

What Gallic gall

Reviewing Bernard-Henri Lévy's *Adventures on the Freedom Road* for the Spectator, Richard Cobb hit upon the conceit of classifying its subjects, the "self-appointed leaders of Parisian intellectual life", in what he called "a rough order of nastiness". Nastiest of all, by Cobb's reckoning, was Sartre, whom he slandered as "a creation straight out of Edward Lear", but just behind was André Breton, the "appalling High Priest of Surrealism". Cobb's review made no further reference to Breton and did not deign to elucidate what was so appalling about him, except to note that he was "the son of a policeman from Nantes". Enough said, seemed to be the implication. (Actually, Breton's father was employed as a ledger clerk in the *gendarmérie* and came from Vincey in the Vosges, but who's counting?)

It never ceases to surprise me — the amazement, not to mention the spluttering indignation, of a certain type of British mentality upon discovering, as though nobody had ever noticed before, that a few celebrated, frequently foreign artists and intellectuals were, *au fond*, not awfully nice chaps, not... you know... not quite our sort.

Was Breton appalling? Yes, indeed. He was intemperate, intransigent, authoritarian and sometimes downright sadistic. He treated his numerous mistresses — who were usually, it has to be said, his compliant, even abject, stooges — with a haughtily cavalier condescension that would have him ostracised today. And his sense of humour ran to puerile practical jokes, like having one of his acolytes ring up Cocteau's mother to inform her (falsely) that her son had just been killed in a car accident. On the other hand, his influence on this century's culture was incalculable, and he was less appalling than the grubbily nasty Philip

Revolution of the Mind The Life of Andre Breton

by Mark Polizzotti

Bloomsbury £25 pp754

Adventures on the Freedom Road

by Bernard-Henri Lévy

Harvill £20 pp433

Gilbert Adair

Larkin or the pompously nasty Kingsley Amis, of neither of whom could such a claim be made.

In his new, staggeringly well-researched biography of Breton, Mark Polizzotti does not shy from his subject's behavioural unsavouriness, and some of it makes for reading so hilarious one is tempted at moments to believe that his intention was to debunk the man. But the hilarity merely reflects the central paradox of Breton's existence. To wit: that he devoted his entire life to surrealism, a movement whose aspiration was to attain, through psychic automatism, a blissfully trancelike form of expression untrammelled by the vigilance of reason or morality (he once, rather rashly, denigrated reality as a "miserable mental expedient"); and yet ran that movement as ruthlessly, as stiflingly, as a mainstream political party, excommunicating any member, be it Dali, Aragon, Bataille, Artaud or Buñuel, who even briefly lapsed from the party line.

No matter the shifts and subterfuges of the surrealists over the years — flirting with communism, then playing hard to get whenever it appeared that they might be overshadowed by the larger cause, then making overtures again when a new *rapprochement* seemed on the cards — Breton himself was always unanimous, as it were, in his own

mind, and would issue thunderous fulminations against any of his allies and friends who did not instantly endorse that unanimity (even if, a month before, he had thought something completely different).

An eye-catching figure in his bottle-green suits, pale-green shirts and garnet-coloured ties, Breton was no less volatile and despotic in his turbulent private life. And rather than summarise, as Polizzotti brilliantly does, his eternally shifting sexual allegiances, it might be easier to reprint a single, characteristic sentence from the book. The year is 1928; Suzanne is Suzanne Muzard, Breton's then mistress; Simone is his wife, and Berl is the novelist and Surrealist fellow-traveller Emmanuel Berl. "Nor," writes Polizzotti with a heroically straight face, "did Suzanne herself provide any assurances, for during her first weeks at Rue Fontaine" — Breton's apartment — "she ran back to Berl, returned for a tearful reunion with Breton several days later, then went back to Berl once more, chased away by Breton's jealousy and his reluctance to divorce Simone."

The fact, however, that one can scarcely resist calling such antics "surreal" is interesting in being itself the best measure of Breton's wider influence. Because of him more than anybody else, the word "Surrealism" soon shed its capital S and entered the bloodstream of contemporary culture. In fact, of contemporary life — for many an ordinary person who has never read a surrealist text or puzzled over a surrealist painting will quite unselfconsciously employ the word surreal to describe some humdrum epiphany of the marvellous in his own daily round. Out of an unholy mix of Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Jarry, Freud, Gustave Moreau, primitive sculpture and the occult, Breton not only produced two haunt-



Breton: intemperate, intransigent, sometimes sadistic © Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum

ing (and, in Britain, still scandalously neglected) books, *Nadja* and *L'Amour Fou*, without which the 20th century would not be what it is, but conjured a whole new way of thinking about the world. And, in Mark Polizzotti, he has found a flawless biographer, one whose gifts are more than just organisational: of a collection of poems composed concurrently by Breton, Eluard and René Char, for example, he writes, beautifully, that their pens touched down on paper "with the lightness of migratory birds".

As for *Adventures on the Freedom Road* (an awkward English-

language rendering of the perfectly straightforward *Les Aventures de la liberté*), though extremely racy and readable in its own way, it simply cannot compare with Polizzotti's work. A chronicle of the right, and more often gruesomely wrong, political turnings taken by the French intelligentsia over the past century, from Zola's involvement in the *affaire Dreyfus* to Althusser's half-demented strangling of his wife, it was originally published in the wake of a TV series (also presented by Lévy) — and it shows. A pity, since there's a marvellous book to be written on the subject. By Polizzotti, perhaps?