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SCULPTURAL OBJECT OF DESIRE: EROTICISM IN MICHEL LEIRIS'S *AURORA*¹

ABSTRACT

The article deals with sculptural metaphors presented in Leiris's *Aurora* in relation to eroticism. *Aurora* is the name of the the surrealist novel's central female figure, who appears in the stories of all the different male characters. All of the men – the narrator and subsequent characters – are searching for a point of stabilisation of their own subjectivities, which are losing their integrity and cohesion. The phantasm of *Aurora*, a Medusa-like woman, is the only entity that guarantees petrification, and therefore can stabilise subjectivity.

Eroticism connected to sculptural forms and *Aurora*'s ability to be at once a petrifying Medusa and an animating force of nature shows the paradoxical condition of the language and the illusory nature of any male character's hopes for constructing stable subjectivity.

KEYWORDS

Sculpture, subjectivity, petrification, Medusa, surrealism

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In one of René Magritte's drawings, *Le Viol* (The Rape), used as an illustration for André Breton's *Qu'est-ce que le Surréalisme?* from 1934, we find one of the most shocking images of a female body in the history of art. Magritte replaced a female face with a torso; breasts take the place of the eyes, the navel replaced the nose, and genitals are situated where the mouth should be. This transformation has a particular significance: the body has not been converted into a different object; rather, the woman has been transformed into herself. The transformation takes place within the scope of her own body parts. The key to such a metamorphosis is internal exchange, not conversion into a different, external object. Surrealist defragmentation of the female body, criticised by some feminists as a reproduction of patriarchal sexualisation of women, gains another interpretation in Magritte's drawing as an illustration for Breton's thesis on surrealist assumptions. Breton defined surrealism as a means of liberation from Western rationalism and rebutted charges of surrealist indifference to social issues. Surrealist shock tactics were meant to disrupt conventional bourgeois morality and to reveal its hypocrisy as the origin of repression and alienation. Magritte's controversial drawing can be read as a visual representation of Breton's thesis. According to Robin Adèle Greeley:

Le Viol is meant as an immediate and provocative answer to the question *Qu'est-ce que le Surréalisme?* It offers us a definition of Surrealism as a representation of the female face-body which, although forced into speechlessness, seems far from being powerless; rather, she threatens Medusa-like to break those enforced bonds at any moment and unleash the full power of her sexuality. The body as it is presented here is not a passive body; through it, sexuality and speech are presented as territories of competition, the control of which is under constant negotiation.²

The comparison of sightless eyes from the image and a Medusa-like glance seems non-accidental here. An ostensibly static and passive body has the power to control the viewer through its sexuality, which goes beyond defined concepts of femininity, and through such a transgression becomes something both problematic and dangerous.

² R. A. Greeley, 'Image, Text and the Female Body: René Magritte and the Surrealist Publications', *Oxford Art Journal* 1992/2, p. 50.

Michel Leiris, whose work will be considered in this article, had his own answer to Breton's question, formulated in an aesthetic, moral, and scientific system.³ The whole of Leiris's life was organised around surrealist directives, although Breton cited only five years (between 1924 and 1929) of Leiris's surrealist activity. During this time, Leiris wrote *Aurora*, merely one of his surrealist novels,⁴ which deals with the problem of a fragmented body and leads to the recognition of the impossible integration.

While combining such a thesis about disintegrated subjectivity with the role of a Medusa-like glance and metaphors of petrification and sculpturalisation, I will interpret *Aurora* as a novel about the impossible desire to integrate the self with the figure of a Medusa-like woman and with the sculptural petrification of reality.

Indéchiffrable énigme

'Aurora belongs to those works of fiction, which avoid all forms of stability and relate only to motion, expressing every one of its multifarious aspects, morbid as well as vigorous. The narrator's statements imply rejection not only of what is fixed but of all that is foreseeable'.⁵ The whole story begins with the narrator's confession, in which he offers some remarks on his own condition, that of experiencing his body as spectral and dispersed elements:

My penis felt diluted, as if reduced to water or to the powder of decaying bones. I stood upright, my legs like two monoliths swaying in the middle of

³ S. Hand, *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self*, New York 2004, p. 28.

⁴ Although written in 1929, *Aurora* was not published until 1946 because of Leiris's doubts about the naivety of the text. In his criticism of the novel, Leiris emphasised the temporal and experiential gap separating the later writer from his much younger and more naïve self. Moreover, Leiris also saw in *Aurora* a prediction of the horrors of Nazism, and his text only emphasises the powerlessness of art. See A. Warby, 'Introduction: The Dawning of Aurora' [in:] M. Leiris, *Aurora*, transl. A. Warby, London 2013, p. 8.

⁵ R. Riese Hubert, 'Aurora: Adventure in Word and Image', *SubStance*, Vol. 4, No. 11/12 (1975), p. 74.

the desert and my arms swinging loosely like the strings of a whip, hanging corpses, or two windmills (A 25).⁶

By moving to a different room, the man would bring about an imaginary rearrangement and reintegration of the organs in the body. The surrounding space manifests properties similar to the man himself:

The shapes revealed their peaks and troughs like mountain-sides, and pulsed like animal bodies, swathed in dark skin. This muddle of contours and irregular-shaped humps and ridges was no different from a stormy night and even exuded a sort of aroma like a sunken lane or a wet road (A 30).

In such a world, all individual elements are mixed together, losing their integrity and cohesion in exactly the same way as the textual subject. At the end of the preface, after the narrator confesses his condition, the name Aurora is pronounced for the first time and he starts his journey. His sea voyage ends with a feeling of a slow and partial transformation of an elbow, which ‘was no longer exactly like the rest of the body, but had taken on a slightly rough appearance like that of granite’ (A 39). The day after his adventure, the man awakes with a mineral taste in his mouth. The name Aurora initiated the body transformation and has launched further visionary journeys.

Aurora as a key word in Leiris’s novel is taken in part from Nerval; it is the schizophrenic conjunction of Aurélia and Pandora, which designates an ‘insoluble enigma’⁷. In his next journey, the narrator refers to this énigme when he sees Aurora with a man who ‘goes to hunt animal furs in icy regions’ (A 49). The hunter meets the woman, who is lighter’ and a ‘coincidence’; ‘an absence of contradiction’ and ‘link between contradictory terms’ (A 49). The woman, whose name is Aurora, is the centre of the universe, a figure that both annihilates and reconciles contradiction. She represents the essence and the absolute. Her rendezvous with the hunter ends with the act of turning the man into stone – and not only him, but the entire space changes into a motionless landscape of metallic hardness, strewn with broken statues. ‘The geometric sky reflected innumerable polyhedra of which only the sharpest

⁶ M. Leiris, *Aurora*, transl. A. Warby, London 2013.

⁷ S. Hand, *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self*, New York 2004, p. 32.

bones were visible, pale points as if made of chalk' (A 64). After the act of petrification of the man and the land:

Aurora's hair became a mass of swirling flames and in a flash the most remote comets hastened to add their incandescent hair to the white heat of this furnace, while the pyramid lost its shape and was suddenly of earth. A moment later it was but a monstrous volcano and, in a flow of lava which would reduce the entire desert to ashes more effectively than the sun, it spat out the mutilated entrails and bits of chain from corpses of those who had been its prisoners (A 65).

The first, partial mineralisation of the narrator's body has subsequently expanded until the final metamorphosis of the space into a landscape of decay.

Mineralisation (as the first step of turning into stone) can be interpreted first as a defensive reaction against the *desubstantialisation and dissolution of the body and reality*. By choosing petrification and stabilisation, the narrator seeks a solution for his sense of blurring contours of reality. In his *Manhood* (*L'Age d'homme*), Leiris confesses that he always longed for some kind of armor to achieve in an external *persona* the same idea of rigidity he was pursuing poetically.⁸ The presence of Aurora – her glance – promises the rigidity of the transformation of living flesh into cold, sharp stone. In this sense of Aurora's Medusa-like glance, she is the figure of a demonic sculptor who succeeds in arresting both the man and the space in the form of stone. Aurora's petrifying glance also has the power of annihilating opposition between architectural (pyramids) and organic petrification, and fluidification and decomposition.

In Aurora, these elements are elevated to the level of an obsessional order: the angular presence of labyrinths, palaces, icebergs, museums, stones, diamonds, pyramids, cones, cathedrals and temples, in which people become cold, nude and rigid, or transformed into mummies or statues, is constantly obscured by *des ramifications végétales*, or traversed and transformed by floods, seas, rivers, alcohol, birds, clouds and honey.⁹

⁸ M. Leiris, *Manhood*, transl. R. Howard, New York, North Point, 1984, p. 127.

⁹ Hand, *Leiris*, p. 35.

According to Susan R. Bowers, the figure of Medusa in modern poetry can be interpreted as a 'rebellion against the stereotype of the creative woman as *unfeminine*'.¹⁰ Bowers examines, for example, the poetry of Louise Bogan (from the 1920s), who created Medusa both as a 'divine sculptor' and 'enigmatic, powerful mother'.¹¹ Leiris's concept is close to this kind of rebellion against stereotyping (Aurora is the promise of integration of the male hero's subjectivity), but also reproduces the demonic image of a woman who threatens male activity. However, if the Medusa complex represents the extreme fear that, by denying the freely organised world with all its connections and internal colorations, the Other's look might reduce the subject permanently to a hard stone-like object,¹² then in Leiris's novel the complex is rather defined as a fear of the subject's own look that might reduce him to a fluid and unstable construction, dissolved in a liquid reality.

Sculptural eroticism

The antinomies of petrification and fluidification embodied in the figure of Aurora are continued in the story of Damocles Siriel. The young man in the third part of the novel explores the ruins of the Temple of Damocles and finds the journal of Damocles Siriel. Damocles was a tyrant, sexually excited by petrification. He altered the temple dedicated to Femininity to represent his own taste for cold, angular constellations, and, threatened by his outraged subjects, flooded it.¹³ In his journal, Siriel explains that:

For me life has always been synonymous with everything soft, lukewarm and undefined. Linking only the intangible, that which is no part of life, I arbitrarily identified all that is cold, hard or geometric with this constant, and it is for this reason that I love the angular lines the eye casts into sky to apprehend the constellations, the mysteriously premeditated order of a monument and finally the ground itself, the most perfect plane locus of all figures (A 72).

¹⁰ Susan R. Bowers, *Medusa and the Female Gaze*, NWSA Journal, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring, 1990), p. 231.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 232.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹³ Hand, *Leiris*, p. 47.

Damocles Siriel's voice resounds like the autobiographical self from *Manhood*. Both seek some kind of monumentalisation of the ego by focussing on rigidity, coldness and sharp surfaces. Moreover, Damocles abhors his soft and fluid body and often fantasises about giving it the appearance of granite, believing that remaining motionless for hours would enable him to become to some extent more like a statue. Kenneth Gross argues that the fantasy of turning a living man into a statue arises out of a desire for the inhuman, the material, out of an inchoate demand for a partial or dialectical identification with stone, the dead literal, the solid or opaque, or whatever else stone can signify.¹⁴ The fantasy secures something in the self that is otherwise bound to be lost: everything warm, soft and undefined, and thus associated with death.

Damocles's fear of losing the substantiality of the self is reflected in his idea of love as something associated with the image of hardness. In order to arouse his desire, the hero had to imagine that all the naked women in front of him were statues, 'cold, hard beings without viscera or skin — and not the female variety of those sinuous little goatskin bottles, full of sobs and ill-defined sensations, called *men*' (A 70). As a consequence of those fantasies, Damocles made love to statuesque women, totally shaved so that they no longer retained any animal qualities, lying on marble. In this scenario, sexual satisfaction is gained by the feeling of caressing not women but 'frozen rivers'. And the only female name Damocles had ever been able to tolerate was, because of its delightful coldness, *Aurora*.

In Victorian literature (e.g. Thomas Hardy and Vernon Lee), classical statues worked as a metaphor of desire that had been silenced, restricted or censored:

The idealised white marble figure with its smooth surface, lack of expression, and generalised facial features signifies a body devoid of physical and psychic processes, immune from sexual desire, appetite, or emotion: it presents a body outside experience, outside history, 'outside a corporeal engagement with the world'.¹⁵

¹⁴ K. Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, Penn State University Press: 2006, p. 133.

¹⁵ J. Thomas, 'Icons of Desire: The Classical Statue in Later Victorian Literature', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1/2 (2010), p. 253.

Aurora deals with this way of interpreting sculpture as an ‘icon of desire’ by emphasising the fetishistic character of Sirel’s desire. Both fantasies and real acts of making love with statues are means of mediating the main desire of all Leiris’s characters to save their subjectivity from melting into an unstable reality of smooth contours, delicate women and undefined borders. *Aurora*, both a spectral and material presence, embodies the desire for stony life, freed from any randomness and variability.

At the beginning of his journal, Damocles Sirel notes that his loathing to every mutable form was related to the fear of death. But fear of death causes aversion to life (A 72), in which the hero consequently sinks into his frozen world of statues. Sirel’s eroticism, as well as that of all male characters in *Aurora*, can be compared with Sacher-Masoch’s strategy of ‘supersensualism’, as a transmuted sensuality built on the transformation of every object into a work of art.¹⁶ In Masoch’s novels, women become exciting when they are indistinguishable from cold statues. Deleuze finds in Masoch’s texts that ‘the plastic arts confer an eternal character on their subject because they suspend gestures and attitudes’.¹⁷ In Democles Sirel’s history, arrested movement refers to the desire to freeze both the reality of the desirous subject and the object of desire: *Aurora*.

In the subsequent stories of *Aurora*’s different male characters (e.g. Paracelsus, who seeks the Philosophers’ Stone), they try to find *Aurora*, who in each story becomes a different fantasy and different object of desire. Every time, her name is transformed according to men’s desires. *Aurora* reappears as ‘OR AURA’, ‘Eau-Rôh-Rah’, ‘OR AUX RATS’, and, finally, when all the male heroes die, as ‘HORRORA’; she is the only stable point maintaining their subjectivity. Her spectral and material presence is the only guarantee of their existence, though her own condition is continuously changing. The search for final, impossible union with *Aurora* is one that will therefore permit the simultaneous existence of metamorphosis and durability in each subject.

¹⁶ G. Deleuze, ‘Coldness and Cruelty’ [in:] *Masochism*, transl. J. McNeil, Zone Books: New York 1991, p. 69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

The language of statues

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator refers to himself as a first-person narrative voice, expressing himself in direct speech, because 'only the word *I* epitomises the structure of the world' (A 43). When different characters appear, he speaks about 'coming to cathedral Death, to this third-person singular' (A 43), which a moment ago he had crossed out with one stroke of his pen. It is a paradoxical condition, in which the word 'I' decays (as the narrator's body and reality at the beginning of the novel decay) and the third person (fictional multiplications of the narrator's subjectivity) becomes a hope for reintegration in stone, frozen form, although this hope turns into the 'cathedral of Death'. Jean Pontialis indicated that 'it is only through a phantasy relation with the other to whom it delegates both its obsessional features and a certain power that must save it from the sickness unto death and its fragmenting effect'.¹⁸ *Aurora* is a figure of such power because, as a Medusa-like fantasy, she has a petrifying glance, which mineralises the subjectivity of male characters. Transformations of her name do not change her domination over the entire novel, and she remains the 'enigmatic medium whose violent possession enables the narrator to achieve the occultation of thought and the gift of verbal transmutation'.¹⁹

The sculptural erotic fantasy of Damocles Sirel, his desire to possess *Aurora* as a figure of frozen and permanent subjectivity outside of the flux of time, also permits us to treat this surreal Medusa as an impossible object of desire for male characters, that is, self-stabilisation in the language that has been lost at the beginning of the novel. Eroticism connected with sculptural forms and *Aurora*'s ability to be both the petrifying Medusa and an animating force of nature show the paradoxical condition of the language and the illusion of any male character's hopes for constructing a stable subjectivity. Referring to de Man's diagnosis, attempts to use language to give the world form or meaning, to posit a subject and reconstruct a lost wholeness, turn us, as users of this language, into statues.²⁰ Language creates something fixed,

¹⁸ J. Pontialis, D. Macey, 'Michel Leiris, or Psychoanalysis Without End', *Yale French Studies: On Leiris* 1992/81, p. 138.

¹⁹ Hand, *Leiris*, p. 36.

²⁰ P. de Man, *The rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, pp. 94–5.

but at the same time it reveals its dehumanising violence – like Aurora, whose glance can suspend someone in a stone-like form and instantaneously open the abyss of the ‘cathedral of Death’ of a third-person narrative. All erotic explorations in Leiris’s novel, as well as the statu-esque metaphors, embody this fundamental aporia of language. And here, language itself remains as the only impossible object of desire.

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