

Seeing the Surrealist Woman: We Are a Problem

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Nous porterons ailleurs le luxe de la peste
Nous un peu de gelée blanche sur les fagots humains
Et c'est tout . . .
Nous le pain sec et l'eau dans les prisons du ciel

(We'll carry the luxury of the plague elsewhere
We a bit of hoarfrost on human firewood
And that's all
We plain bread and water in the prisons of the sky)

André Breton, "Broken Line"¹

Headless. And also footless. Often armless too; and always unarmed, except with poetry and passion. There they are, the surrealist women so shot and painted,² so stressed and dismembered, punctured and severed: is it any wonder she has (we have) gone to pieces? It is not just the dolls of Hans Bellmer, lying about, it is more. Worse, because more lustily appealing, as in Man Ray's images.

I am looking at one of the most problematic of them: to describe her (or the part of her that exists, confronting me), is already to feel nervous. She is posed like a challenge, wrapped like a dubious present in shimmering dark water-patterned and tight moire, glistening just about everywhere she is (no head, no feet, no anything but that body mesmerizing, arms akimbo), this dame Man Ray so severs and swaddles and stresses is none of us, exactly. But maybe is us all, as we are seen. Sure and strident, ready to do anything we can – except we can neither speak nor think nor see, nor walk and run, certainly not love and paint and write and be. Surrealist woman, problematic and imprisoned, for the other eyes.

Give them their head: they had one

The women we are presenting in, and saluting by, this volume *Women and Surrealism* are the contrary, each and all of them, of the dame wrapped up and shiny that Man Ray so shot. They, all of them, wrote or painted, saw and thought and were, not necessarily as the others of men, but not as



Man Ray, *Untitled*, 1929. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris.

their mothers either. We have wanted to give them their head, their eyes, and their hands, not just on their hips to provoke, but free, to use as they pleased and did.

Give them their voice: they had one

Sure, they spoke in differing accents, and their voice was not always pleasing. It was, from time to time, cruel, jesting, acerbic; and, from time

to time (harder to take, for some of us), self-effacing. But we have wanted to give their multiple voices their due, so we could listen. And keep on listening.

Let them stand on their own two feet: they had two.

And were not necessarily the runners-around with or the runners-after their male companion, if they had or wanted one. They were capable of going, and of going fast and often first. We have wanted to let them choose and take their stride. Are they, then, strident women? Yes, sometimes, even frequently. And does that bother us? Nope.

Besides, Nadja knew how to draw.

And there she is, drawing away in those pages, with Breton looking on, only he gets bored.

Let him.

Now, I actually think Breton had some problem with the female gender. He really did.

The buildup was fine, and even glorious: In *Mad Love*,³ he exclaims in horror about the conception of love burning itself out: "So Juliet, continuing to live, would no longer be always more Juliet for Romeo!" She should have been, of course, and in the innocence that love creates—and that he would have believed it possible to create—that would have been quite surely so. But Breton himself, and continually, is skeptical of the continuity of the sublime in the fact of love.

Look what happens to all his heroines: Nadja, fascinating because mad, is then disappointing, because she is not interesting enough; she reads the menu aloud and, says Breton, I was bored. Later, of course, when she has gone truly (therefore, for him, terrifyingly) mad, and been put away—after a pause ("They came to tell me Nadja was insane"), he can confess he was not up to loving her as he should have. But on the moment, boredom. In *The Communicating Vessels*,⁴ Breton is enchanted at one moment by a woman who dangles her perfect legs sitting across from him, next to her dreadfully dull companion ("probably a teacher"—!), at another, by some lovely eyes walking along. He goes back to meet those eyes, but panics at the thought that actually, he wouldn't be able to recognize the girl were she not looking, because, well, of course, he had forgotten everything else. What matters, matters, and if you don't see it, the rest gets lost: "J'avais en effet, tout oublié de sa silhouette, de son maintien et, pour peu que ses yeux fussent baissés, je ne me sentais pas capable de l'identifier à trois pas" ("I had, in fact, forgotten everything about her silhouette and the way she carried herself, and if she were to lower her eyes, I would not have felt capable of identifying her three steps away").⁵ Then the thing diminishes, and, although he is terribly grateful she was there that first Sunday, now

when he meets her, and is not hoping to, her eyes may be still as lovely as before, but she has lost something of her, in fact all of her meaningfulness for him. The passage bears reading, with its impersonals: "*il était donc vrai . . . il m'arrive . . . il faut bien reconnaître*" – as if, through the impersonal expression, he as a person were to be let off the hook of caring, feeling, seeing more than the eyes, or of seeing at all. She has lost out, and lost him, whether she cared or not: she did break it off, but then, he somehow wins out in the expression. It is like the case of Nadja, however different. It is the problem of the surrealist woman, in these texts:

Il était donc vrai qu'elle n'avait à se trouver sur ma route que ce premier dimanche. Je lui sais encore un gré infini de s'y être trouvée. Maintenant que je ne la cherche plus, il m'arrive de la rencontrer quelquefois. Elle a toujours les yeux aussi beaux, mais il faut bien reconnaître qu'elle a perdu pour moi son prestige. (p. 98)

(It was true then that all she had to do was to be in my path that very first Sunday. I am still grateful to her for having been there. Now that I am no longer looking for her, I happen to run into her sometimes. She still has eyes just as beautiful, but it has to be admitted that she has lost her importance for me.)

And now, he says, she turns her head aside when they pass in the street. It somehow seems all very sad.

Ah, the seabirds

In *Mad Love*, there is a beach walk where everything goes wrong. All the presages are against the love, and it had no chance, that day: it was, says Breton, the nature of the site. "I remember, as I passed rather far from them, the singular irritation provoked in me by a bustling flock of seabirds squawking against a last ridge of foam. I even started throwing stones at them . . ." (102). Now they are walking not right by the water, because he hated taking off his shoes, and they are walking more and more distant from each other, this non-shoe-removal decision being the only definite thing about the situation. His mood is progressively worse, even with his shoes on, he longs to turn back – this is a constant in his love-walking, see the passage in *Les Halles* – and the mental distance between the lovers is suddenly immense: "The rift between us was deeper still, as if by all the height of the rock in which the stream we had crossed had been swallowed up. There was no point even in waiting for each other: impossible to exchange a word, to approach each other without turning aside and taking longer steps" (103). And then it turns out, it is indeed the site's problem, for they are walking near the House of the Hanged Man, painted by Cézanne (who, thinks Breton, painted other such things which are even more important than his apples). The *aura* around the house is, like the *aura* around the apples, what matters.

Now the issue is, in a sense, what has an aura and what does not. We know, from Walter Benjamin, how crucially important the aura is, and we

know, from Breton, that the urgent thing is the mystery of it all – they are on the same frequency, the aura and the strangeness of woman, as long as she remains other. Or at least somewhat other.

According to Xavière Gauthier, in her *Surréalisme et sexualité*, everything in surrealist art is “piégé” or mined and trapped and undermined, because it is all highly ambivalent.⁶ She studies several of the canvases of Magritte, such as *Le Chant d’amour* with its red shoes turning to feet, among others, and discusses the strong urges to violence and torture: in surrealist poetry, she says, women are loved, but in surrealist art, they are hated (331). And it is indeed the case that the images, even the ones seemingly the most loving, have an edge to them.

This is strangely true often, even in the poetry. Take the following examples from four different poems, two prose poems and two in verse: “Rendez-vous,” about the sky ringed around by storms, ends with stifling, and with the cozy words: “la bague au châton vide que je t’ai donnée et qui te tuera” (“this ring with the empty setting that I gave you and that will kill you” [*Poems*, 21]). That is what happens with gifts.

Next, the dense and lyric “Forest in the Axe,” full of oxymorons, ends with the opposite gender-murder, but the same feeling: “Il n’y a plus qu’une femme sur l’absence de pensée qui caractérise en noir pur cette époque maudite. Cette femme tient un bouquet d’immortelles de la forme de mon sang” (“No more than one woman out of the absence of thought which characterizes in pure black this damned age. That woman holds a bouquet of everlastings in the shape of my blood” [*Poems*, 58–59]). Something may indeed last, but in a very odd form: the violence of the setting, for that ring of emptiness and for this bouquet of blood, disconcerts, and tells what seems to be the truth. Bloody as it is.

One of the most moving verse poems, “Vigilance,” ends with the statement of unity so often quoted: “Je ne touche plus que le coeur des choses / Je tiens le fil” (“I touch nothing but the heart of things / I hold the thread” [*Poems*, 78–79]), but it is preceded by a shell-shaped bit of lace from which, as in Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, the woman emerges, here, just in the shape of one breast (“la forme parfaite d’un sein”). Of course two breasts have twice the same shape as one, usually, but all the same, the impression is less one of wholeness than one of partialness – less, I would say, partiality, in the positive sense – than partialness. It depends upon the way we read, of course, but in a certain angle, as Breton often said of his own vision, this is the way it looks.

Finally, in the poem of birth that begins “Il allait être cinq heures du matin” (“It was about to be five in the morning” [*Poems*, 102–3]), the ending, about a magic spell cast upon the narrator, takes effect again in the sort of violence that Gauthier has described for the art:

Tu avais gravé les signes infaillibles
 De mon enchantement
 Au moyen d'un poignard dont le manche de
 corail bifurque à l'infini
 Pour que ton sang et le mien
 N'en fassent qu'un

(You had etched the unfailing signs
 Of my enchantment
 By means of a dagger whose coral handle
 bifurcates to infinity
 So that your blood and mine
 Make but one [*Poems*, 103])

Now of course it is deeply erotic to be so joined, but one does wonder what the reader, so enjoined to participate in the sexual and emotional union here, however "free,"⁷ is free to do and to read.

It is not so much that I want to begin reading Surrealism over, as that I see increasingly the problematics of the surrealist woman within that reading. We have wanted, here, to *make free* with the reading, and to let her creations make free. Let it not be taken as negative for Surrealism and its male leaders, but as a positive revisioning, rethinking, and call to re-reading.

Notes

1. Jean-Pierre Cauvin and Mary Ann Caws, trans. and eds. *Poems of André Breton* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 35.
2. I am taking a potshot at my own "Ladies Shot and Painted," in Susan Suleiman, ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), reprinted in longer form in Mary Ann Caws, *The Art of Interference: Stressed Readings in Visual and Verbal Texts* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 1989; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). See also Susan Gubar, "Representing Pornography: Feminism, Criticism, and Depictions of Female Violation," in *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Summer 1987), 712-41.
3. Translated by Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 92.
4. Translated by Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey Harris (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).
5. *Les Vases communicants* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 98.
6. Xavière Gauthier, *Surréalisme et sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Idées, 1971), 25.
7. I am of course referring to Breton's great and famous poem, "L'Union libre" (*Poems*, 48-49).