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## The Fictions of Surrealism

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## The Fictions of Surrealism

### Abstract

Surrealism is an attitude toward life, even more than a literary and artistic movement. It aspired to no less than the remaking of man and the world by reintroducing "everyday" magic and a new idealization of the Female. In many respects, its goal was spiritual renewal. This enterprise was most prominently successful in the domain of poetry and painting. The major spokesman for the movement, Andre Breton, disliked the novel. Nevertheless, the members of the movement and their associates made numerous ventures into prose fiction, with notable results. Four types of fiction are delineated: the neo-Gothic romance; the adventure diary of "magic" experience—this one being probably the most typical of all the kinds of narrative invented; the erotic (or pornographic) *récit*, and the linguistic extravaganza, in which language becomes the major instrument of sorcery. In many ways, the Surrealist "experiment" could be characterized as an attempt at the liberation of languages. This observation raises a number of questions about the impact of Surrealism on subsequent developments in French fiction (and the theatre), as well as upon its impact on Western fiction in general. The conclusion drawn is that Surrealist fiction has been a major contribution, a pioneering effort, in the shaking up of narrative concepts and techniques in the second half of the twentieth century.

### Keywords

surrealism, fiction, female, spiritual renewal, magic, poetry, painting, Andre Breton, prose fiction, *récit*, liberation of language, language, Western fiction

## The Fictions of Surrealism\*

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Surrealism was much more than a literary and artistic movement; if one treats it as such, then one would have to say that it is a continuation and consolidation of Dada (Shattuck 40-61) which began in Zürich in 1916; that it formulated its program of action for the first time in 1924 by means of André Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme*, dominated the French literary scene until 1940, then dispersed and disintegrated, never really reconstituting itself but leaving a distinct and distinctive mark on post-war French literature. So what was Surrealism, then? A state of mind, an attitude, a mode of behavior; more succinctly, a way of life, because its profoundest ambition was to remake the world by restructuring man and by transforming society—Orphic and Promethean at the same time. The liberation of man was to subvert that much-revered French (and Western) addiction to Reason (Descartes was the principal *bête noire*); the more recent enemy was bourgeois materialism and the resultant dehumanization that had brought on the carnage of the First World War. The transformation of man was to be a return to the "marvelous," specifically the "merveilleux quotidien" 'the magical component' in everyone's everyday life: dreams, spontaneity, play, and the free and open creativity of the Unconscious, which was understood as the core of authenticity, the center of desire, the seat of love and ecstasy, and the source of visionary reality. You might call this an aesthetic version of Freud; and on the political level, you would have to center on Marx and revolutionary politics. As a matter of fact, Surrealism deserves the credit for having attempted for

\* This essay was presented at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and at Kansas State University in October, 1995.

the first time to bring about a partnership between Marx/Lenin and Freud. Roger Shattuck speaks of a “triad of forces” that beset and characterized Surrealism: politics, science, and the spiritual (42). The science may be the weakest part, if it is understood as referring to the natural sciences: the Surrealists were much more strongly drawn toward the biological and psychological sciences, particularly if you are willing to extend that terrain to marginal science such as alchemy and the experimental quasi-sciences that date back to the later eighteenth century (in actual truth, they go back as far as the early Renaissance), which are generally known as “occultism.” Occultism, in a very real sense, provides the link between the scientific and the spiritual here, as well as the diachronic connection between Surrealism and Romanticism.

Here are Shattuck’s useful notations: “Occultism, objective chance, the revival of the chivalric and Arthurian traditions of erotic love, magic, and alchemy, the cult of the supernatural in woman—all these unstable items fed a faith that had unmistakable elements of transcendence. . . . The word with which the Surrealists tried to conjure so often, *le merveilleux*, belongs to a sustained attempt to find spiritual values in everyday life”(44). There is more than a little of “spilled religion” in Surrealism, just as there had been in Romanticism; in this instance, it is primarily spilled Catholicism from pedigreed French precursors (with strong leanings toward the erotic and demonic): Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Huysmans. In this sense, Surrealism is relentlessly and unmistakably “modern.”

But the Surrealists favored painting and poetry; they tried to conquer the Parisian stage in the 1930s, unsuccessfully, but they did make an attempt, their most vigorous and radical champion being Antonin Artaud. Yet they did not care for the novel. They saw it as a trivial and pedestrian, a vehicle for crudely “realistic” notation; they liked to quote the famous dictum of Valéry, with whom they had nothing else in common, that “La marquise sortit à cinq heures” ‘The marquise went out at five o’clock’ wasn’t worth putting down on paper. Nor did they like the kind of psychological analysis in which Stendhal and Proust excelled; that was too Cartesian for them. Breton, in his first *Manifesto*, quotes the description of the moneylender’s room in *Crime and Punishment* as an example of what was wrong with the novel generally speaking. It is, in a way, an unfortunate example, because Dostoevsky’s work contains more than a trifle of what might normally pass for *le merveilleux*; but even so, this particular passage, which is so important for Raskolnikov’s subse-

quent actions, falls into the category of the descriptive and perhaps the analytical. So it is really better to speak of Surrealist “prose” and, more pertinently, of some kind of interest in narrative. Breton says subsequently:

Dans le domaine littéraire, le merveilleux seul est capable de féconder des oeuvres ressortissant à un genre inférieur tel que le roman et d’une façon générale tout ce qui participe de l’anecdote. *Le moine*, de Lewis, en est une preuve admirable. Le souffle du merveilleux l’anime tout entier.

In the domain of literature, the marvelous alone is capable of fertilizing works growing out of an inferior genre such as the novel and, generally speaking, anything which smacks of the anecdote. *The Monk*, by Lewis, is admirable proof of the fact. The breath of the marvelous animates it throughout. (24)

The choice of Matthew G. (“Monk”) Lewis’ novel (1796) is not too surprising. This Gothic novel enjoyed, like the works of the Marquis de Sade, a lively underground existence in the nineteenth century. It was Gothic with a vengeance—not only centered upon old castles, dungeons, maidens in distress, but it is also diabolic, cruel, and erotic. Most of these characteristics were to find their way into Surrealist fiction; in some ways, Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1870) was a product, or at least an analogue, of *The Monk*, although one might add that narrative continuity in *Maldoror* is unimportant. But, in a way, narrative continuity was a basic component of the “realistic” novels that Breton detested. What Lautréamont had to offer over and beyond Matthew Lewis was a strong lyrical impulse, an aggressive and blasphemous anti-theism and diabolism; instead of castles and dungeons, we have here the whole grotesque bestiary familiar to us from the late Middle Ages onward (as in Bosch, Grünewald, and the late Goya): spiders, reptiles, plus sharks. And *Maldoror* is a “theater of cruelty” long before Antonin Artaud gave the term currency in the 1930s. Instead of castles, *Maldoror* lives in the presence of the ocean, that great *topos* of change and infinity that the Romantics cherished. Another basic “discovery” (at least for the French) must be added to the list of major fictional antecedents: Lewis Carroll’s *Alice au pays de merveilles* (*Alice in Wonderland*), which not only combines dreams and fantasies but also a wry kind of humor—Breton was to baptize it

later as “l’humour noir” ‘black humor,’ a term that has had a long history throughout the twentieth century and which is still very much alive and kicking. One might put it this way: the Surrealists found out that there was also malice in wonderland; and they put it to good fictional use. And there is another ingredient of Alice that was to endear the book not only to James Joyce but to a number of the Surrealist writers and poets, namely the play of language, the puns, the verbal intricacies and the nonsense that proliferate in Lewis Carroll’s looking-glass.

There are, in my view, four different kinds of narrative that grew out of Surrealist soil. They are sufficiently distinct in their forms, traditional antecedents, and particularly in their content to warrant this classification, instead of speaking of merely one kind of Surrealist fiction or novel. Most predictable, as we shall see, is the novel-romance prolonging older, especially “Gothic,” models. The most distinctive Surrealist narrative is that which fuses the “oneiric process” ‘the dream life’ with everyday urban reality. Then there is the special category of the Surrealist erotic (some would say, pornographic) novel, which establishes and in a way canonizes a sub-genre of “transgressive” writing. Finally, there is the “neo-babelic” novel (the term comes from Raymond Queneau), a linguistic extravaganza of highly ingenious and sophisticated nonsense reflecting the labyrinthine joy—and terror—of language itself.

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We begin with the revival of the Gothic romance. Its finest practitioner is Julien Gracq, whose first novel, *Au château d’Argol* (*The Castle of Argol*, 1938) is an elegant and lyrical neo-medieval tale involving a woman and two men in a setting in Brittany, reminiscent of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” though presumably taking place in modern times (but that aspect is virtually slighted), in a romantic and exquisite isolation. It differs from its medieval models, however, in being scrupulously analytical concerning the characters (not quite according to the Surrealist recipe!) and in moving toward allegory, the kind of allegorical or symbolic reading to which Wagner’s great later operas—the *Ring* cycle, *Tristan* and *Parsifal*—lend themselves readily. These references are consciously made by Gracq, for whom the Parsifal/Fisher-King theme is of the highest symbolic importance. Later works by Gracq pursue this Holy Grail motif. I mention particularly the play *Le roi pêcheur* and the novel

*Un balcon en forêt* (Strauss 903-09). As a matter of fact, Gracq's principal characteristic is to re-mythologize the modern world in terms of spiritualized themes, such as the quest, the magic moment, the mysterious operations and exchanges of mind and soul, particularly in what is perhaps his finest novel, *Le rivage des Syrtes*. In this respect, he shares with the Surrealists their basic anti-materialism and their struggle for renewal but differs from them in terms of form, that is to say, his strong reliance on medieval and nineteenth-century romance, and in the fact that his works are not specifically contemporary, or at least don't have the "feel" of modernity.

The second group of novels might be called diaries of miraculous happenings; in the two key texts, Louis Aragon's *Le paysan de Paris* (1926) and André Breton's *Nadja* (1928), Surrealist fiction discovers itself. Of the two, *Nadja* is the more conventional: it reminds the reader more of certain traditional fictions, particularly the eternal-feminine romance. Its most illustrious French ancestor is Gérard de Nerval's "rêve de la vie" *Aurelia* (1854), a thinly disguised autobiographical account of the author's "descent into Hades" (lapse into madness) and redemption through the agency of a woman, who is both real (Jenny Colon) and mythical (Eurydice, Isis). The main section of *Nadja* follows this Nervalian pattern: the "magical" encounter with a charismatic woman; in this instance, her name is Nadja, the commonly shortened version of the Russian name Nadyezhda, meaning "hope," just as the name Aurelia had suggested "dawn," a new life, to Nerval. As a matter of fact, both texts are latter-day derivatives of Dante's *Vita nuova* and of Beatrice. Nadja is a clairvoyante, a fortune-teller, who opens up new spiritual vistas for the narrator, who is explicitly André Breton himself and she effectively transforms him into a new being. She defines herself as "l'âme errante" 'the errant soul' (81). The basic formula of the book, then, is quite simple and very much in the heritage of troubadour poetry and romance: metamorphosis of the psyche through the magic efficacy of the Female. The more distinctively modern, i.e., Surrealistic, component of *Nadja* lies in the fact that the events are located in a contemporary—a "real"—Paris, easily recognizable not only from the descriptions but also through a description-saving device, namely a number of actual photographs of places and things mentioned in the texts. Breton, in a foreword to the revised edition of *Nadja*, speaks of the "impératifs anti-littéraires" (6), thereby justifying his contempt for descriptive fiction as shown in his first *Manifesto*. Anna Balakian observes of the pictures that they are:

both a concession to the reader and an integral part of the physical format of the work itself. The concession, however, is superficial: the photographs dramatize the disparity between static reality and the “convulsive” beauty with which it is endowed through the poetic vision. (110)

The effect of this combination of text and photos is a bit uncanny: on the one hand, the photographic reality of the text is being affirmed and at the same time abrogated by the events; or better: transcended. The narrative in effect says over and over again: Reality is in front of our noses, let us begin with that; but behind it, there is a surreality, a greater or deeper or higher reality, to be discovered; once discovered, it will renew us. “Il se peut que la vie demande à être déchiffrée comme un cryptogramme” ‘It may be that life asks to be deciphered like a cryptogram’ (131). This central portion of *Nadja*, written in the form of a journal, quite effectively dissolves the conventional distinctions we may make (on whatever philosophical basis) between empirical and psychical reality and between realistic fiction and romance. But Breton is in some respects too much of a theorist of Surrealism and too much of a Frenchman to be content with mere exemplification. The “marvelous” experience of Breton is framed by an introductory essay of some length and a short epilogue, both reflecting the experience and extracting a philosophical-aesthetic conclusion from it. In other words, *Nadja* is also meditative and didactic—and that is by no means unusual in narrative romances. Like so many works from Dante’s *Vita nuova* onward, it hovers on the edge of allegory, in the sense that it functions like an Annunciation. Or at least that is what it strives to be: in certain ways the quest is not successful in the long run. *Nadja* is compared to Melusina (123, 147), the most elusive nymph of mythology; and toward the end, after the time of the events has become blurred, Breton admits that they no longer get along. He then adds: “A vrai dire, peut-être ne nous sommes-nous jamais entendues, tout au moins sur la manière d’envisager les choses simples de l’existence” ‘In truth, perhaps we never agreed, at least not on the way to envisage the simple things of existence’ (155). Either Breton’s erotic expectations are not fulfilled by *Nadja*, or they are not attainable at all. Yes, there *has* been an invasion of magic and mystery into daily life thanks to *Nadja*, but it has fallen short of the miracle (157). This disappointment may account for the need for analysis that follows. Its ultimate message, revealed in the final line of the narrative, is “La beauté sera

CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas” ‘Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or it will not be’ (187). That startling perception constitutes one of the main aesthetic tenets of the Surrealist movement: the discovery of beauty as spontaneous, fulgurant; and also physical and orgiastic: the sudden revelation/transformation of reality into something rich and strange, and the sea-change of the experiencing self into a new corporeal and spiritual being. That, in essence, is the definition of the Surrealist experience and its aesthetic, whether directly or consciously borrowed from Breton or not: it is visible in all Surrealist pictures and discoverable in all Surrealist literature.

Breton went on to enlarge the notion of convulsive beauty in a later autobiographical narrative, a sort of sequel to *Nadja*, entitled *L’amour fou* (1937), in which the key phrase goes as follows:

Il ne peut, selon moi, y avoir beauté—beauté convulsive—qu’au prix de l’affirmation du rapport réciproque qui lie l’objet considéré dans son mouvement et dans son repos. . . . La beauté sera érotique-voilée, explosante-fixe, magique-circonstancielle ou ne sera pas.

According to me, there cannot be beauty—convulsive beauty—except at the price of affirming the reciprocal relationship linking the object considered in motion and at rest. . . . Convulsive beauty will be erotic-veiled, explosive-stable, magic-circumstantial or it will not be. (25-26)

Convergence of opposites: one of the cherished goals of Surrealism: the restoration of the harmony between the natural and the supernatural, but this time (unlike the Middle Ages) with its energies centered in man and radiating outward (not upward) to transfigure humanity itself. The source of this dynamic is love, understood here as a form of exalted, ecstatic madness: poetry, in short.

The other work of fiction under consideration, *Le paysan de Paris*, moves (both works are narratives-in-motion!) in a similar direction as *Nadja*; yet it is the more original of the two with respect to structure and content. Like *Nadja*, its framework is didactic and philosophical; the opening section is called “Preface to a modern mythology,” and the concluding section is resolutely metaphysical. Its subtitle is actually “The dream of the peasant,” which gives its particular kind of metaphysics (Hegelian, plus a new materialistic mystique) an oneiric, surrealistic overlay; and the reflections culminate in a series of aphoristic statements, such as the following:

C'est à la poésie que tend l'homme.  
 Il n'a de poésie que du concret.  
 La réalité est l'absence apparente de la contradiction.  
 Le merveilleux, c'est la contradiction qui apparaît dans le réel.

Man gravitates toward poetry.  
 There is no poetry except of the concrete.  
 Reality is the apparent absence of contradiction.  
 The marvelous is the contradiction which appears in the real.  
 (248)

What matters here, it seems to me, is not so much the attempt to ground Surrealism in a metaphysic of a concrete magic universal, but the construction of a Surrealist mythology around the “merveilleux quotidien.” The rest is illustration and (mainly urban) landscape. The two major “demonstrative” sections of the narrative are “Le Passage de l’Opéra,” situated in an arcade formerly located near the Opera in Paris; and “The Sentiment of Nature on the Buttes-Chaumont,” a park located in the northeast corner of Paris. It from these two vantage points that the “peasant”—the outsider, the alien, the one who sees Paris with “other” eyes—contemplates the urban spectacle and develops his “mythologie en marche” ‘mythology in motion’ (143). More than that: this mythology is concretized in a landscape, a set of Surrealist *tableaux*, so to speak. Somewhere in the novel Aragon remarks:

On dirait que pour Dieu le monde n'est que l'occasion de quelques essais de natures mortes. Il a deux ou trois petits trucs qu'il ne se fait pas faute d'employer: l'absurde . . . le banal . . . il n'y a pas moyen de le tirer de là.

It looks as though for God the world is merely an occasion for several attempts at still-life. He has two or three little gimmicks that he never fails to use: the absurd . . . the banal . . . there is no way of getting him away from that. (61)

The remark strikes me as extraordinarily revealing as well as suggestive. The task of the Surrealist observer, be he a writer or a painter or a film-maker, is to animate these “natures mortes,” to set these still-life observations in motion by means of his fantasy and to capture them on the page, on canvas, on celluloid. In that sense all of Surrealist art may be said to be a series of fantasy-landscapes (whether

abstract or bimorphic doesn't matter) generating, or generated by, a mythology-in-motion. The title of the work, *Le paysan de Paris*, might just as easily have been "Le paysage de Paris" 'The Paris Landscape.'

How does it work? Again by a series of surprises and transformations. Instead of Breton's photographs, here we have posters, advertisements, wine lists, statistics, that operate their kind of estrangement effect by being taken out of their context, without losing touch with it altogether. Witness the following description of the enchantment of the ordinary. The narrator is in the arcade looking at the shop-window of a seller of walking-canes:

Quelle ne fut pas ma surprise, lorsque, attiré par une sorte de bruit machinal et monotone qui semblait s'exhaler de la devanture du marchand de cannes, je m'aperçus que celle-ci baignait dans une lumière verdâtre, en quelque manière sous-marine, dont la source restait invisible. Cela tenait de la phosphorescence des poissons . . . mais cependant je devais m'avouer que bien que des cannes après tout puissent avoir les propriétés éclairantes des habitants de la mer, il ne semblait pas qu'une explication physique pût rendre compte de cette clarté surnaturelle et surtout du bruit qui emplissait sourdement la voûte. Je reconnus ce dernier: c'était cette voix de coquillages. . . . Toute la mer dans le passage de l'Opéra. Les cannes se balançaient comme des varechs. Je ne revenais pas encore de cet enchantement quand je m'aperçus qu'une forme nageuse se glissait entre les divers étages de la devanture. Elle était un peu au-dessous de la taille normale d'une femme, mais ne donnait en rien l'impression d'une naine. Sa petitesse semblait plutôt ressortir de l'éloignement, et cependant l'apparition se mouvait tout juste derrière la vitre. Ses cheveux s'étaient défaits et ses doigts s'accrochaient par moments aux cannes. J'aurais cru avoir affaire à une sirène au sens le plus conventionnel de ce mot, car il me semblait bien que ce charmant spectre nu jusqu'à la ceinture qu'elle portait fort basse se terminait par une robe d'acier ou d'écaille, ou peut-être pétales de roses. . . . "L'idéal!" m'écriai-je, ne trouvant rien de mieux à dire dans mon trouble. La sirène tourna vers moi un visage effrayé et tendit ses bras dans ma direction. Alors l'étalage fut pris d'une convulsion générale. . . . La clarté mourut avec le bruit de la mer. (30-32)

Fancy my surprise when, attracted to the cane shop by a kind of mechanical drone which seemed to emanate from its display window, I saw the window suffused as if under water with a glaucous light, whose source remained hidden from view. It brought to mind the phosphorescence of fish . . . but I was compelled to recognize that although canes may conceivably possess the luminous properties of sea creatures, no physical law seemed adequate to explain this preternatural light and especially the hollow noise filling the vault of the arcade. That noise I knew: it was the voice of seashells. . . . The entire ocean here in the Passage de l'Opéra. The canes were swaying gently to and fro, like kelp. I hadn't yet recovered from this spell when I noticed a form swimming between the various strata of the display. She was slightly smaller than the average woman but in no way impressed one as dwarf-like. Rather, her diminutiveness seemed the optical effect of distance, yet this apparition was directly inside the window. Her hair had come undone, her fingers occasionally grasped the canes. I would have taken her for a siren, in the most literal sense of the word, for it seemed to me that the lower portion of this charming specter, who was naked to the girdle which she wore at hip level, tapered into a dress of steel or scales or perhaps rose petals. . . . "The ideal!" was all I could exclaim in my confusion. The siren turned a frightened face toward me and then held out her arms, whereupon the entire display convulsed. . . . The light died along with the noise of the sea. (*Nightwalker* 16-17)

The scene just depicted reflects the enchantment of the cityscape—a perfect example of “urban magic”—very poetic and suggestive in the way that inspired Walter Benjamin’s so-called “Arkadenprojekt”—the plan to articulate Paris as the “capital of the nineteenth century” in terms of precisely such architectural inventions as the arcade.

The description of this and other shop-windows in the arcade culminates in a “Discourse of the Imagination,” in which the Imagination, personified, announces to the world the birth of a new vice: “Le *Surréalisme*, fils de la frénésie et de l'ombre” (81) ‘*Surrealism*, son of frenzy and of shadow’ (52). And here follows the definition:

Le vice appelé Surréalisme est l'emploi déréglé et passionnel du stupéfiant *image*, ou plutôt de la provocation sans contrôle de

l'image pour elle-même et pour ce qu'elle entraîne dans le domaine de la représentation de perturbations imprévisibles et de métamorphoses: car chaque image à chaque coup vous force à reviser tout l'Univers. Et il y a pour chaque homme une image à trouver qui anéantit tout l'Univers. (*Le paysan* 82)

The vice known as Surrealism is the unsystematic and passionate use of the narcotic image, or rather the uncontrolled provocation of it for its own sake and for whatever unforeseen upheavals and metamorphoses it renders visible; for every image, whenever it strikes, forces you to revise the entire Universe. And every man has an image which, in coming to light, will obliterate the entire Universe. (*Nightwalker* 52-53)

Perhaps no definition of Surrealism, not even Breton's, so clearly underlines the element of *dérégulé* (borrowed from Rimbaud) and of the "automatic" spontaneity, as well as the importance of images, their transformational impact on the beholder, and the destructive-constructive rhythm that characterizes the entire movement.

These two works, then, achieve something that was perhaps implicit in Surrealism from its very inception: a narrative structure that moves between the lyric and narration—a special characteristic and function assigned to Surrealist prose in quest of the marvelous in the everyday world. Surrealism had defined itself originally as a quest for "automatic writing," which was, so to speak, the lyricism of the Unconscious, and which quickly became a treasure chest to be ransacked for poetic images. For Maurice Blanchot, "le message automatique" is the crucial discovery of Surrealism (92). Since automatic writing had been from the very beginning the keynote and the rallying-cry of Surrealism, one is left with the question, one that Surrealist poetry could bypass but which Surrealist narrative could not avoid for very long: If automatic writing is *the* way of using language authentically (i.e., unconsciously), language becomes valorized in a new way; as Blanchot says, automatic writing becomes a weapon ("machine de guerre") against reflection and against language itself, inasmuch as language is the instrument whereby reflection can take place. And at the same time automatic writing uses that very language and celebrates it, so that as a result language becomes a different kind of knowledge. Blanchot concludes this thought by saying that for the Surrealists there comes a

point “où le langage n’est pas le discours, mais la réalité même, sans toutefois cesser d’être la réalité propre du langage, où enfin l’homme touche à l’absolu” ‘where language is not discourse but reality itself, without however ceasing to be the very reality of language, where at last man makes contact with the absolute’ (93). In the first *Manifesto*, prose as yet had no particular function, except the classical one of serving for argumentation, polemical and theoretical discourse: prose was the vehicle for manifestos. In *Le paysan de Paris* and *Nadja*, the quest for the surreal took the form of a narrative that described that quest and also commented on it, developed a theory. Hence, both works move back and forth from the recording of events to the meditation on the metaphysical and mythical significance of these happenings; the two novels are simultaneously narratives and essays and didactic paradigms.

*Nadja* is a tribute to the magic power of the Female; it takes its place in a long line of spiritual and sensuous celebrations from the Middle Ages and Petrarch through the Romantics (most notably Nerval), giving the theme of love a resplendent new face and body, especially in the poetry of Eluard. In *Le paysan de Paris* there comes a moment where the narrator literally and lyrically overflows with love, with the celebration of the Female. Here is an excerpt from this densely charged alliterative prose:

La femme a pris place dans l’arène impondérable où tout ce qui est poussière, poudre de papillon, efflorescence et reflets devient l’effluve de sa chair, et le charme de son passage. . . . La femme est dans le feu, dans le fort, dans le faible, la femme est dans le fond des flots, dans la fuite des feuilles, dans la feinte solaire où comme un voyageur sans guide et sans cheval j’égare ma fatigue en une féerie sans fin. . . . Je suis dépossédé de moi-même, et du développement de moi-même, et de tout ce qui n’est pas la possession de moi-même par toi. (208-09)

Woman has assumed her place in the imponderable arena where all that is dust, butterfly powder, efflorescence, and reflections becomes the effluvium of her flesh, and the charm of her transitory presence. . . . Woman is in the fire, in the strong, in the weak; woman is in the trough of waves, in the flight of leaves, in the solar feint where like a traveler without a guide and horse I direct my weariness hither and yon in an endless fairyland. . . . I am evicted from myself, and from my development, and from whatever is not the possession of myself by you. (139-40)

There is no real distinction here between prose and poetry: exploration has marvelously turned into ecstasy. And at a later point, metaphysics and love become fused, and the devices used are genuinely poetic: alliterative (at least in the original) as well as rhythmic. More than that: there is also a new vigor in this narration. Landscape, fauna, and flora have merged into a special kind of erogenous topography, the “zone” (in Apollinaire’s sense: circuit, girdle) of the Female, “pays amoureux,” as Steven Ungar suggests (95). At a later point in *Le paysan de Paris* landscape, love, and metaphysics are fused: “L’esprit métaphysique pour moi renaissait de l’amour. L’amour était sa source, et je ne veux plus sortir de cette forêt enchantée” (242) ‘The metaphysical spirit was reborn for me, out of love. Love was its source, and never again would I leave the enchanted forest’ (162).

There is another version of eroticism cultivated by a few of the more marginal Surrealists, notably Georges Bataille, and it seems legitimate to think of this kind of fiction as another genre of Surrealist narrative. For Bataille, eroticism is closely linked to cruelty, sacrifice, and death. Unlike Sade’s fictions, Bataille does not adopt the pattern of sexual cruelty followed by a pedagogical lecture justifying the violence and repeating this pattern ad infinitum. Rather, Bataille’s fictional works wallow in a mixture of disgust and fascination that seems at every point to look toward death as a supreme fulfillment. This kind of writing is essentially repetitive (a feature that it shares with pornography) and joyless, a quality that we also detect in the Marquis de Sade’s works. For Bataille, the major interest lies in the conjunction of the *homo erectus* (in both senses of the word) and the solar disk, which in man finds its corporal analogues in the anus and in the pineal (penile?) body of the brain. We have here a weird and pathological transformation of Descartes into something scatological, blasphemous, and violent; it leads to fanciful analogies, such as the notion of the “Jesusve,” a conglomeration of self (“je”), Vesuvius (volcanic craters are equated to anuses of the earth, which explode into violence); and of course the blasphemous reference to Jesus in the midst of all this. “C’est ainsi que l’amour s’écrit dans ma propre gorge: je suis le *Jésuve*, immonde parodie du soleil torride et aveuglant” (I 86) ‘Love, then, screams in my own throat; I am the *Jesuve*, the filthy parody of the torrid and blinding sun’ (9). Sexuality has been demonized here—it is still eroticism, but upside down. Similarly, in Bataille’s novel *Histoire de l’oeil* (*The*

*Story of the Eye* 1928) there is an elaborate constellation of spherical and oval shapes, which are constantly blended into one another: eyes, eggs, testicles, the sun's disk, and so on. Here the sequence of images works like a ceaseless chain of transgressions (not merely transformations) whose impulse is an obsessive provocation of "normalcy," propriety, decency—all the criteria of rational or monotheistic humanity. In general the spirituality of the Surrealists and their associates stands in a problematic relationship to Catholicism; most of the Surrealists were lapsed Catholics or atheists. Bataille is a diabolized (i.e., upside-down) Catholic, strongly drawn to evil and prone to Gnostic formulas:

Si nous abandonnons aujourd'hui ouvertement le point de vue idéaliste, comme les gnostiques et les manichéens l'avaient abandonné implicitement, l'attitude de ceux qui voyaient dans leur propre vie un effet de l'action créatrice du mal, apparaît même radicalement optimiste. (I 224)

If today we overtly abandon the idealistic point of view, as the Gnostics and Manicheans implicitly abandoned it, the attitude of those who see in their own lives an effect of the creative action of evil appears even radically optimistic. (48)

In his preface to the short fiction "Madame Edwarda" (1935) Bataille states that "this story brings God into action in the plenitude of his attributes; and this God, nonetheless, is a common whore, who is in every way equal to other whores." But what mysticism has not been able to say (at the moment of saying it, it lost its strength), eroticism can utter:

Ce récit met en jeu dans la plénitude de ses attributs, Dieu lui-même; et ce Dieu, néanmoins, est une fille publique, en tout pareille aux autres. Mais ce que le mysticisme n'a pu dire (au moment de le dire, il défaillait), l'érotisme le dit: Dieu n'est rien s'il n'est pas dépassement de Dieu dans tous les sens; dans le sens de l'être vulgaire, dans celui de l'horreur et de l'impureté; à la fin, dans le sens de rien. . . .

God is nothing if he is not the bypassing of God in all senses [directions]; in the sense of the vulgar being, in the sense of horror and impurity; finally, in the sense of nothing . . . (3: 12)

Actually, what Breton is doing here is to push Surrealistic “excess” to its limits . . . and beyond, in the direction of the Sacred, displacing mysticism into a negative mystique defined by sacrificial and sordid-scatological eroticism, including the experience of abjection and nausea. The disciples of the Marquis de Sade may thus be seen as erotic terrorists: Phallus in Wonderland has his problems and his agonies. Bataille locates himself at the dialectical opposite point from the mainline Surrealists. And Breton did what he so often did: expel Bataille from the Movement, ostensibly for dialectical lapses. But his intellectual, spiritual, and fictional excesses stand as a kind of commentary and borderline mark for Surrealism viewed as a state of mind. The practice of theologizing eroticism was continued, thirty years after Bataille, by Pierre Klossowski, but with elegance rather than brutality.

The fourth and final category of Surrealist fiction may be the most interesting, the most durable. The very idea of “dictée de la pensée, en l’absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison” ‘automatic writing’ proposed by Breton in his first *Manifesto*, “thought-dictation, in the absence of any control exercised by reason” (37), implied a problem of articulation, not only as far as the narrative was concerned, but of language, itself. Raymond Queneau was one of the first writers associated with Surrealism to tackle the colossus of language. His novels, beginning with *Le Chiendent* (*The Bark Tree* 1933) are in the wild bacchanalian or carnivalesque mode, in which “anything” goes: colloquialisms, slang, neologisms, linguistic absurdities, polyglot deformations of spelling (for example, “ouaterproufe” ‘raincoat’; “coquetèle” ‘cocktail’; “mouvize” ‘movies’; and other such tidbits). Queneau realized fully that the gap between spoken language, and written French was in a sense unbridgeable, ludic as well as ludicrous; that is to say, spoken slang is not really intended to be written down and becomes comic, rather than “authentic,” when it enters the domain of literature. The model for all this is, of course, Rabelais (and his great latter-day reincarnation, James Joyce, with a little seasoning provided by Lawrence Sterne and possibly by *Bouvard et Pécuchet*). Thus, Queneau’s novels are wild composites of parodies and linguistic inventions, a show-window of “*patoiseries*.” Everything is a carnival, everything is festive: *Pierrot mon ami* (1942) takes place in L’Uni-Park (loony park would do as well); *Zazie dans le métro* (1959) is a wild dash across Paris, through transvestite night clubs, bars, tourist buses—everything but the Metro of its title (which is closed because of a

strike), but mainly it is a romp through language itself. Many of Queneau's novels are like comic strips about philosophies ranging from Heraclitus to Heidegger; one of the novels uses a title from Hegel, *Le dimanche de la vie* (*The Sunday of Life* 1952), which refers to the "time" beyond the end of history as proclaimed in his *Phenomenology*. Jarry's famous 'Pataphysics ("the science of imaginary solutions") and metaphysics are yoked together here in a mock ceremony. A work mainly written in the 1930s but revised and published only after the War, *Saint Glinglin* (1948), contains what may be viewed as the basic formula for Queneau's prose: "fariboles, fadaises et couillonasseries phoniques" 'phonic twaddle, nonsense and cockandballistics' (174). And the endless parodies are parallels to the linguistic play on a larger scale, as they are in Rabelais: both of them are mock imitations, pseudo-inventions, creative deconstructions. *Saint Glinglin* starts in an aquarium and the lifestyle of fish and it ends with a veritable torrential rain, after the Urbinataliens (Hometowners) have been deprived of their permanent good weather (another "Sunday of life") by an act of undoing the "chasse-nuages" 'cloudchaser' which kept the rain out of the town. In between there are parodies of Freud's *Totem* and *Taboo*, delivered in a loose kind of verse that suggests the Old Testament as well as Homeric hexameters; and there is also a "live" appearance of the actress Alice "Phaye" (another kind of Alice-in-Wonderland?). The novel also contains a ludicrous diatribe against vegetable nature, reminiscent of Baudelaire and Sartre, plus a recipe for a dish called *brouchtoucaille*, which will bring to mind not only Rabelais but also Alfred Jarry. And there is a farcical plate-smashing festival in honor of St. Glinglin (a jinglingly appropriate name for a saint who is honored by the smashing of crockery). The book, like all of Queneau's novels, is a veritable madhouse, and yet, like almost all carnivalistic fictions, from Boccaccio to the present (Michel Tournier, Milan Kundera, the early Günter Grass, and possibly Thomas Pynchon come to mind) not without the darker and anguished underside that is part of life—as well as of the literary monstrosities inherent in language itself.

\* \* \*

Surrealism, as I have tried to show, was an aggressive challenge to modern culture aimed toward a radical renewal; as a movement it was anything but cohesive, partly as the result of André Breton's intolerance of deviations from the norms he had established for the

intellectual and political correctness of his clan, partly as a result of the individualities and diversities that marked those minds that were drawn toward that basic attitude which Surrealism incarnated: rebellion against the middle class, rebellion against a materialistic view of life, dedication to the pursuit of the marvelous, and the cult of the Female. In brief, there is an obvious contradiction in a disciplined “movement” that is meant to attract unruly and independent individuals. Most of the Surrealists were better anarchists than Marxists. After all, Marxists don’t yearn for spiritual revelations. Yet revelations were more important to the Surrealists than revolutions; Walter Benjamin calls it, more appropriately, an “insurrection” (188), and Roger Shattuck thinks of it as an “experiment,” that is to say a set of experiences and adventures. It was a serious quest for “profane illumination” (Benjamin 179). Its impact was strong and has remained vital throughout the twentieth century, and especially in France. Virtually every French poet that came to prominence after the second World War was marked by the Surrealists in some way: René Char, Francis Ponge, Henri Michaux, Aimé Césaire, and many others. In the theater, which Surrealism failed to conquer in the thirties, we can chalk up a belated victory in the case of the so-called Theater of the Absurd: it seems to me that Ionesco was exactly the kind of playwright that the Surrealists were looking for and didn’t find; and Artaud’s “theater of cruelty” found its most worthy apostle in Jean Genet (who is too complex to be described as a Surrealist, but who shared with them, and with Ionesco, a profound distrust of Western theater). Perhaps it is only in painting that Surrealism spent itself and had no immediate successors. But one could say that, as with Cubism, even Expressionism, the success of Surrealism was sealed into the styles of painting dominant after the Second World War. In film, which despite appearances lends itself splendidly to “magical” effects, the achievement of Buñuel remains solid, and many other filmmakers (Bergman, Fellini) have a healthy instinct for the non-realistic possibilities of the medium.

But let us return to fiction. The common denominator in all the varieties of Surrealistic fiction that I have outlined above is the dissatisfaction with the novel as it existed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One may fault Breton here on his narrowness; others, such as Queneau, immediately saw the Surrealistic dimensions inherent in Joyce—is not the “Ulysses in Nighttown” chapter the first great Surrealist play *avant la lettre*? And *Finnegans Wake*

a pure dream-book, a perfect hallucination, Lewis Carroll enlarged indefinitely? Nevertheless, this kind of writing is the opposite of automatic writing; and yet it has the uncanny effect of dream language. In France, Surrealism served as a prime mover of the *nouveau roman*; Robbe-Grillet's first fictions, despite their relentless fixation on the world that is merely "there," create a hallucinatory effect produced by the conviction that the world and life are not marvelous but merely unintelligible; or in one of his later works, *La Belle Captive*, Robbe-Grillet unabashedly concocts a narrative around a number of paintings by René Magritte. In the case of a writer like Maurice Blanchot, who like his friends Bataille and Leiris was close to Surrealism but not quite part of the movement, his work moves along lines of an abstract novel, the drama of a state of mind focused on the mysterious dialectic of the act of writing. Without Surrealism (and possibly without the example of Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*) this kind of *récit* would have been more difficult. But what Surrealism actually achieved for Blanchot and others was a sort of emancipation of language, this anxiety over *parole* and *discours* being the central and crucial problem besetting contemporary literature. Blanchot, who saw the contradiction in the Surrealists' posture toward language, notes that for these writers:

le langage disparaît comme instrument, mais c'est qu'il est devenu sujet. Grâce à l'écriture automatique, il bénéficie de la plus haute promotion. Il se confond maintenant avec la "pensée" de l'homme, il est relié à la seule spontanéité véritable: il est la liberté humaine agissant et se manifestant.

language disappears as an instrument, but as a matter of fact it has become the subject. Thanks to automatic writing, it enjoys the highest prestige. It now merges with human 'thought,' it is bound to the only true spontaneity: it is human liberty acting and becoming manifest. (95)

That is no small praise, because in a very real sense it focuses on the permanent achievement of the Surrealists: the transformation and liberation of language in literature —just as one might speak of the emancipation of the canvas in painting or the imagery of film. Precisely this very phenomenon makes it possible for Blanchot to write fiction about the creative act of language, even though the texts are not in any ostensible sense "Surrealistic" fictions. In 1960,

after the publication of *Zazie*, Queneau and several friends founded Oulipo, *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (Workshop for Potential Literature), which specialized in combinatorial verse and prose: game theory applied to literature. The results are, for the most part, delightful, at least in their ingenuity. But there is something in literary pursuit that apparently strains beyond the purely ludic impulse that underlies all art. That was true of Queneau's work, as we observed, and it is even more true of the work of Georges Perec, whose precise geometrical and combinatorial narratives nevertheless (and surely intentionally) conceal a genuine capacity for observing life, particularly in *La vie mode d'emploi* (*Life: A User's Manual*, 1978) and its enigmas.

Finally, we ought to glance beyond the confines of Europe. When we look across the Atlantic Ocean, we note that some kind of New World surrealism exists there too. The great Latin-American writers of our day, especially Gabriel García Márquez, have made modern readers aware of something that the Spanish have for a long time called "realismo mágico" and which is deeply rooted in the Spanish literary tradition—its primordial exemplar is *Don Quixote*—and it reappears in various forms in recent Latin-American literature. Jorge Luis Borges helped to bring it back to the surface, although one would hardly think of him in relation to the Surrealists: he was closer to that Spanish tradition, plus Pascal, Valéry, Poe, and Kafka. (Perhaps the greatest "sorcerer" of modern fiction, Vladimir Nabokov, had nothing to do with Surrealism at all; his prestidigitations also come from *Don Quixote*, plus the entire European tradition, and especially from poetry.)

An interesting and tantalizing problem is "Could one speak of an American (i.e., North American) 'surrealism'?" Probably yes, if one adjusted the focus a little. American fiction throughout the nineteenth century had a strong predilection for the romance, the allegorical tale; witness Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, even certain "Gothic" and ghostly tales of Henry James; and after the Europeanization of the American novel, there have been steady efforts made to break out of so-called "reality" into the grotesque or the fantastic; witness Nathaniel West, large sections of Faulkner, Djuna Barnes, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, William Burroughs, and, most recently and impressively, Thomas Pynchon. It is as if there had always been some native disposition in American writers to devalue or distort or transform the everyday world. When we consider that the rest of the world outside of Europe and the Americas has never been strongly attracted to documentary reality, we are inclined to say

that, globally speaking, realism has been the exception, the aberration (albeit a brilliant one!), and that Surrealism did no more than to redress the balance. In an age which has elevated the prestige of fiction, and the demand for it, above the lyric and above the dramatic, the Surrealists had to find their way into narrative sooner or later. They may not have produced great masterpieces of fiction (Artaud called for "No more masterpieces!"), but they helped to free language of its age-old rationalistic accretions and thus to prepare the path for a variety of the fictions to come.

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