s insistence on the “Frenchness” of the realist novel—he underlines again and again “notre roman français”—ought to be understood as intricately bound up in the critique of the boundaryless-ness of this type of industrialist, financial powers that pursue their own economic interests across borders, even at the expense of European peace. This nationalist turn then helps explain how Aragon ends his defense, with the French novel not just the voice of the French people but also a “weapon of the true France against the two hundred families” (ibid.). Rather than just simply a reflection or a translation of an oppressed class, the realist novel for Aragon becomes something more, a weapon against the mythical masters of the French economy, the writer’s equivalent to manning the barricades.

To be sure, the opposition that Aragon establishes between realism and the myth of the two hundred families has something of a literary jingoism to it, the image of the author as the new sans-culottes. Yet Aragon’s insistence on realism as the reflection of the struggle of the people suggests the possibility of a more fundamental reconsideration of the link between politics and literature. In the traditional view, realism serves as an accurate reflection of reality; it therefore functions in a similar way to how power ought to work in a democracy, with elections or representation serving as the accurate translation of the people’s voice. But the conspiratorial view offered by the two hundred families asserts more profoundly that power is, in fact, often occluded in a democracy; as Aragon puts it, these masters control banks, gambling dens, and bordellos. As with any conspiracy theory, this myth insists that the true “reflection” of the people’s voice has thus become obscured, distorted, exploited. In the political realm, to oppose the two hundred families thus entails something more than
mere elections; it requires a return to revolution, a popular and populist mass uprising. And in terms of literature, this opposition also calls for something more than just realism as reflection; it requires realism to become a combative representation of the people’s struggle.

There is also a more personal dimension to Aragon’s opposition of realism and the two hundred families, one tied to his participation in the surrealist movement. To understand this link, it is pertinent to put this essay in the context of his other contemporary writings on socialist realism. Emerging out debates, directives, and struggles in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, socialist realism became the official aesthetic doctrine of communism; its goal was to realistically portray the heroic struggles of the working class in the hopes of constructing a socialist future. With the publication of *Pour un réalisme socialiste* (1935), a collection of speeches in favor of this new aesthetic, Aragon became one of the leading spokesmen of the movement in France. In this text, Aragon attempts to achieve two interrelated goals, one literary and one personal. First, he sets out to justify socialist realism by arguing how realist literature can best help shape the socialist future. To do this, Aragon insists on an opposition between the tendency of capitalism to mask its brutality and the revelatory power of revolutionary writing. He defines capitalism by its attempts at covering and concealment, by its efforts at masking, and by trickery. This is a variation of an opposition Aragon erects elsewhere in *Pour un réalisme socialiste*, presenting the struggle between capitalism and its literary opponents as one between shadow and light: “Je déclare que dans toute poésie, dans toute littérature, dans toute culture, ce qu’il est notre rôle aujourd’hui de revendiquer, à nous, écrivains qui entendons qu’il y a deux parts dans ce monde, une d’ombre, et l’autre de lumière, et qui sommes pour la lumière contre l’ombre, c’est ce qu’elles ont contenu de réalisme” (73–74). In other words, the choice of realism is made in the name of enlightenment: the “shadows” of the world—mysticism, tricks, and swindling—are to be undone, laid bare by the illuminating representation of the socialist struggle. It is thus not difficult to imagine how Aragon’s notion of realism as the struggle of light against shadows could draw so readily on a conspiratorial discourse, with the author as the triumphant hero combating the forces of darkness.

Aragon’s second goal in *Pour un réalisme socialiste* is to explain his own personal trajectory from surrealist to socialist realist. In criticizing his former avant-garde colleagues, Aragon repeats a common critique of the surrealists, arguing that their notion of revolt was closer to anarchy and amusement than to true revolution. Following his communist awakening, Aragon’s own

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9. For the authoritative account of socialist realism and its origins, see Régine Robin’s *Le Réalisme socialiste*. 
participation in the movement, which he characterizes as his “maladie sociale,” should now be seen as the sign of another era, another Aragon: “l’homme que j’ai été m’apparaît comme un être des ténèbres” (55). Belonging to the avant-garde, in other words, effectively aligns the writer on the side of shadows, on the side of capitalism. But *Pour un réalisme socialiste* treads a sometimes delicate path between the socialist realist and the surrealist, the present Aragon and the past. He freely admits of his past errors of political judgment and credits his newfound consciousness as a new awakening: “Je me sens aujourd’hui . . . un homme entièrement nouveau” (54). Yet his defense of realism often seems a personal defense, focusing on the authors who helped shape his own identity as a surrealist, notably poets. In one speech, “Le Retour à la réalité,” he insists on the “realist” aspects of poets from Hugo and the symbolists to Rimbaud and Apollinaire, almost reproducing the famous passage of Breton’s *Premier manifeste du surréalisme* that claims the movement’s literary forebears as “surrealist” in some manner. In *Pour un réalisme socialiste*, Hugo and the symbolists become “realists” in their use of banned words, Rimbaud in his Commune poems, Apollinaire in his wartime lyricism. In so doing, Aragon sketches a tradition of “realism” that resembles in many respects the surrealist canon that shaped his own poetic trajectory.

Perhaps most strikingly, and in a turn that fully participates in the rhetoric of anticapitalism, Aragon assimilates the surrealist icon Lautréamont into a tradition of realism by linking the poet to the Paris Commune and opposing him to the Romantic tradition, characterized here as part of “le mobilier de la banque et de l’industrie” (70). Lautréamont becomes the symbol of the Commune, a representative of the *peuple*, against the Romantics, the embodiment of the financial powers of the nineteenth century. The impact of this move on Aragon’s own personal narrative becomes clear a few pages later, when he compares the surrealists to the Romantic poets that Lautréamont distinguished himself from and then criticizes his former friends through Lautréamont’s words: “Moi, sorti de leurs rangs, je reprends à mon compte contre eux les phrases même de [Lautréamont]” (80). The result of the equivalency that Aragon establishes between himself and Lautréamont is not just about literature, his act of casting off surrealism as his predecessor forsook the Romantics. It is also about history: if Lautréamont was, in Aragon’s eyes, the poet of the Commune, the rebirth of the revolutionary spirit, so Aragon becomes the author for the new Third Estate, the new revolution to come.

This use of revolutionary rhetoric to critique surrealism resurfaces in “Défense du roman français,” adopting the conspiratorial logic implicit to the myth of the two hundred families. In the middle of the essay, Aragon has to come to terms with the fact that realism has, as he puts it, its highs and its lows, even in an individual artist’s œuvre: Hugo has his “realist” Gavroches, but he also has his decidedly unrealist and therefore meaningless Hernanis.
Aragon explains this conundrum through a consideration of “men of history”: “Ces hommes sont animés d’intérêts divers, et partagés en camps adverses, et la force qui pousse l’histoire en avant est cette lutte même où ces camps s’affrontent” (564). Aragon here avoids a language of class division, preferring one of “camps” and “interests,” the latter being one of the charged nebulous terms associated with the two hundred families. And rather than read the novel as a direct result of the class struggle, Aragon suggests something more interesting: “Le romancier qui la traduit est souvent le jouet de cette lutte. Tout se passe pourtant comme si des forces conscientes lui dictaient sa conduite” (ibid.; italics added). Reading history through a conspiratorial lens, seeing the two hundred families as a “motive force of history” (to borrow Hofstadter’s phrase), entails for Aragon a corresponding view for literature: unrealist writers and their work are not just the product of a class struggle but the puppets of “conscious forces.” To use the novel as a weapon against the two hundred families would thus mean to liberate the author and his work from the grips of a vast economic and political conspiracy. Yet the conspiratorial logic here suggests a possible hidden defense of Aragon’s own surrealist past. When he failed to write realist novels, when there were aspects of his work that did not reflect the struggles of his era, perhaps it was because he himself was the victim of a conspiracy of “conscious” economic forces.

Aragon also argues in “Défense du roman français” that there are two weapons that the dominating powers use to disarm the novel’s potential as a weapon: imagination and psychology, both of which have been seen as corrupting forces on writers as varied as Chateaubriand, Benjamin Constant, and Paul Bourget. But these two notions receive an additional specificity for writers after World War I: imagination and psychology become “la fantaisie et le freudisme,” with the examples he gives as Proust, Lawrence, and—unsurprisingly—“surrealizing novelists” [“romanciers surréalisants”] (565). One could read this turn as a potential apology for the avant-garde, the argument that their misguided politics is a result of their being the puppets of history. But in this essay, Aragon claims that the age of Proust and the surrealists is already over: “Ces temps sont déjà révolus parce que l’énorme vague de fond qui secoue le monde social d’aujourd’hui est le meilleur liquidateur des spéculations sans provisions” (ibid.). Here, Aragon makes an interesting move: it is not just that Freudian, fantastic authors are victims of “conscious economic forces.” Rather, their work ought to be seen as precisely the type of financial “speculation” that the two hundred families were often accused of undertaking at the expense of the French people, what we might read as an aesthetic risk-taking that exploits the public while offering no promise of return, and one that ought to be liquidated. “Freudian” and “fantastic” authors are not just victims of conspiratorial economic forces; they themselves participate in that conspiracy. In other words, rather than...
subscribe wholly to the logic of the myth of the two hundred families, a logic
that would seem to lead him toward a defense of the avant-garde, Aragon
instead uses its conspiratorial and anticapitalist rhetoric to align fantastic and
Freudian authors with the economic masters of France.

4. Céline: The Conspiracy of Conspiracies

Aragon uses the myth of the two hundred families to attack the avant-
gaarde from the vantage point of the unified Left, intertwining the political
and historical myth with an aesthetic defense of realism. This myth proved
remarkably enduring in the interwar years because of its ability to appeal
to both ends of the political spectrum. Particularly after the fascist riots of
February 1934, the fear of the two hundred families merged with the rise
of anti-Semitism in France, with attacks against the “état-major judéo-
bancaire” becoming more prevalent, especially in right-wing periodicals like
Henry Coston’s La Libre Parole, and continuing on even into the Occupation
(Anderson 172). It is thus perhaps not surprising, then, that the two hundred
families surface in another text on the other end of the political spectrum:
Céline’s notorious anti-Semitic pamphlet Bagatelles pour un massacre.
Appearing in 1937, Bagatelles represents the moment when Céline’s stylistic
iconoclasm took a paranoid turn, producing a strain of political and personal
vitriol directed against Jews that would continue in two more pamphlets,
L’École des cadavres (1938) and Les Beaux Draps (1941). In Bagatelles,
Céline recounts, through his alter-ego Ferdinand, the numerous affronts he has
suffered at the hands of a massive Jewish conspiracy, including the failure of
two ballets he wished to produce, his work at the League of Nations, and his
loss of the Prix Goncourt. In addition to this first-person narrative, Bagatelles
pulls from various source materials, with Céline adapting, reproducing, and
plagiarizing from contemporary anti-Semitic publications.10 In these sections,
Céline offers a wide-ranging political diatribe that accuses the Jews of political
revolution, economic dominance, and cultural supremacy.

While Aragon poses the two hundred families as the true enemies of the
French people, Céline refers to them in Bagatelles primarily to prove the extent
of the “real” conspiracy of the Jews. Early on in the text, the consideration
of the Jewish plot occasions an ironic nostalgia in Céline for the phantasmal
reign of the two hundred families: “Le Juif international, il nous fera regretter
Schneider, Thiers, Wendel et Gengis-Khan . . . Le Juif sera le pire des maîtres”
(59). In a move recalling Aragon’s reverence of the Paris Commune, Céline

10. Alice Kaplan has documented the extent to which Céline drew on popular anti-
Semitic pamphlets circulating in France at the time in writing Bagatelles. See her Relevé
des sources et citations dans Bagatelles pour un massacre.
mentions Schneider and Wendel in the company of Alphonse Thiers, the authority behind the violent suppression of the Commune (and even going farther back in a typical Célinian exaggerated gesture, to the reign of Genghis Khan). Céline would seem to be reproducing the anticapitalist discourse that sees the people as victims of certain elite rulers. Yet his focus on the two hundred families in Bagatelles is more about highlighting their status as myth. In a later section on how to name Jews, Céline decries: “On nous va rabattant les oreilles depuis des années avec ces fameuses 200 familles . . . Encore un flan fantastique! Il n’y a qu’une grande famille, bien plus puissante que toutes les autres . . . la grande famille juive internationale, et leur petits cousins ‘maçons’” (136). In other words, Céline identifies the two hundred families as an outright fiction, a cover for a truer reality, which he perceives as the vast Jewish conspiracy controlling French politics, economics, and the arts. Further, he demonstrates the interconnectedness and mutability of conspiratorial discourses: the conspiracy of the Jews also involves their Masonic “cousins,” both in turn masked by the myth of the two hundred families. (And elsewhere in Bagatelles he details how the Jewish plot learned from the Jesuits’ own conspiracy.)

According to Céline, the real effectiveness of the Jewish conspiracy is that it is at once extensive and hidden, having at its disposition a whole wealth of tactics to cover its traces. Part of his goal in writing Bagatelles is to effectively identify this conspiracy to those who cannot perceive it, to lay out to his readers the full reach of Jewish power and influence. As Alice Kaplan notes, this impulse often takes the form of the proper name: Céline claims that Jews must be identified if the conspiracy is to be fully uncovered, leading him to reveal their names and titles through various lists and references (Kaplan 24). Thus the Rothschild name repeatedly appears in Bagatelles as a symbol of the extent of Jewish power; the Baron de Rothschild is identified at one point as “le roi de France lui-même” (285). But another name from the list of the two hundred families also comes into play, to demonstrate how this financial myth hides the real conspiracy of the Jewish plot. In decrying the descent of the French people into alcoholism, Céline protests against the inordinate attention given to the steel magnate Wendel: “Wendel! Wendel! Wendel! Tartuferies! Pouffantes offusqueries! Je connais cent distillateurs, cent fois plus criminels que Wendel!” (151). The use of the proper name here, then, is not just to

11. The same logic returns in Céline’s second anti-Semitic pamphlet, L’École des cadavres (1938): “Pas plus de deux cents familles que de beurre au train, une seule réelle omnipotente internationale famille: la famille juive, la grande féodalité internationale qui nous rançonne, nous abrutit, nous détrousse, nous tyrannise” (216).
12. Wendel functions in the same manner in L’École des cadavres, where Céline mocks the communist daily L’Humanité for focusing on this member of the two hundred
identify the participants in the Jewish plot; it is also to show how they hide their influence.

Like Aragon, Céline’s critique of the two hundred families also entails a paranoid vision of literary history, one preoccupied with realism. Unlike Aragon, however, Céline’s narrative is at its heart one of decadence, the decline of style. For Céline, the role of style is to embody authentic emotion—“un style c’est une émotion, d’abord, avant tout, par-dessus tout . . .” (164)—and he positions his spontaneous style against traditional style, which he defines above all by its lack of real emotion, what he deems its “imposture”: “C’est toujours le toc, le factice, la camelote ignoble et creuse qui en imposent aux foules, le mensonge toujours! jamais l’authentique” (167). By creating conventions of speech and language, successful or canonical literature strips style of its authenticity, turns it into dissimulation and deceit, what he characterizes as “le français idéal pour Robots” (ibid.). This turn to the robotic is one that Céline dwells on at length: through schooling and tradition, the French reader has been taught to neglect true emotional style, a trend that leads to the robotization of the reader. For Céline, this is the result of the Jewish conspiracy in literature: rehearsing old anti-Semitic tropes of Jews as beholden to reason, he argues that they lack the emotional ability to produce real art. Imitation thus becomes the sole outlet for Jewish creation.

As David Carroll argues, one of Céline’s tactics in Bagatelles is to insist on his own revolutionary poetic voice, to demonstrate through the “authentic” expression of emotion that his art cannot be assimilated to “Jewish art.” Thus Céline works to demonstrate the radical difference of his work, “to twist written language so that the spontaneity of feeling came through it” (Carroll 189). Part of this strategy also involves a criticism of realist literature, what he deems “le goncourtisme descriptique, le farfouillage objectif à toute force, le Zolaisme à la 37” (169). Writers who follow Zola’s model, attempting to reproduce reality through description, are a sign for Céline of this literature’s poverty: it cannot produce authentic emotion, therefore it can only imitate. This strategy also occasions an attack on surrealism, to eliminate any pretense the avant-garde might have of possessing a stylistically innovative or spontaneous voice. To do this, Céline traces a history of “Art Robot,” moving from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century to the present day: “Renaissance, naturalisme, objectivisme, surréalisme, parfaite progression vers le Robot” (172). In Céline’s decadent history of style, surrealism is the
culmination of the “art robot,” what he calls “le cadastre de notre déchéance émotive” (170–71) and “la plus abracadabrante imposture de ce siècle” (171). Incapable of innovation, surrealism replaces direct, natural emotion with stylish tics, themselves markers of falsehood (in particular, Céline critiques the surrealist appropriation of “primitive” rhythms instead of using “authentic” French). And in Céline’s history of literature, this imitative gesture means that surrealism’s relationship to naturalism is one not just of succession but of continuation through decline: “Le sur-réalisme, prolongement du naturalisme, art pour robots haineux” (170). Even Céline’s separating of the prefix from noun, “sur-réalisme,” which he repeats on multiple occasions, insists on the heritage that surrealism takes from realism. Far from a rupture with previous literary trends, the avant-garde instead goes over and above what realism accomplished in erasing emotion from literature, in replacing authenticity with conventions or imitation.

Throughout the cultural sections of Bagatelles, Céline articulates a history of literature that takes to task the literary maîtres of France. He critiques academies, institutions, and canonical authors for all failing to communicate emotions authentically, for standardizing style to the point that it becomes artificial and imitative. Céline demonstrates how the anticapitalist discourse retains notes of a racially tinged populism: he often critiques literary and political elites in the name of the people, seen here as the Aryan masses who stand in opposition to the Jews. Yet there is a sharp negative focus to Céline’s consideration of the peuple that distinguishes him from, say, Aragon’s triumphant vision of a renewed Third Estate. Rather than trumpet the value of the masses, Céline attacks their predilection for what they are most accustomed to, for the spectacles of the modern age. In this critique, surrealism in particular is deemed popular or successful because it participates in a race for the least common denominator, an appeal to the base instincts of the masses: “Le ‘bon sens’ des foules c’est: toujours plus cons. L’esprit banquiste, il se finit à la puce savante, achèvement de l’art réaliste, sur-réaliste. Tous les partis politiques le savent bien. Ce sont tous des puciers savants” (196). Realism is a “flea circus,” an appeal to the poor taste of the masses culminating in surrealism. The image of the flea circus here signifies “l’esprit banquiste,” misguided popular taste, but we might also read it as a glancing reference to the common trope of referring to financial powers as parasites, a discourse that not only focused on Jews but also routinely turned against the two hundred families (Daladier, for example, railed against the “grandes féodalités parasitaires”) (Anderson 168). And it is also important to note the parallel that Céline draws here: “l’esprit banquiste” is a culmination of realism, but political parties also take part in the race to the bottom: “Ce sont tous des puciers savants.” Advertising and propaganda appeal to the people just as much as literature does, meaning
that for Céline the common man is fooled by both aesthetic and political fictions.

This image of art as an exploitative means of distraction returns to the two hundred families a few sections later, when Céline plows through various arts to demonstrate the extent of the Jews’ cultural influence. In proclaiming the next stages of the flea circus ("Au prochain acte la puce savante!")

Céline argues that the “art for robots” will triumph by distracting the masses in various ways (221).

In poetry, this takes the form of the avant-garde technique of cut-up poetry; in cinema, Céline bemoans the erotic depiction of “Aryan” actresses by Jewish directors. The “art robot” as the fundamental style of the Jewish conspiracy primarily works through distraction and feint: it covers its tracks by offering stylistic exaggeration or spectacles of sex and violence. And tellingly, Céline ends this cultural tour by returning to political propaganda, critiquing other narratives that hide the extent of the Jewish presence: “Tout cela creux absolument, grossièrement inactuel, fictif, tricherie hurlante . . . Toujours autour des ‘200 familles’ plus ou moins! . . . Mais qui vient nous raconter les saloperies foncièrement juives des 500,000 familles effrénément juives, campées sur notre sol?” (227).

In other words, the myth of the two hundred families is to politics what the “art robot” is to literature or cinema, a way to distract and deceive the common people, a shift away from the “true” conspiracy of the Jewish plot. It is a point to which Céline returns later in the text: “Les fameuses 200 familles, aryennes ou pas, mais je vous les donne! [. . .] Je refuse ces ‘courants d’air’! . . . Je veux du solide! . . . Des réalités! . . . des vrais responsables!” (289). The two hundred families are thus mere substitutes for reality, pale images of the “true” source of power. They represent the political side of the artistic act of deception, a way to hide “realities.” The myth is, in other words, directly akin to realism or, more precisely, “sur-realism” as realism’s culmination: a technique masking reality, covering the real conspiracy at work.

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As Céline’s search for the ever-deeper conspiracy lays out so extraordinarily, conspiratorial discourses can almost always be adapted to new targets, can always go farther to root out the perceived “true” source of power. His reading of surrealism and the two hundred families as masks for the Jewish plot advances an argument much like that of Aragon’s defense of the realist novel. Reading history through a conspiratorial lens, seeing it as the deliberate product of secret forces, provides a framework for considering literary history in similar terms, with surrealism as the literary corollary to the economic and political myth. Surrealism comes to be seen as the sign of an elite culture, apart from the masses and therefore on the side of the maitres, who in turn stand in for abstract or complex economic and political forces and influences.
But the fundamental mutability of conspiratorial discourses as highlighted by Céline’s pamphlet also allows us to consider how this logic can run in the opposite direction. For if we consider Céline and Aragon’s texts as primarily about literary history, rather than politics, it is surrealism that emerges as the ultimate enemy. Thus denouncing the two hundred families provides a politically motivated justification for articulating a greater cause, a particular vision of literature—be it Aragon’s realist novel or Céline’s “authentic style”—at the expense of surrealism.

Understanding this double conspiratorial discourse helps, finally, to shed light on Contre-Attaque’s January 21, 1936, invitation, allowing us even to imagine the session as a potential rejoinder to Aragon’s “Défense du roman français,” published the same month. In considering Contre-Attaque as the moment when surrealism took to the streets, it is possible to think of their response as positing a revolutionary history of both politics and literature in which the avant-garde emerges triumphant, becomes a mass movement. Contre-Attaque’s focus on the two hundred families would, then, not only be an effort to remove the French people from its leaders, to cut off the symbolic head of its political and financial masters, but also an act of denying a conspiratorial view of literary history that attempts to sever the avant-garde from the masses.

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Works Cited


