

COMMENTARY

Surrealism in André Breton's *Nadja*

Silvia Kadiu*

This close reading of André Breton's *Nadja* (1928) examines the role of the title character in the development and evolution of Breton's surrealist aspirations. Drawing from the theories presented in *The Manifestoes of Surrealism* (1924), it shows that *Nadja* epitomizes both the aesthetic fulfillment and political limits of Breton's surrealist ideas, thus prefiguring the author's political detachment in the years following the writing of the novel.

Introduction

First published in 1928, André Breton's *Nadja* is the true story of the author's mysterious encounter and complex relationship with the eponymous character. As Breton indicates in a footnote, *Nadja* is an unconventional young woman who comes to 'approach the extreme limit of surrealist aspiration, its furthest determinant' (Breton 1999: 74). In *The Manifestoes of Surrealism* (1924), Breton defines surrealism both as an artistic movement and as a political activity. Surrealism is, according to Breton, a 'psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought' (Breton 1972: 26). Based on a belief in 'the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought', it tends to 'ruin all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life.' (Breton 1972: 26)

To what extent does *Nadja* represent a living embodiment of Breton's surrealist ambitions? How does she relate to the dual nature of surrealism as an aesthetic and political practice? And what are the consequences of her institutionalization at the end of the book, for both Breton and for the surrealist movement?

In answer to these questions, I first present the criteria according to which *Nadja* personifies the artistic aims of surrealism for Breton, before discussing the political dimension of the surrealist principles she incarnates. Lastly, I focus on *Nadja*'s madness and its significance in relation to Breton's surrealist theories.

1. Surrealist aesthetics

As the prevailing element of surrealist experience, chance punctuates the book's plot from the very beginning. The first section deals with Breton's reflections on a series of fortuitous meetings with Paul Eluard, Benjamin Péret, 'Les Détraquées,' and the woman at the flea market, all of which serves as a prelude to his encounter with *Nadja*:

Last October fourth, toward the end of one of those idle, gloomy afternoons I know so well to spend, I happened to be in Rue Lafayette [...]. Suddenly,

* Centre for Multidisciplinary and Intercultural Inquiry, UCL, UK
silvia.kadiu.11@ucl.ac.uk

perhaps still ten feet away, I saw a young woman walking toward me, she had noticed me too, or had been watching me for several moments [...]. She was on her way, she claimed, to her hairdresser on the Boulevard Magenta (I say claimed because she later admitted she was going nowhere). (Breton 1999: 64)

In this scene, 'encounter' is described as the coincidental intersection of two aimless wanderings. The main occupation shared by Breton and Nadja in the text is *flânerie* (the act of strolling), an activity common both to the 'disinterested play of thought' and 'psychic automatism' characteristic of surrealism (Breton 1972: 26), and to Nadja's idle and spontaneous way of living. This is described, for instance, when, asked by Breton where she will have dinner, Nadja replies: 'oh, over there, or there (the two nearest restaurants), wherever I happen to be, you know. It's always this way.' (Breton 1999: 71) Defining herself as a wandering soul, 'the soul of limbo,' Nadja makes clear that, more than a philosophy, chance is a structuring element of her identity.

According to Breton, it is through chance that we encounter and manage to see the 'marvelous' in everyday life. As the supreme aesthetic achievement for the surrealists, 'the marvelous is always beautiful; anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful' (Breton 1972: 14). Nadja, the epitome of contingency and unpredictability, naturally becomes a bridge towards the marvelous for Breton, who insists both on her visionary abilities (e.g. her visions of Breton's wife and of the hand flaming over the water) and on her power to create a marvelous reality by imagining and reinventing herself as the legendary character of Melusina:

Nadja had also represented herself many times with the features of Melusina, who of all mythological personalities is the one she seems to have felt closest to herself. I have seen her

try to transfer this to real life, insisting that her hairdresser spare no efforts to arrange her hair in five distinct strands in order to leave a star over her forehead. (Breton 1999: 129)

Nadja's ability to see beyond the realm of immediate reality and to recreate herself into a chimerical figure makes her the archetype and the artistic accomplishment of surrealist aesthetics. As Peter Edgerly Firchow states in 'Nadja and Le Paysan de Paris' (1965), 'Nadja is the "marvelous quotidian" incarnate, and as such the living embodiment and walking proof of the validity of the theories of surrealism' (Firchow 1965: 302).

Throughout the narrative, Nadja remains a dreamlike and enigmatic figure both for Breton—'Who is the real Nadja?' he asks towards the end—and for the reader, who is provided a plethora of photographs (forty-four to be exact), but not a single one of Nadja. A spectral and impulsive character, 'like one of those spirits of the air suffering from an inner conflict' (Breton 1999: 79), Nadja subverts rational conceptions of identity as a fixed and stable entity. She encapsulates the surrealist yearning for an emancipated mind and for an unrepressed unconscious, which according to Breton is on the verge of 'reasserting itself' against 'the reign of logic' (Breton 1972: 9). Indeed, Nadja's playful activities, which consist of closing her eyes and speaking automatically, capture the spirit of childhood, the quintessence of surrealist experience. The product of an indefinite imagination, Nadja's vision of 'the hand flaming over water' (Breton 1999: 85) and her description of 'the thought on the bath in the room without mirrors,' (Breton 1999: 101) are surrealist images *par excellence*, as defined by Breton in *The Manifestoes*:

The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two or more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant

and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality. (Breton 1972: 20)

Revealing an instinctive inventiveness freed from the tyranny of rationalism, Nadja's analogical way of thinking fully embraces surrealist poetics.

2. Surrealist politics

While depicting Nadja as an ethereal, uncanny and mysterious character, Breton also insists on the authenticity of her existence. For example, after recounting one of her visionary episodes (one where Nadja correctly predicts that the light at one of the windows will go off), the author emphatically claims the veracity of the event described:

I am sorry but I am unable to do anything about the fact that this may exceed the limits of credibility. Nevertheless, in dealing with such subject, I should never forgive myself for taking sides: I confine myself to *granting* that this window, being black, has now become red, and that is all. (Breton 1999: 83; original emphasis)

The real existence of Nadja's powers is central to Breton's narrative because she is not only a breathing expression of surrealist aesthetics, but she is also proof of the possibility of its political practice. As Bethany Ladimer explains in 'Madness and the Irrational in the Work of André Breton' (1980):

Surrealism was unique in that it constantly identified the starting point of social change with the liberation of the individual psyche. [...] From a political point of view, repression of subconscious desires and modes of thought was seen as the very mechanism that perpetuated the negative values of bourgeois society, in particular the supreme importance of socially productive work along with the oppression of the worker,

the existing social order and hierarchy, rationality and the entire legacy of nineteenth century positivism. (Ladimer 1980: 175)

Nadja's identification with chance, her ability to transform the trivial into the marvelous, her limitless imagination and unconformity—all of these surrealist traits are important for Breton insofar as they stand for the possible disruption of bourgeois norms.

In *Nadja*, Breton's criticism of work, the supreme bourgeois value, is radical: 'There is no use of being alive if one must work' (Breton 1999: 68). From the very beginning, Nadja's alienation from the bourgeois mode of production is made explicit through her garments (she dresses poorly) and through the contrast between her and her co-workers (she carries her head high, unlike everyone else in the street). For Breton, Nadja—'this always inspired and inspiring creature who enjoyed being nowhere but in the streets,' the 'free genius' emancipated from the 'jail of logic' (Breton 1999: 154)—champions the applicability of surrealist philosophy:

The idea that freedom [...] must be enjoyed as unrestrictedly as it is granted, without pragmatic considerations of any sort, and this because human emancipation—conceived finally in its simplest form [...]—remains the only cause worth serving. Nadja was born to serve it. (Breton 1999: 142)

By establishing creativity as commonplace practice, Nadja thus satisfies the political antibourgeois tenet of *The Manifestoes*.

For the surrealists, irrationality coincides with femininity. In Breton's view, the artist should 'emphasize to the fullest extent all that falls within the feminine mode of understanding, as opposed to the masculine, and base his work exclusively on characteristic feminine perception' (Breton 1973: 62). 'He should,' he continues, 'exalt and preferably even appropriate for his own personal use everything that distinguishes the female

from the male in matters of understanding and volition' (Breton 1973: 62). The aesthetics and politics of surrealism are based on a gendered conception of irrational sensibility, which Nadja's discourse and drawings symbolize:

'The Cat's Dream,' showing the animal in a standing position trying to escape without realizing that it is held to the ground by a weight and suspended from a chord which is also the disproportionately enlarged wick of an overturned lamp, remains the most obscure drawing for me. It is a cutout hastily made after a vision. (Breton 1999: 121)

For Breton, Nadja is the ideal surrealist figure because she asserts the extra-rational essence of femininity. Her madness, which becomes more explicit as the story unfolds, moreover represents the ultimate threshold of surrealist experience.

3. Surrealism and irrationality

Does Nadja's institutionalization at the end of the book signify the failure of surrealism? Breton makes clear that Nadja was institutionalized because of her social condition and of her unconventional attitude: 'Nadja was poor, which in our time is enough to condemn her, once she decided not to behave according to the imbecile code of good sense and good manners' (Breton 1999: 142). Nadja, Breton claims, is the victim of a bourgeois society that, by attempting to heal irrationality, paradoxically transforms it into insanity: 'Unless you have been inside a sanitarium you do not know that madmen are *made* there.' (Breton 1999: 139; original emphasis) Nadja's mania makes visible and denounces a society unready for the political changes at which the surrealists aim. Although Breton does not acknowledge Nadja's institutionalization could be an instance of the defeat of surrealist politics, the protagonist's fate suggests that initially certain social and political

conditions are necessary for the empirical assertion of surrealism.

Breton fails to acknowledge the impact of Nadja's institutionalization on the surrealist movement in the same way that he primarily fails to recognize the substantiality of her disorder. In retrospect, his acute feeling of guilt for having guided her towards illogicality paradoxically leads him to validate the bourgeois interpretation of her condition:

It is from this last enterprise [the negation of rationality], perhaps, that I should have restrained her, but first of all I should have had to become conscious of the danger she ran. Yet, I never supposed she could lose or might already have lost the gift of that instinct for self-preservation which permits my friends and myself, for instance to behave ourselves where a flag goes past, confining ourselves to not saluting it. (Breton 1999: 143)

In this passage, Breton's notion of 'instinct for self-preservation' draws a distinction between the purely aesthetic fervor of surrealist concepts and the actual, perilous materialization of Nadja's madness, as though for him there is a limit to the irrational. Prior to her institutionalization, Breton had already experienced a certain estrangement from Nadja. The degree of incongruity she embodies is at times too extreme for Breton who, ultimately, decides to end their relationship after Nadja reveals a violent event from her past. Breton's reaction signals that to him inanity is appealing in its aesthetic dimension, but appalling in its empirical manifestation.

Breton's incapacity to detect Nadja's derangement results from his fascination with the creative aspect of her condition: 'Nor could Nadja's letter, which I read the same way I read all kinds of surrealist texts—with the same eye—show me anything alarming' (Breton 1999: 144). As Marc Polizzotti writes in his introduction to the Penguin edition,

'Breton simply [chooses] to ignore Nadja's symptoms in any but their "poetic" manifestations' (Breton 1999: xix). By the end of the novel, Breton implies that, apart from their mutual aesthetic interest, he and Nadja have never really known each other:

For some time now, I had stopped understanding Nadja. Actually, perhaps we have never understood one another, at least about our way of dealing with the simple matters of existence. She had decided once and for all to take no account on them, to withdraw from the present moment, to make no difference from the trifling remarks which she happened to make and those others which meant so much to me, to ignore my momentary mood and my considerable difficulty in forgiving her worst fits of abstraction. (Breton 1999: 130)

For Breton, like the society that has condemned her, Nadja represents an unsubsumable 'Other,' who ought to remain repressed. In this respect, it is worth noting that the very last part of the book does not directly deal with the title character, Nadja, but with Breton's new lover, the rather conventional Suzanne Muzard. She is 'not an enigma,' as Breton takes care to underline, in contrast with Nadja (Breton 1999: 158). It is also not a coincidence that the text ends on an aesthetic note: 'Beauty will be CONVULSIVE [sic] or will not be at all,' proclaims Breton at the end of the novel, in an attempt to confirm his aesthetic inclinations (Breton 1999: 160). As the furthest determinant of surrealist desire, Nadja thus provides a 'rigorous and revealing test of reality for Breton's theories concerning surrealism' (Ladimer 1980: 160), which, like the structure of the text itself, slowly turn away from politics to focus mainly on aesthetics.

Conclusion

Nadja is Breton's account of his encounter with what he considers to be a living symbol of the surrealist endeavor. Nadja approaches the absolute limit of Breton's artistic and political aspirations, since her enactment of surrealist aesthetics is synonymous with the potential subversion of bourgeois values. In Breton's mind, Nadja proves the validity of *The Manifestoes*, which her institutionalization at the end of the book nevertheless calls into question. Although Breton's report of Nadja's delusion aims to criticize the estranging society that has punished her, it also ironically reproduces the bourgeois discourse he intends to oppose. While Nadja's irrationality is for him a source of aesthetic inspiration, its material manifestation becomes a symptom of alienation. Breton's relationship with Nadja tests the effectiveness of his surrealist theories, revealing both the creative power of their poetic expression and the insuppressible limits of their political application. It should therefore come as no surprise that Breton gradually distanced himself from politics in the years after writing *Nadja*.

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