

**ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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

Is André Breton's *Nadja* (1928) a novel? 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." Briefly, over a period of a few days, the narrator and Nadja forge an intense relationship: the narrator is surprised, smitten, and entranced, and we are led to believe that Nadja feels similarly. But nothing really comes of the affair. Nadja simply disappears from the narrative, and ultimately we are told that she has been institutionalized in an asylum or mental hospital. It feels as though the narrator has had a lucky escape: Nadja took him to the threshold of madness; while she herself continued on, beyond the brink of unreason, he stopped short and lived to tell the tale. But he remains haunted by the experience, which is perhaps why he writes this book as a document of that haunting, a testament to a double flirtation: with Nadja, and with the other side of reason. Combining photographs and Nadja's untutored and sometimes disturbing artwork with the text, it 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. Alternatively, we are presented with the raw material for a novel that never quite takes shape. This may 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.*

1. Fictions of the Self and Others

Mark Polizzotti's introduction to the Penguin edition of the translation of *Nadja* is initially in no doubt: "The first thing is, this is not a novel" ("Introduction" ix). Later, a note of uncertainty creeps into the discussion: "Is *Nadja*, then, as many have claimed, a novel?" But it is not a novel, Polizzotti continues to claim, in so far as the events it relates "truly happened" (xxi). There was indeed a woman who went by the name of Nadja, though her real name (Polizzotti tells us elsewhere, in his biography of Breton) was Léona-Camille-Ghislaine Delcourt, "born near Lille on May 23, 1902," whom Breton met on the afternoon of Monday, October 4, 1926 (*Revolution of the Mind* 235, 234). For the next few

weeks, Breton had a whirlwind infatuation with this Nadja—despite the fact that he was married, to a woman called Simone Kuhn—before the relationship cooled into occasional encounters and fitful correspondence that finally came to an end in February of the following year. Polizzotti tells us that the essentials of this affair are set down with “rigorous authenticity” in the book we have here, which Breton went on to write some months later, by which time he had taken up with yet another woman, to whom its final pages are addressed (she goes un-named, but she was Suzanne Berl). “Whatever liberties Breton might have taken with the details,” Polizzotti argues, “this is no novel in the traditional sense, but what we might call a lyrical manifesto, or (as several reviewers put it) a ‘confession’” (252). No doubt Breton had plenty to confess. But the discourse of confession is adapted by psychoanalysis—as historian Michel Foucault puts it, “yet another round of whispering on a bed” (*The History of Sexuality* 5)—and the book is also an attempt at self-analysis. After all, it opens with the question: “Who am I?” (11). The story it tells, then, may provide some kind of answer to that question of identity. Yet like all such narratives of selfhood, as Breton himself is more than aware, it is still very much a fiction, and a precarious one at that.

Nadja thus gives her name (or a version of her name: a protective pseudonym) to the text, but the book is fundamentally about Breton. Nadja herself is an enigma from first to last. The point is that the mysterious Nadja—the very fact that she is such a mystery—has something to say about Breton. Critic Mariah Devereux Herheck notes that the book’s opening question (in French, “*Qui suis-je?*”) can mean not only “Who am I?” but also “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 (“André Breton’s *Nadja*” 165). Breton pursues Nadja in part because he thinks she might offer a clue to who *he* may be, even as it is the fact that he finds himself following her that also provokes the question, as it destabilizes his sense of self. What kind of person is he, to find himself following a woman like this? For from the start, Breton intuits that Nadja is trouble, as well as troubled: she has more than a little of the *femme fatale* about her, as Devereux Herheck observes; she will get him in trouble, and not just with his long-suffering wife. Nadja may lead to his self-understanding, but at the risk of leading also to his self-destruction.

What exactly 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? Pause the video here, and write down some of Nadja's characteristics—how she looks, how she behaves, how she thinks—and consider why Breton would be drawn to her. While you do that, I'll have a glass of absinthe, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Absinthe

Breton and Nadja repeatedly meet in bars and cafés—their relationship takes place almost entirely in public, on the streets of Paris or on an excursion to the outlying town of Saint-Germain—but we are not told what they eat or drink. By the early twentieth century, however, one drink very much associated with Paris's Bohemian demi-monde was absinthe: an anise-flavoured spirit whose ingredients include extracts from the wormwood plant. Such was the drink's reputation, thanks to its clientele and rumours of its hallucinogenic effects, that by the 1920s it was banned in much of Europe (including France), as well as in the United States. Such prohibition only added to its mystique, and in 1936 Breton included a Picasso sculpture of an absinthe glass (*Le Verre d'absinthe* of 1914) in a catalogue of "surrealist objects" (Silveri, "*Être-objets and objets-êtres*"). Picasso's sculpture would not hold a drink—one side is open to the world—but it is a reminder of the Surrealist impulse to find in everyday things, perhaps under the influence of wormwood and alcohol, inspiration for aesthetic experimentation.

It takes a while for Nadja to turn up. It is only after a lengthy set of ruminations about Paris, the theatre, and so on that, finally, over a third of the way through the book, and in the context of a reflection on "the event from which each of us is entitled to expect the revelation of his own life's meaning," we are told that "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, in other words, for something special that will honour and do justice to a text that starts out as little more than idle musings.

But the circumstances for Nadja's appearance are unpromising, however much Surrealism was always keen on finding unsuspected significance in the mundane and the

everyday. It is “one of those idle, gloomy afternoons” in early October, and Breton is “aimlessly” wandering the streets (63), only half-focussed on his surroundings, “unconsciously watch[ing]” the people around him: “their faces, their clothes, their way of walking. No, it was not yet these who would be ready to create the Revolution.” Then all of a sudden, at “an intersection whose name I don't know, in front of a church,” he sees, “perhaps still ten feet away, [. . .] a young, poorly dressed woman walking toward me. [. . .] 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). So Nadja is distinguished physically from the crowd around her: she is dressed differently; but more importantly she carries herself differently. 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. Her make-up is also un-nerving, as though unfinished, and it highlights her eyes: “I had never seen such eyes,” Breton tells us (64). Nadja is both the object of the gaze and an observer of her own. Breton writes of her eyes in terms of what they “reflected” (literally, what could be seen in them: “*Que s’y mire-t-il*”), ambiguously suggesting that they may reveal either something about her, or about what she sees, what can be seen from where she stands, as though they were mirrors. The “obscure distress and at the same time [. . .] luminous pride” (65) that they reveal might belong to Nadja, or to Breton, or they may simply be characteristics of the world that they are both inhabiting, viewed from her perspective.

Above all, 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, as Breton breathlessly puts it, “so pure, so free of any earthly tie, and cares so little, but so marvelously, for life” (90). Hence no doubt the reason that she is imagined literally to be floating above the pavement, “scarcely seem[ing] to touch the ground” (64). She cedes little if anything to material reality and everyday necessity, preferring instead to “tell [her]self all kinds of stories. And not only silly stories: actually,” she reports to Breton, “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. No wonder that, somewhere between demand and prediction, she tells Breton: “You will write a novel about me. I’m sure you will” (100). And rather than taking her words as a sign of self-delusion, for Breton it is as though Nadja were the realization of his own aesthetic

and political ideal: "Does this not approach," he comments, "the extreme limit of the surrealist aspiration, its *furthest determinant*?" (74). Breton is impressed by how fully Nadja is invested in her own fictions.



Figure 1: Self-portrait by Léona Delcourt ("Nadja")

As such, again it is not so much Nadja herself that entices Breton, as it is the fact that her imaginings uncannily resonate with his own. His infatuation is not so much about her, but about him. In so far as Nadja attracts Breton, becoming an object of his obsession, then as critic Roger Cardinal observes, “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” (“Nadja and Breton” 191). She mirrors Breton, but as a fantastic reflection—or incarnation—of an attitude or way of life to which he himself aspires, but can perhaps do no more than aspire. 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). And Nadja thus implicitly challenges Breton likewise to resist such tawdry compensations, to embrace fully the consequences of his own convictions.

2. *Risking the Self with Others*

If there is something in Nadja that attracts Breton, there is also much that disconcerts him. And again, 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. Breton’s narcissism, fed by Nadja as she comes to return his own obsession with interest—“she takes me for a god,” Breton tells us, “she thinks of me as the sun” (111)—turns to terror as he glimpses the risk of losing himself, of sacrificing his self to a logic (or an illogic) that he can no longer control. *Nadja* (the book) 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? Paranoia is, in short, a Surrealist temptation (the Spanish painter Salvador Dalí would go on to develop an entire theory of a “critical-paranoiac method” [*The Secret Life* 312]), and it is no surprise that Nadja should trace paranoid connections in the world around her: “She is certain that an underground tunnel passes under our feet, starting at the Palais de Justice [. . .] and circling the Hôtel Henri IV” (83). Reading her environment, coming up with a story about it, she seems to be able to predict the future, anticipating a window lighting up with red curtains. All this starts to frighten Breton, “as it is beginning to frighten Nadja too” (84). She gets to talking about death and about prison. Breton reads her a poem in an attempt to calm her down,

“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). As their relationship develops, so does this sense of threat that goes hand in hand with their erotic attraction. When they take the train to the suburbs, for instance, a romantic embrace is interrupted by Nadja’s screams: “There (pointing to the top of the window), someone’s there. I just saw a head upside down—very clearly.” At first, Breton sees nothing. Later, however, he, too, seems to catch sight of “the head of a man who is lying on the train roof disappear over our compartment” (107). Does this mean that Nadja is right, or that Breton has caught some of her paranoid fantasies? The book does not, perhaps cannot, adjudicate against her: Breton describes “reality” as “lying at Nadja’s feet like a lapdog” (108, 111). But in so far as he believes this, he is sharing Nadja’s own madness.

It is one thing to think that others are out to get you. It is quite another to give yourself up to fate. Breton relates that “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” (152). Breton resists what he calls this “test of life” that would have “extinguish[ed] us, doubtless forever” (153, 152), but he finds Nadja’s commitment to “the application of a more or less conscious principle of total subversion” seductive and inspiring: “I feel less and less capable of resisting such a temptation *in every case*,” he tells us; “In imagination, at least, I often find myself, eyes blindfolded, back at the wheel of that wild car” (152, 153). But he stops short, taking such risks only “in imagination.” Nadja is too much for him! He recognizes, somewhat to his chagrin, that he and his friends hold on to that “minimal common sense” that ensures that they “do not side with whatever we feel sympathetic to on every occasion, nor permit ourself the unparalleled joy of committing some splendid sacrilege, etc.” (143). Nadja, however, seems to have abandoned all sense of precaution, and no longer had any buffer: she “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.” What is more, Breton adds, “She was also alone” (142). Even he does not intervene when she is sent against her will to an institution. He contents himself with somewhat pious criticisms of psychiatry (“as I see it, all confinements are arbitrary”) but strangely argues that this very “contempt” for the psychiatric profession,

“its rituals and its works, is reason enough for my not yet having dared investigate what has become of Nadja” (141). As Cardinal notes, “he does nothing to obtain her release or transfer” (“Nadja and Breton” 196). It is as though he, too, preferred her behind bars.

Nadja (the book) is then, among other things, a confession (direct or otherwise) to Breton’s own role in Nadja’s downfall. He recognizes that he has somehow betrayed her—and perhaps also betrayed himself. But the novel is at the same time a self-exculpation. Perhaps there was never any hope for her: her assumed name, Nadja, is, in Russian (we are told), “the beginning of the word hope” but “only the beginning” (66). Even her name is but a fragment, the start of something but not its end. 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. Breton realizes that he was not able to go to the end with Nadja, was unable to follow her. As critic Victor Burgin notes: “Nadja *introduced* Breton to his own limits and limitations” (“Chance Encounters” 58). Alternatively, we might say that Breton let Nadja escape him, which ultimately was the same thing as letting her be captured by the institutions of psychiatry and the law. We may draw our own conclusions from that. But his book also perhaps warns us that that way madness lies, that 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. If, as Breton concludes, “Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all” (160), then it will remain open-ended and incomplete, riddled with the fractures and cracks through which the light gets in.

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Song: Leonard Cohen, "Anthem"