



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

# RMST 202

Romance Studies,  
Modernism to the Present

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## *Nadja*: André Breton's Flirtation with Madness

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## *Nadja*: André Breton's Flirtation with Madness

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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The book is a somewhat messy combination of aesthetic, philosophical, and even political reflection with details of everyday life in Paris that lead to diary entries recording the narrator's interactions with a young woman who goes by the name of "Nadja."

Nadja simply disappears from the narrative,  
and ultimately we are told that she has  
been institutionalized in an asylum  
or mental hospital.

While she herself continued on, beyond the  
brink of unreason, he stopped short and  
lived to tell the tale.

This book is a document of that haunting, a testament to a double flirtation: with Nadja, and with the other side of reason.

It is as though Breton were giving us all the elements of a case history (or two case histories: his own and Nadja's) that it is up to us to decipher.



This may not be a novel, but it is a book centrally concerned with the powers (and dangers) of stories or story-telling.

We are challenged to impose some sense on the disorder it shows us, through either analysis or fiction, but also to postpone that sense-making, to live (however briefly) with the unexpected contingencies of modern life, as does Nadja. . . until she can bear them no longer.



# **FICTIONS OF THE SELF AND OTHERS**

**“The first thing is, this is not a novel.”  
(Mark Polizzotti)**

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“Is *Nadja*, then, as many have claimed,  
a novel?”  
(Mark Polizzotti)

“Whatever liberties Breton might have taken with the details, this is no novel in the traditional sense, but what we might call a lyrical manifesto, or (as several reviewers put it) a ‘confession.’” (Polizzotti)

“Between the couch and discourse: yet  
another round of whispering on a bed.”  
(Michel Foucault)

“Who am I?” (11)



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The story it tells may provide some kind of answer to that question of identity. Yet like all such narratives of selfhood, it is still very much a fiction, and a precarious one at that.

The book is fundamentally about Breton.

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Nadja herself is an enigma from first to last.

“Qui suis-je?” (11)

“Qui suis-je?” (11)

“‘Who do I follow?’ Akin to a detective in search of clues, Breton thus pursues leads, both physical and metaphysical, in order to solve his quest for self-knowledge.”

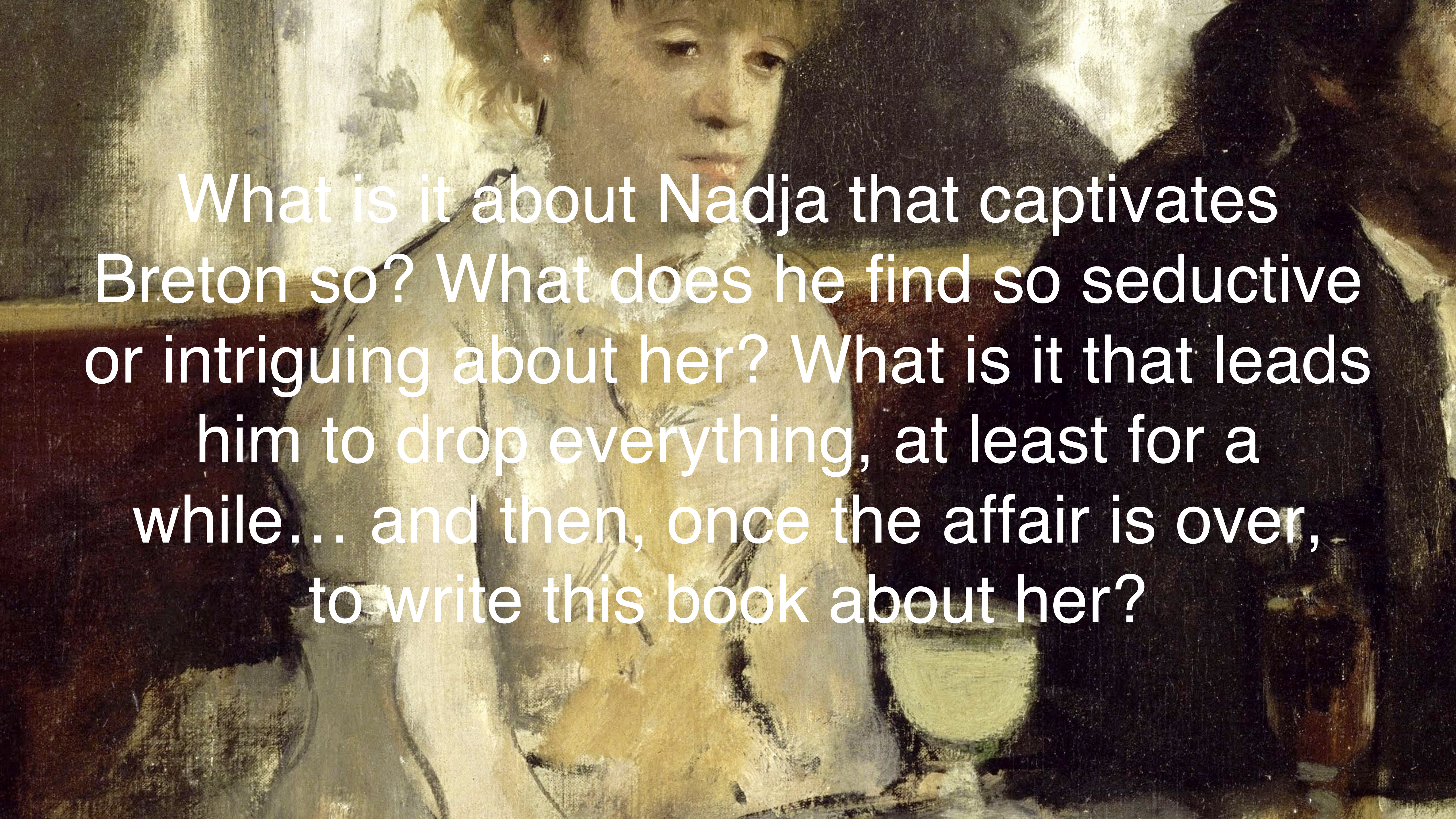
(Mariah Devereux Herheck)

What kind of person is he, to find himself following a woman like this?

Nadja may lead to his self-understanding,  
but at the risk of leading also to his  
self-destruction.

What is it about Nadja that captivates Breton so? What does he find so seductive or intriguing about her? What is it that leads him to drop everything, at least for a while... and then, once the affair is over, to write this book about her?



The background is a painting. On the left, a woman with blonde hair, wearing a white dress with a high collar, looks towards the right. On the right, a man in a dark suit and white shirt is partially visible, looking towards the woman. The painting style is somewhat impressionistic with visible brushstrokes.

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“The event from which each of us is entitled to expect the revelation of his own life’s meaning [. . .] *is not earned by work.* [. . .] it is this, more than anything else, that once made me understand and that now justifies, without further delay, Nadja's appearance on the scene.” (60)

It takes some time to prepare us for something special that will honour and do justice to a text that starts out as little more than idle musings.

“Last October fourth, toward the end of one of those idle, gloomy afternoons [. . .], I happened to be in the Rue Lafayette. [. . .] I continued aimlessly in the direction of the Opéra. [. . .] There were more people in the street now. I unconsciously watched their faces, their clothes, their way of walking. No, it was not yet these who would be ready to create the Revolution.” (63-4)

“I had just crossed an intersection whose name I don't know, in front of a church. . . .

“Suddenly, perhaps still ten feet away, I saw a young, poorly dressed woman walking toward me, she had noticed me too, or perhaps had been watching me for several moments. She carried her head high, unlike everyone else on the sidewalk. And she looked so delicate she scarcely seemed to touch the ground as she walked.” (64)

She is somehow more material, more physically present, holding her head high rather than slinking into the background, even as she is simultaneously almost ethereal, less walking than floating.

“I had never seen such eyes.” (64)



“What was so extraordinary about what was happening in those eyes? What was it they reflected—some obscure distress and at the same time some luminous pride?” (65)

What attracts Breton to Nadja is that fact that, though she emerges from the otherwise unremarkable surroundings of the Parisian streets, she does not seem to belong anywhere so mundane.

“She is so pure, so free of any earthly tie,  
and cares so little, but so marvelously,  
for life.” (90)

“You know, that's how I talk to myself when I'm alone, I tell myself all kinds of stories. And not only silly stories: actually, I live this way altogether.” (74)

It is as though her life were purely literary:  
she is from the outset less a person  
than a character.

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she is from the outset less a person  
than a character.

“You will write a novel about me.  
I’m sure you will.” (100)

“Does this not approach the extreme limit  
of the surrealist aspiration, its  
*furthest determinant?*” (74)

It is not so much Nadja herself that entices Breton, as it is the fact that her imaginings uncannily resonate with his own.



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His infatuation is not so much about her, but about him.

“He is interested in her for what she can teach him about the nature of surreality; she is only the medium, without attraction per se. [. . .] She represented surrealism itself.” (Roger Cardinal)

She provides the proof of the possibility of a fully surrealist existence, inhabiting a dimension of the real that sets aside “everything that comprises the false but virtually irresistible compensations of life” (112).



# **RISKING THE SELF WITH OTHERS**

If the source of the attraction ultimately has to do more with Breton himself than with Nadja, then what scares him is similarly something that he needs to claim as his own.

“As for her, I know that in every sense of the word, she takes me for a god, she thinks of me as the sun.” (111)

He glimpses the risk of losing himself, of sacrificing his self to a logic (or an illogic) that he can no longer control.

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*Nadja* shifts then from self-exploration to a cautionary tale of possible self-immolation.



Nadja's stories verge on paranoia—  
and after all, what is paranoia but a  
tendency to see plots all around, to make  
suspicious connections between apparent  
coincidences, events that are in fact  
linked only by chance?

“She is certain that an underground tunnel passes under our feet, starting at the Palais de Justice (she shows me which part of the building, slightly to the right of the white flight of steps) and circling the Hôtel Henri IV.” (83)

“This place frightens me, as it is beginning to frighten Nadja too.” (83-4)

“To restore her, I recite a poem by Baudelaire but the inflections of my voice terrify her all over again, her fear aggravated by her memory of the kiss we exchanged a little while before, ‘a kiss with a threat in it.’” (85)

“There (pointing to the top of the window), someone’s there. I just saw a head upside down—very clearly.’ [. . .] To set her mind at rest, I lean outside again. I have time to see, quite distinctly, the head of a man who is lying on the train roof disappear over our compartment.” (107)

“Who were we, confronting reality, that reality which I know now was lying at Nadja's feet like a lapdog?” (108-11)

“One evening, when I was driving a car along the road from Versailles to Paris, the woman sitting beside me (who was Nadja, but who might have been anyone else, after all, or even *someone else*) pressed her foot down on mine on the accelerator, tried to cover my eyes with her hand in the oblivion of an interminable kiss.”

“Desiring to extinguish us, doubtless forever, save to each other, so that we should collide at full speed with the splendid trees along the road. What a test of life, indeed!” (152-3)



“Nadja's attitude toward me derives from the application of a more or less conscious principle of total subversion. [. . .] I feel less and less capable of resisting such a temptation *in every case*. [. . .] In imagination, at least, I often find myself, eyes blindfolded, back at the wheel of that wild car.” (152-3)

“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 [. . .] so we do not side with whatever we feel sympathetic to on every occasion, nor permit ourselves the unparalleled joy of committing some splendid sacrilege, etc.” (143)

“Nadja was poor, which in our time is enough to condemn her, once she decided not to behave entirely according to the imbecile code of good sense and good manners. She was also alone.” (142)

“As I see it, all confinements are arbitrary.  
[. . .] My general contempt for psychiatry, its  
rituals and its works, is reason enough for  
my not yet having dared investigate  
what has become of Nadja.” (141)

“He does nothing to obtain her release or transfer.” (Roger Cardinal)

“He does nothing to obtain her release or transfer.” (Roger Cardinal)

It is as though he, too,  
preferred her behind bars.

He recognizes that he has somehow  
betrayed her—and perhaps also  
betrayed himself.

“Nadja, because in Russian it’s the beginning of the word hope, and because it's only the beginning.” (66)



Breton's book challenges us to come up with other endings, to make a novel of the odd, disjoint, and ultimately unfinished set of experiences he shared with Nadja, to put together the pieces of text, photography, and art.

“Nadja *introduced* Breton to his own limits and limitations.” (Victor Burgin)

Breton let Nadja escape him, which ultimately was the same thing as letting her be captured by the institutions of psychiatry and the law.

Telling too tidy a story (about ourselves or others) is a form of confinement. A novel, too, can be like a sanatorium: establishing and reproducing the parameters of so-called sanity and common sense

“Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or  
will not be at all.” (160)

“Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or  
will not be at all.” (160)

It will remain open-ended and incomplete,  
riddled with the fractures and cracks  
through which the light gets in.



# MUSIC

Pianochocolate,  
“Romance”



# CATERING

Bindy Kang-Dhillon





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# PRODUCTION

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