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Frédéric Vincent

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Frédéric Vincent

When Surrealism comes to help

for International Journal of Surrealism, University of Cambridge, June 2023.

a text dedicated to Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron

In a solemn address on Monday 16 March at 8pm, the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, declared: "We are in a health war". From midday on 17 March 2020, French citizens could no longer leave their homes, except for medical treatment, shopping or work for those who could not do so from home.

French were only allowed to go out if absolutely necessary, within a radius of one kilometre, with a dated and signed attestation that was checked by the police in the streets. Bookshops, museums, cinemas and theatres were closed as unnecessary. Culture had become unnecessary in France. This period of confinement in Paris was perplexing.

For a moment, we had the impression of being immersed in André Breton's book *Nadja*. With this impression of walking through the streets empty of the images that adorn this text, To walk through deserted streets at the very moment when spring appears. After a cold winter, as much for its climate as for its context, that of a world pandemic, spring was finally making its appearance, the large fig tree under the glass roof of my flat was seeing its large green leaves grow.

The cities were emptying, the sounds of traffic and air traffic were giving way to birdsong in this early spring of 2020. The streets as in the air had imposed a silence to which we were no longer accustomed. A mysterious silence, like in *Nadja*.

Breton's story begins with the phrase "Who am I?"¹ This pandemic seems to have allowed many people to reflect on their lives, their careers and their paths. Many left the city after the containment that had called into question their own purpose. Who are we? Breton could also have written.

The second sentence of the story is all the more telling: "If by exception I referred to an adage: indeed why wouldn't it all come down to who I 'haunt'?"²

Breton continues: "I must confess that this last word leads me astray..."³.

We too, confined, in a country in a state of war according to the words of its president, are at the same time haunted by the idea of disappearing because of a virus, haunting the streets of our cities and haunting our lives with ghosts that mysteriously resurface in this exceptional situation.

The Swiss publisher and bibliophile Henri-Louis Mermod owned the original manuscript of *Nadja*. It was acquired by Pierre Bergé, who disposed of it in 2015. Two years later, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France acquired it.

The said manuscript was declared a national treasure, a twenty-seven page manuscript as inseparable as the hands of a couple of lovers in the street.

For the occasion, the BNF published a deluxe facsimile edition, so that (almost) everyone could get an idea of what this treasure contained.

At an auction in November 2019, the BNF acquires a notebook by André Breton, which contains the notes for the writing of *Nadja*.

¹ André Breton, *Nadja*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1963), 7.

² Breton, *Nadja*, 7.

³ Breton, *Nadja*, 7.

This manuscript and this notebook will reveal some secrets that are still well kept. Thus we discover the true identity of the woman behind Nadja.

For a long time, we thought that this woman was an actress named Blanche Derval, but it is not so. The real Nadja is called Léona Delcourt, she was both a dancer and a courtesan. André Breton was captivated by this mysterious woman he met in the street.

In order to get her out of her state of poverty, he sold a painting by Derain and put her up in a hotel, thus paying off her debts. They spent a week together, a week of passion and wandering in the streets of Paris. But Nadja leaves Breton in February and tells him that he will write this beautiful story. Nadja the prophetic, Nadja the mysterious, Nadja the pythia of mad surrealist love.

On 25 February 2020, three weeks before the announcement of the confinement in France, the INHA is organising a meeting entitled "André Breton's Nadja manuscript (NAF 28930)⁴, acquired in 2017.

The speakers are : Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron (CNRS) and Olivier Wagner (BnF).

In her first contribution to this conference, Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron

Returns to the foundations of surrealism: Abandon the old poetic form (rhyme, coded rhythm) in favour of poetic forms that remain to be invented, totally new. On the other hand, to adopt an active revolutionary position (...) and a demand for greater freedom of morals.

Breton's account is that of a mad love, and a true story. As Maurice Nadeau points out: "Love, like revolution, was one of the fundamental inspirations of the Surrealists"⁵. Breton's love for Nadja

Georges Hugnet recounts: "This year, 1928, saw the publication of Breton's Nadja by the N.R.F. presses. A capital and long-awaited work, it recounts with precision and sufficiency an adventure in the author's life. Breton sublimely superimposes dream and life, madness and reason. He spares the reader none of his reflections, none of his reactions. He talks about his friends, his everyday life, his current concerns, his opinions on various issues; he attacks psychiatrists in passing and empties his personal quarrels"⁶.

Hugnet adds: "The best passages remain those in which he speaks like a clinician about his meeting with Nadja"⁷.

Nadja is a short story in three main parts with a rather different literary style. The first part of the story is in the form of an apprenticeship novel reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Confessions.

Shortly after the who am I, Breton develops a passage on ghosts, mixing the real and the supernatural.

The second part is a diary of the meeting between Breton and Nadja.

The empty streets of Paris resemble de Chirico's paintings in certain respects, in Nadja Breton writes: "Chirico recognised then that he could only paint surprised (surprised the first) by certain arrangements of objects and the whole enigma of the revelation held for him in this word: surprised"⁸. The surprise here is considerable: from one day to the next, the streets are empty.

Nadja is a story whose particularity is that it includes photographs, the first of which is a view of the Hôtel des grands hommes, Place du Panthéon. There, in front of the hotel, a cart and its

⁴ Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, « Le manuscrit de Nadja d'André Breton (NAF 28930) », <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaUFUVKBAmU>

⁵ Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du Surréalisme*, (Paris : Seuil, 1964), 109.

⁶ Georges Hugnet, *Pleins & Déliés, témoignages et souvenirs, 1926-1972*, (Paris : Guy Authier éditeur, 1972), 242-243.

⁷ Hugnet, *Pleins & Déliés*, 243.

⁸ Breton, *Nadja*, 13.

horse, in the foreground the statue of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher of the Enlightenment, refers to the apprenticeship novel aspect of this first part of the story. The Hôtel des Grands Hommes, located at 9 place du Panthéon in Paris, was the meeting place of André Breton and Philippe Soupault, who wrote *Les Champs Magnétiques* there.

If you remove the horse-drawn cart, this early photograph by Surrealist group member Jacques-André Boiffard could well have been taken in 2020. Many of the photographs of the streets of Paris seem to be empty of their inhabitants, such as this view of the statue of Etienne Dolet on Place Maubert or this front view of the brasserie "A la nouvelle France" where the terrace is empty, no customers are sitting. This brasserie is the one chosen by Breton to join Nadja, thus: "6 October - So as not to see too much of me loitering, I go out at about four o'clock with the intention of walking to "La Nouvelle France" where I am to meet Nadja at half past five"⁹.

The general atmosphere caused by this confinement situation leads to strange impressions like when Breton and Nadja meet an old lady who asks Nadja for a pencil, "this woman, according to Nadja, could only be a witch"¹⁰. Witches, animals, and vines are what we come across during this confinement. Emptied of its inhabitants who had stayed at home, only going out when necessary, we came across invisible people. When Nadja drew her first picture, she represented herself as Mélusine, Breton confirmed: "Nadja also represented herself many times as Mélusine, who, of all the mythical personalities, is the one she seems to have felt closest to"¹¹.

The third part of the story begins with the author's observation: "a few months ago, someone came to tell me that Nadja was crazy"¹².

In a third part, sometimes laconic in tone, Breton warns: "I am not the one to meditate on what happens to 'the shape of a city', even the real city, distracted and abstracted from the one I inhabit by the force of an element that would be to my thoughts what air is to life"¹³. And yet Breton compares the city, where two people have loved each other, to a 'mental landscape'¹⁴. Is the city in the end only a mental landscape?

In France, there were three confinements, the first from 17 March to 11 May 2020, that is to say almost two months, two months of confinement, of war against an invisible enemy. Surrealism is a youth movement, a youth revolted by the horrors of war. And now, in 2020, the French president speaks of a state of war in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. A strange period experienced as a dream by some.

Tristan Tzara wrote in the last issue of "Surrealism in the Service of the Revolution": "For human life will no longer have any value,-the fear of death having disappeared with its derivatives of regrets to be left among the remnants as well as the conformity of the latter to the homage of the dead,-such will be, in a world where absolute oblivion will be established as the first rule of life, when inspiration and enchantment will become the objectives in view of a total innocence..."¹⁵.

This pandemic situation was considered surreal, Roxana Azimi notes: "...the word has passed into everyday language to define anything that is considered incongruous, delirious or absurd. "Surreal", wrote AFP to describe the telephone exchange between Putin and Macron

⁹ Breton, *Nadja*, 74.

¹⁰ Breton, *Nadja*, 102.

¹¹ Breton, *Nadja*, 123.

¹² Breton, *Nadja*, 127.

¹³ Breton, *Nadja*, 145-146.

¹⁴ Breton, *Nadja*, 146.

¹⁵ Tristan Tzara, « Grains et issues, rêve expérimental », *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution* N°6, Mai 1933, 56.

on 20 February, just before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "Surreal", again, is the sum offered by Real Madrid to the footballer Kylian Mbappé"¹⁶.

The very term Surrealist is used and constantly reinterpreted.

In 1973, José Pierre asked: "Is Surrealism interrupted for lack of Surrealists?"¹⁷.

The second containment in France took place from 30 October to 15 December 2020, little more than a month during which the French were once again left to wait.

A third one-month lockdown took place from 3 April to 3 May 2021.

Like a waking dream, the exhibition "The Invention of Surrealism" opened at last at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. This exhibition, curated by Isabelle Diu, Bérénice Stoll and Olivier Wagner with the scientific collaboration of Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, presented numerous documents from the Champs magnétiques to Nadja.

Nadja, whose name in Russian corresponds to the "beginning of the word hope"¹⁸.

The hope of the end of this latent war, of the end of impossible situations, of the end of confinement, of the end of an old world.

The lifting of successive confinements in the world seemed to open up a new world, a new hope. The surprise of the declaration of war in Ukraine rekindled and plunged the planet back into an old world, that of the Cold War, of the opposition between two blocks, East and West, of the threat of a third world war. A situation that we can also describe as surreal.

Nadja's last sentence has remained famous: "Beauty will be convulsive or it will not be"¹⁹.

Nadja who sank into madness, was interned, all of us, with this pandemic of Nadja, became crazy, interned in our own spaces of life, finally freed can we still dream of a beauty whether convulsive or not?

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¹⁶ Roxana Azimi, « Cent ans après son avènement, le surréalisme est partout », Le Monde, 24 septembre 2022.

¹⁷ Maurice Nadeau, *Le Surréalisme, aujourd'hui*, (Paris : supplément à la Quinzaine Littéraire, 1973), 8.

¹⁸ Jean-Michel Hirt, « Amour et folie : Nadja, l'âme errante, introduction », in *L'invention du Surréalisme*, Paris, BnF éditions, 2020, p. 136.

¹⁹ Breton, *Nadja*, 155.