Literature as Document

Generic Boundaries in 1930s Western Literature

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Building up a “Glasshouse” in *Nadja*: Documenting the Surrealist Way of Life

Nadja Cohen

The notion of “document” plays a central role for the avant-gardes and especially for surrealist writers who extended the use of this word¹ considerably. It is indeed closely associated with their extensive conception of surrealism as a way of life, a *Weltanschauung*, rather than a literary trend. The surrealists argue that art should not be confined to the narrow boundaries of an institutional structure (a book, a museum, etc.). Instead, they claim that art can be found anywhere, in everyday objects, provided that a poetic light is shed on them. In other words, when documented, everyday life can give birth to “cette poésie, au besoin sans poèmes”;² according to Breton’s paradoxical but significant phrase. A search for that kind of poetry implies a redefinition of the writer’s task, which would consist in collecting documents of surrealist encounters, whether they involve persons (like Nadja, in Breton’s book), objects (found at the flea market for instance) or cultural items (films, books, paintings). The idea of the “Centrale surréaliste” – founded in October 1924 at 15 Rue de Grenelle, where objects of all types were gathered for their unexpected poetic value – perfectly reflects this ambition.

In surrealist writings, the word “document” has different meanings. In certain contexts, it is endowed with an almost sociological value as, for instance, when Aragon uses the term to qualify popular films and heroes of his time, like *Fantômas* or *Les Vampires* in Feuille’s serials:

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- 1 See Clément Chéroux *et alii* (dir.) *La Subversion des images. Surréalisme, photographie, film*, cat. expo. Centre Pompidou, Paris (23 septembre 2009–11 janvier 2010), Paris, Centre Pompidou, 2009, and also for instance Magali Nachtergaele. *Esthétique des mythologies individuelles: Le dispositif photographique de Nadja à Sophie Calle*. Littératures. Université Paris-Diderot – Paris VII, 2008 (<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00640863/document>).
 - 2 La Confession dédaigneuse, in *Les Pas Perdus, Oeuvres complètes I* [1988], édition établie par Marguerite Bonnet avec la collaboration de Philippe Bernier, Etienne-Alain Hubert et José Pierre, Paris, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1999, 198. / *The Lost Steps*, translated by Mark Polizzotti, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2010, 7: “poetry that, ultimately, can do without poems”.

Ce qui nous attirait, c'était tout ce dont nous privait une morale imposée, le luxe, les fêtes, le grand orchestre des vices, l'image de la femme aussi, mais héroïsée, sacrée aventurière. Il y a un document précis de cet état d'esprit [...]. L'idée que toute une génération se fit du monde se forma au cinéma, et c'est un film qui la résume, un feuilleton. Une jeunesse tomba tout entière amoureuse de Musidora, dans *Les Vampires*.³

In this case, the writer plays the part of the “main elective”⁴ who sheds light on certain works, often ill-considered ones. In addition, his task is to write history by accumulating these compositions and with them other valuable “documents” marked by a certain zeitgeist and to show how they are situated and take part in the constitution of the “mythologie de leur temps”.⁵

In Breton's autobiographical narratives, however, this historical or sociological aspect of the document is mostly replaced by its psychological and existential value.⁶ Breton's life, as he stages it, becomes a work of art, a document, illustrating his own theory according to which there is more poetry in an artist's life than there is in his works (“Je pense aussi que la poésie [...] émane davantage de la vie des hommes, écrivains ou non, que de ce qu'ils ont écrit”).⁷ No

3 Louis Aragon, “Les Vampires”, in *Projet d'histoire littéraire contemporaine* [1923], Paris, Gallimard (Digraphe), 1994, 7. “What attracted us was all we were deprived of by the morals we had to live by: luxury, parties, the great orchestra of the vices, the image of the woman, too, but an exalted image, of the woman as a hero, a sacred adventurer. There is a precise document of that state of mind [...]. The world view of an entire generation was shaped in movie theatres. One film in particular sums it all up: a serial. In *Les Vampires* all youngsters fell in love with Musidora.” (translation and emphasis Cohen).

4 “Ces œuvres longtemps ignorées et susceptibles d'être promues un jour au rang de *lampes perpétuelles* ont besoin d'une main élective qui les découvre et les remonte de la sépulture”. “Fronton-Virage”, in *La Clé des Champs, Œuvres complètes III*, édition établie par Marguerite Bonnet avec la collaboration de Philippe Bernier, Marie-Claire Dumas, Etienne-Alain Hubert et José Pierre, Paris, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1999, 840.

5 “Limites non-frontières du surréalisme”, in *La Clé des Champs, op.cit.* 667.

6 Though Breton allies both of these values in his definition of a work's value. “La vertu d'une œuvre ne se manifeste que très secondairement dans les plus ou moins savantes exégèses auxquelles elle donne lieu, elle réside avant tout dans l'adhésion passionnée qu'en nombre sans cesse croissant lui marquent d'emblée les jeunes esprits. Ce qui compte pour moi, et rien d'autre, c'est cet instant décisif de l'approche où la vie, telle qu'elle était conçue jusque là, change de sens, s'éclaire brusquement d'un jour nouveau”. “Flagrant délit”, in *La Clé des Champs, op.cit.* 794.

7 “Clairement”, in *Les Pas Perdus, OCI, op.cit.*, 265. / “I also think that poetry [...] emanates more from the lives of human beings – whether they are writers or not – than from what they have written”, “Clearly”, in *The Lost steps, op.cit.*, 81. The importance given to small biographical details can be found in Breton's account of an anecdote, deemed priceless, concerning Victor

wonder, then, that the notion of document is widely used by him, especially in one of his most famous narratives: *Nadja*, presented as a sort of autobiographical documentary, which will be discussed in further detail in this article.

As a thread throughout its argument, this text will focus on the special relationship that Breton tries to establish with his reader by reviewing two different values for documents his work contains. On an initial level, and according to Breton's metadiscourse, those documents comprise traces of events, used for their attestation value. Yet they also play a different role on another level, used as raw material that requires an active reading. Mimicking Breton's attitude toward life, the readers of *Nadja* will have to reconstruct its slippery character and find their own visual path in the book by undergoing a surrealist experience.

The English translation of the book, dating back to 1960, is based on the 1928 version of the text. It neither takes into account Breton's important foreword ("avant-dire, dépêche retardée") written in 1962, nor does it take into consideration the changes he made to the illustrations of the 1963 republication. Those addenda are essential as far as documents are concerned. Therefore, the French Pléiade edition will be used here as a reference, only citing the English edition for translations of certain passages.

1 Breton in His "Maison De Verre": the Attestation Value of the Document

On one level, one could consider the whole book as a document. In the preface to the 1963 edition, *Nadja* is presented as a "document pris sur le vif" "8 deeply rooted in the present.⁹ Breton claims that his tone will be willingly cold and dispassionate, "calqué sur celui de l'observation médicale"¹⁰ in order to document his encounter with an enigmatic woman, Nadja, and the tragic outcome of their affair. The documentary paradigm is strongly suggested by Breton who evokes the supposedly anti-literary principles that he obeys. Such is the case, for instance, when he specifies the important dates of their story (from

Hugo: "Comme je me louerais de posséder sur chacun des hommes que j'admire un *document* privé de la valeur de celui-là". *Nadja*, OCI, *op.cit.* 648–649.

8 "Avant-dire" [1962], 646 / "a snapshot" (Our translation).

9 As opposed to the archive, which is retrospective. See an issue of *Littérature* n°166, "Usages du document en littérature", directed by Camille Bloomfield et Marie Jeanne Zenetti, Paris, Armand Colin, Larousse, juin 2012.

10 "Avant-dire", 645 / "patterned after [the style] of a medical examination" (Our translation).

4 October to 12 October 1926), as in the diary of a scientist keeping track of his experiments and observations. By proceeding in this manner – or at least by claiming that he does – Breton aims at multiple targets, such as the “vanity” of aesthetic research – particularly in the making of a book (see the beginning of the “avant-dire”¹¹ and the conclusion of the book),¹² to which he opposes the (questionable) “aesthetic indifference” of his documentary. His main target, though, is fiction (“l’affabulation romanesque”).¹³ The documentary paradigm is used as a valuable asset against narrative fiction, which is deemed useless, as he explains in his famous criticism – attributed to Valéry – on typically Balzacian sentences like “la marquise sortit à cinq heures”.¹⁴ As is often the case in his writings, this reproach is not only an aesthetic but also a political and a moral one. On a political level, Breton points out the futility of aristocrats, who are ignorant of historical materialism and live in a fictitious world. On a moral level, he turns fiction in general into a reprehensible activity, for both its writer and its reader. By contrast, the non-fictional nature of his work endows it with a poignant dimension that a novel could never reach and the appalling news of Nadja’s psychiatric internment at the end of the book adds a new dimension to his narrative.

If *Nadja* is to be considered as a documentary, one could question Breton’s purpose. If a document is supposed to teach us something, as is suggested by the etymology of the term (*docere*), what do we learn from *Nadja*? For what reason has it been written? Firstly, according to the writer, the documentation of this tragic affair will help both himself and the reader understand who he has become. Indeed that is precisely the purpose of this narrative, as is revealed

11 *Ibid.*, 645.

12 *Ibid.*, 744 / English edition, 147.

13 “Avant-dire”, 651.

14 André Breton, *Premier manifeste du surréalisme* [1924], *OCI, op.cit.*, 314. “Par besoin d’épuration, M. Paul Valéry proposait dernièrement de réunir en anthologie un aussi grand nombre que possible de débuts de romans, de l’insanité desquels il attendait beaucoup. Les auteurs les plus fameux seraient mis à contribution. Une telle idée fait encore honneur à Paul Valéry qui, naguère, à propos des romans, m’assurait qu’en ce qui le concerne, il se refuserait toujours à écrire: *La marquise sortit à cinq heures*. Mais a-t-il tenu parole?” / “As a cleansing antidote to all this, M. Paul Valéry recently suggested that an anthology be compiled in which the largest possible number of opening passages from novels be offered; the resulting insanity, he predicted, would be a source of considerable edification. The most famous authors would be included. Such a thought reflects great credit on Paul Valéry who, some time ago, speaking of novels, assured me that, so far as he was concerned, he would continue to refrain from writing: *The Marquise went out at five*. But has he kept his word?”, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1972, 7.

in the first sentence of the book (“qui suis-je?”). The author piles up documents in order to conduct an inquiry on himself.

Secondly, this testimony is an answer to Nadja’s request to relate their story (“André? André? Tu écriras un roman sur moi. [...] Prends garde: tout s’affaiblit, tout disparaît. De nous il faut que quelque chose reste”).¹⁵ Nevertheless, André Breton refuses to write a “novel”, as was suggested by Nadja. To fulfil the testimonial function of the book, he chooses the form of the documentary to leave traces, not only of a brief affair (“us”), but also of a woman (“me”) who will soon become the shadow of herself, a feeling that she may already experience.

Thirdly, the enunciative situation should also be taken into account. At the end of his narrative, Breton addresses another anonymous woman – who turns out to be Suzanne Muzard – whom he addresses as “toi qui n’es rien tant qu’une femme”.¹⁶ By contrast, this expression sheds a cruel light on the central character, Nadja, whom Breton considered to be an unwilling and tragic muse. Hence, if one takes into account the recipient of the book, one of the functions of *Nadja* would be to document Breton in order to give his indirect self-portrait to the beloved. To fulfil this project, the writer establishes a pact with his reader by claiming that his book will be like a “maison de verre” through which anyone can see. Note here that the glass metaphor¹⁷ is not new when Breton uses it. Since the 1850s, glass buildings were a symbol of industrial and architectural modernity, and a building like the Crystal Palace in London was a major attraction. Therefore, the glass metaphor had been commonly used ever since as, for instance, in Zola’s presentation of his naturalist work, which he compared to a glasshouse. Glass architecture will later be associated with utopian, mystical, hygienist, ideological, moral, political and social connotations,¹⁸ some of which can be found in Breton’s text.

In this regard, documents of various natures¹⁹ are used as traces of this relationship as well as of the narrator’s state of mind at the time. Some of the documents are composed of text and are inserted within the narration. Others are

15 *Nadja*, OCI, *op.cit.*, 707–708 / “André ? André ? You will write a novel about me. [...] Be careful: everything fades, everything vanishes. Something must remain of us”, English edition, 100.

16 *Ibid.*, 751 / “who [is] nothing so much as a woman”. English edition 156.

17 See Philip Junod’s writings on the glass paradigm, “Nouvelles variations sur la transparence”, *Revue Appareil* [online], revue *Appareil* – n°7–2011. <http://revues.mshparisnord.org/appareil/pdf/1197.pdf>.

18 Emmanuel Alloa, “Architectures of Transparency”, *Re. Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 53/54, Spring/Autumn 2008, 322–330.

19 See Jean Arrouye’s article for further details: “la photographie dans *Nadja*”, *Mélusine*, n°4: “le livre surréaliste”, Lausanne, L’Âge d’homme, 1982, 123–151.

images of different kinds, which are rejected and placed at the margins of the text, and whose captions are excerpts from the book. An example of a textual document could be found in the list of quotations from Nadja herself – indeed, Breton gathers and presents them in the form of a list.²⁰ More striking are the images (pictures, private letters, Nadja's drawings, sketches, paintings): they create visual heterogeneity in the book. According to Breton, the role of photographs is to "[faire] voir, mais alors voir"²¹ the places and persons he mentions, in a more efficient way than descriptions ever will.²²

Among all these documents, photographs play a special part. The choice of the medium of photography is justified by its attestation power, which was later analysed by Roland Barthes in his famous essay *La chambre claire*. As the French critic states:

C'est le malheur (mais peut-être aussi la volupté) du langage de ne pouvoir s'authentifier lui-même. [...] pour essayer de rendre le langage infictionnel, il faut un énorme dispositif de mesures: on convoque la logique ou, à défaut, le serment; mais la photographie, elle, est indifférente à tout relais: elle n'invente pas; elle est l'authentification même.²³

This attestation and anchoring function explains why photography plays a crucial part in surrealist writings. Rosalind Krauss emphasizes it as follows:

Surrealist photography exploits the very special connection to reality with which all photography is endowed. Photography is an imprint or transfer of the real: it is a photochemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a way parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints [...]. The photograph is thus genetically distinct from painting or sculpture or drawing. Technically and

20 719 / "make you see, really see", English edition, 116.

21 651 / English edition, 19.

22 "Il est bien évident qu'on ne peut pas, sans donner son portrait, faire voir si peu que ce soit, un personnage auquel on s'efforce de toutes façons d'intéresser", Avis au lecteur pour *La femme 100 têtes*, *Œuvres complètes II*, Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), *op. cit.*, 306.

23 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire*, 134–135 / It is the misfortune (but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself. [...] the attempt to render language unfictional requires an enormous apparatus of measurements: we invoke logic, or, lacking that, sworn oath; but the Photograph is indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself", *Camera lucida*, translated by Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 1981, 87.

semiologically speaking, drawings and paintings are icons, whereas photographs are indexes.²⁴

In the wake of his inaugural profession of faith, rejecting all types of fictional lies, Breton clearly chooses photography. In his mind, this medium is the least artistic, the most accurate one, to match his pseudo-medical report. In Barthes' words: "une photo est toujours invisible: ce n'est pas elle qu'on voit [...] le référent adhère".²⁵

Indeed, most of the photographs in *Nadja* seem relatively plain.²⁶ There apparently is nothing "surrealist" about them,²⁷ especially when one compares them to the ones taken by Man Ray and that can be found in *L'Amour fou*. Here, the photographs of Etienne Dolet's and De Becque's statues and the one of the café "À la nouvelle France", for instance, seem to have a mere documentary value, despite the fact that Breton claims that they were "prise[s] sous l'angle spécial dont [il] [...] avai[t] [lui]-même considér[é] [les choses]"²⁸ and that he changed the frame of the pictures of the statues in the 1962 edition.²⁹ In his book project *Writing with images*, James Elkins considers that "Boiffard's photographs [...] are unremarkable except in that their ordinary nature they contrast against the mysterious, intense and enigmatic encounters with *Nadja*".³⁰ In addition, he gives a series of arguments to show why, according to him – and unlike W.G. Sebald, for instance – "Breton did not develop a consistent awareness of the meaning of visual objects in his book". Heterodox as it may seem, Elkins' point of view on the matter appears to be all the more relevant, for it would not be the first time that Breton would show his indifference to visual media and to the question of the medium in general.³¹

24 Rosalind Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism", in Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York, Abbeville, 1985), 21–26.

25 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire*, *op.cit.*, 16–18 / English edition, 6: "a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see. In short, the referent adheres."

26 However, Daniel Grojnowski does not agree on that point. See "Promenades photographiques: *Nadja* d'André Breton", in *Photographie et langage*, Paris, José Corti, 2002, 147–176. See also Paul Edwards, *Soleil noir: photographie & littérature des origines au surréalisme*, Rennes, PUR, 2008, 293.

27 There is one exception to this rule: the photomontage "ses yeux de fougère" which will be discussed further.

28 *Nadja*, *op.cit.*, 746 / English edition, 151: "taken at the special angle from which [he] [him] self had looked at them".

29 See Jean Arrouye, *op.cit.*

30 http://writingwithimages.com/?page_id=346

31 See for instance the subsection entitled "Entrée des médiums = déni du *medium*" in Jean-Pierre Bobillot's article "La poésie écrite a-t-elle encore lieu d'être? Breton / Apollinaire /

In Breton's words, "L'abondante illustration photographique a pour objet d'éliminer toute description – celle-ci frappée d'inanité dans le *Manifeste du surréalisme*".³² Yet he does not always stick to this strict alternative (description or photography): not all places he mentions are shown and some pictures do not replace descriptions. At times, there is a redundant relationship between a photograph and its description,³³ when the former was supposed to replace the latter. For instance, the photograph of "Docteur Claude" comes with a caption that clearly influences its reception: following Breton's suggestion, the reader will seek to see "ce front ignare et cet air buté"³⁴ which the picture alone did not really show. In this case, the reader will justify the text by the way he receives the picture. Although Breton intends to use photographs as almost scientific documents,³⁵ in *Nadja*, the pictures also require the reader to develop new reading skills: the reader must create his own visual path in/throughout the book.

2 Reconstructing *Nadja* and Experiencing Surreality

The original form of this narrative, intertwining text and visual documents, implies a new kind of reading, for which the narrator's attitude provides a model: it involves the hermeneutic quest to decipher a puzzle placed under the sign of the sphinx (a recurrent image in the book). The main puzzle the reader will have to solve is the following: strangely enough, even though she gives the book its title, *Nadja* is not visible in the pictures, at least not in her entirety. This (partial) invisibility reveals a crucial aspect of her relationship with the narrator who, in turn, gives a partial, metaphorical and diffracted image of her.

Some documents can fit into this incomplete and displaced portrait of *Nadja*, reconstructed by the reader. It is irrelevant to know whether or not Breton anticipated all the interpretations his readers would make of *Nadja*'s iconography. Montaigne, in his time, already gave credit to his "suffisant lecteur" for

Heidsieck (et retour)", *Mélusine*, n° XXVIII, "Le Surréalisme en héritage. Les avant-gardes après 1945" [actes du Colloque de Cerisy], Lausanne, L'Âge d'Homme, fév. 2008, 197–210.

32 645 / "The abundant photographic illustration aims at suppressing all descriptions – condemned as useless in the *Manifesto of surrealism*". (Our translation).

33 See Pascaline Mourier-Casile, *Nadja d'André Breton*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994 (Foliothèque), 136–138 and Michel Beaujour, "Qu'est-ce que *Nadja*?", *NRF*, 15, n°172, 1er avril 1967, n° spécial "André Breton (1896–1966) et le mouvement surréaliste", 206.

34 736 / English edition, 137: "his dunce's forehead and that stubborn expression on his face".

35 The scientific paradigm is very present in surrealist writings, see for instance *La Révolution surréaliste* whose layout imitates that of the weekly journal *La Nature*.

finding things in his works that even he had not thought of. The principle of the “oeuvre ouverte” applies even more to an enigmatic and poetic book like *Nadja*, which is, like its heroine both “inspiré et inspirant”.³⁶ In this respect, it is worth mentioning some documents that the reader, like an investigator, could gather to reconstruct Nadja’s slippery character. Consider, for example, the Mazda picture. This battery brand is phonetically similar to the heroine’s name. Moreover, Breton recalls that Nadja specifically used the shape of the Mazda light bulb to render her body in one of her self-portraits. What is more, a somewhat vulgar pun could suggest that Nadja, who partly lived by means of prostituting herself, was an “allumeuse” herself (but then in a figurative sense), just like the light bulb. The reader could also find a connection between “l’adorable leurre du musée Grévin” (the picture of a wax statue in an erotic position) strapping up her suspender belt and Nadja, for the same reason we just mentioned.

The title of the ill-considered play, *Les Détraquées* (The deranged), of which Breton gives a picture, might also hint at Nadja’s impending madness. The reader, intrigued by the choice of a picture of “Madame Sacco, voyante” – in spite of the latter’s minor role in the book (her name only appears in a footnote)³⁷ – might further realize that this picture echoes Blanche Derval’s portrait. The same black background and the look of these women link them. In addition, Madame Sacco’s photo enables Breton to introduce into the iconography the theme of foresight, which is omnipresent in the text. A network of signifiers is thereby created, which includes Nadja herself, even though, as previously noted, a picture of her cannot be found in the book, strangely enough. When Breton first meets Nadja, he compares her to Blanche Derval and describes her eyes, “Curieusement fardée, comme quelqu’un qui, ayant commencé par les yeux, n’a pas eu le temps de finir [...]. Je n’avais jamais vu de tels yeux”.³⁸ These very eyes will later be shown in a photomontage and a poetic prose developing the metaphor of her “yeux de fougère”.³⁹

This mysterious photomontage, which appears in the 1963 edition,⁴⁰ merits its additional consideration for a moment. It seems all the more significant

36 716.

37 693 / English edition: “inspired and inspiring”.

38 683–685 / English edition, 64: “Curiously made up, as though beginning with her eyes, she had not had time to finish [...]. I had never seen such eyes”.

39 714 / English edition, 111: “fern-colored eyes”.

40 And therefore absent in the English edition. On the differences between the two editions, see for instance Daniel Grojnowski, “Promenades photographiques: *Nadja* d’André Breton”, in *Photographie et langage*, Paris, José Corti, 2002, 147–176.

as it is the only one of this kind within the book. The image illustrates a prominent theme: the view,⁴¹ in a literal as well as figurative sense, exploits the semantic richness of the French verb “voir”. Indeed, this photomontage could produce a pun on the set expression “avoir le don de double vue”, in which Nadja is praised for her mysterious looks but also seen as a “voyante” (fortune-teller). Therefore, one could consider this photograph as a metaphor for her supernatural gifts but also as a synecdoche, given that these eyes are all there is to see of her. To be sure, apart from a few elements referring to her hair and her figure, Breton mainly puts the emphasis on this detail. Accordingly, even her name is just a part of the Russian word for “hope” (Nadejda). And though one could argue that it is the name she chose for herself, the fact that in this photomontage Breton focuses on one body part – her eyes – could, considering the tragic outcome of their affair, be understood as a form of violence, more than as a poetic “blason”. Far from establishing her reality as a woman, this manipulated photo transforms her into a mythical creature (a sphinx). Moreover, by focusing on a detail from her face, this photomontage may also reveal that Nadja is mostly considered as a signal, a “pressentiment”,⁴² a sign with an additional layer, like a metaphor.

In a way, one could say that Breton turns her into a document, as he puts it in a crucial passage dated 7 October:

Je suis mécontent de moi. Il me semble que je l'observe trop [...]. Est-ce que je ne l'aime pas? Je suis, tout en étant près d'elle, plus près des choses qui sont près d'elle. [...]. Il serait impardonnable aussi que je ne la rassure pas sur la sorte d'intérêt que je lui porte, que je ne la persuade pas qu'elle ne saurait être pour moi un objet de curiosité [...]. Et si je ne la voyais plus ? Je ne *saurais* plus.⁴³

41 See Jean Arrouye for further details, *op.cit.*

42 At the end of the book, when he addresses the new woman he met and whom he loves, he writes: “Tu t’es substituée [...] à plusieurs figures de mon *pressentiment*. Nadja était de ces dernières, et il est parfait que tu me l’aies cachée. Tout ce que je sais est que cette substitution de personnes s’arrête à toi car rien ne t’est substituable”, 751–752 (our emphasis). English edition, 157.

43 701/ English edition, 90 (author’s emphasis): “I am annoyed. I suppose I observe her too much [...]. Don’t I love her ? When I am near her I am nearer things which are near her. [...] It would be also be in forgivable if I were not to reassure her about the kind of interest I feel in her behalf, persuade her that she could not be an object of mere curiosity for me [...] And if I never see her again ? I wouldn’t *know* anymore.”

In this excerpt, several terms confirm the hypothesis that Nadja, at a certain point in her relationship with Breton, is nothing but a document to be studied, from which one could learn something. The narrator confesses that he observes her too much, suggests that she may have become an object of mere curiosity, and that what he expects from her is not love but a kind of knowledge, if he can decipher this cryptic document correctly.⁴⁴ This asymmetrical relationship explains why the narrator expresses his guilt at the beginning of the passage.

As the sole instance representing itself as a subjective elaboration, as a rhetorical figure, the photomontage "les yeux de fougère" draws the readers' attention and gives them a precious clue for understanding the nature of Breton's fascination for Nadja. It also provides them with a clear example of surrealist metaphor, defined by its extreme degree of immediate absurdity in the first *Manifesto*. The surrealist atmosphere pervading the book, however, is also created in a more subtle way, namely, by the very structure of the book, which actually enables the reader to experience surrealism.

As mentioned earlier, most photographs in the book prove to be relatively insignificant. Yet this triviality is in itself significant. It reminds the reader that the wonder ("le merveilleux") possibly arising from an unexpected encounter does not lie in the object itself but in the spectator's behaviour, provided that he accepts to test ("le vent de l'éventuel"),⁴⁵ to be receptive to any kind of encounter (l'objet "pervers" found at the Saint-Ouen flea market⁴⁶ or Fanny Beznos).⁴⁷

In addition, the integration of documents produces a collage effect, which enables Breton to create a feeling of surrealism in the act. This effect is often due to the fact that images appear a couple of pages from their call-outs. Breton may not have been responsible for this phenomenon, which was common practice at the time. However, for the reader, the captions of the documents either create a déjà-vu effect or raise an expectation, a suspense, a desire, that will be fulfilled when the reader will later meet his match in Breton's text. When the caption is an incomplete and, therefore, enigmatic

44 Once again, the comparison with the words he uses to address his newly beloved is cruel and meaningful at the same time: "Tu n'es pas une énigme pour moi. / Je dis que tu me détournes pour toujours de l'énigme", 752 / English edition, 158: "You are not an enigma for me. / I say you have turned me from enigmas forever".

45 "La Confession dédaigneuse", in *Les Pas perdus*, *OCI, op.cit.*, 196 / English edition, 196: "the winds of possibility".

46 676–679. / English edition, 54.

47 *Ibid.*

sentence, it is particularly true as, for example, in “Gant de femme aussi...”,⁴⁸ or “Non: pas même la très belle et très inutile Porte Saint-Denis”⁴⁹ (as opposed to strictly informative captions mimicking a documentary style like “La Profanation de l’Hostie (détail)”).⁵⁰ The reader’s experience could be compared to what Breton will later analyse as the “hasard objectif”, which is a key element of surrealist theory. Initially borrowed from Engels, this phrase is redefined by the poet who gives it a wider meaning in *Les Vases communicants*.⁵¹ Based on Breton’s personal experiences of synchronicity and on experimentations he witnessed at the “institut Métapsychique International”, the term refers to unpredictable moments when incongruous elements encountered in everyday life come together to meet someone’s secret thoughts.

The way the documents are arranged in the 1963 edition can create such effects in the reader’s mind. For instance, in the 1964 Livre de poche edition, the photomontage “ses yeux de fougère” can be found before the text from which this metaphor has been excerpted, which creates a déjà-vu effect, comparable to the “unheimlich” feeling analysed by Freud in his essay on *The Sandman*. The dissemination of the pictures and the time separating the image from the matching passage create a feeling of “hasard objectif” in the reader’s mind, associated with the emergence of wonder that pervades surrealist writings. These effects are neither caused by the photographs nor by the text *per se* but by the friction of those elements.

There are some exceptions but, all in all, the style of both the text and the pictures is sober. Due to a clever combination, they blend and produce surrealist effects contributing to the reader’s fascination for this mysterious and hybrid document called *Nadja*. Therefore, Breton’s ambition involves the promotion of a surrealist way of life, rather than yet another artistic movement.

48 680. / English edition, 57: “Also a woman’s glove”. Breton’s proofs for the photos are available online: <http://www.andrebretton.fr/fr/livre/?gcoi=56600100830260&>.

49 664. / English edition, 34: “No: not even the extremely handsome, extremely useless Porte Saint-Denis”.

50 704. / English edition, 95. The inherent poetry of such mysterious captions could be compared to the “laconisme pathétique” of the film intertitles praised by Robert Desnos (“Musique et sous-titres”, *Paris-Journal*, 13 avril 1923) and by the surrealists in general.

51 *Les Vases communicants*, OC II, 485: “Cette sorte de hasard à travers quoi se manifeste encore très mystérieusement pour l’Homme une nécessité qui lui échappe, bien qu’il l’éprouve vitalelement comme une nécessité”.

3 Conclusion

The project of documenting one's life will later on be strongly reaffirmed by a friend of the surrealist group, Michel Leiris, more precisely in the preface to his autobiography entitled *L'Âge d'homme*. Like his predecessor, he claims that he has gathered "à l'état presque brut un ensemble de faits et d'images [...] en somme: la négation d'un roman".⁵² Leiris' metadiscourse is significantly very similar to Breton's when he compares his project to a "photomontage" (which his book, exclusively composed of text, is not), using this metaphor to explain that the tone that he chooses is "aussi objectif que possible". In a preface entitled "De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie", he employs the metaphor of the bull's horn to underline a risk inherent to the project, that of exposing oneself in the autobiographical project. Indeed, the polysemy of the French verb "[s'] exposer" reveals that "showing oneself" is also "facing a danger". It is this very danger, however, that makes this project valuable:

Ce qui se passe dans le domaine de l'écriture n'est-il pas dénué de valeur si cela reste "esthétique", anodin, dépourvu de sanction, s'il n'y a rien, dans le fait d'écrire une oeuvre, qui soit un équivalent [...] de ce qu'est pour le torero la corne acérée du taureau, qui seule – en raison de la menace matérielle qu'elle recèle – confère une réalité humaine à son art, l'empêche d'être autre chose que grâces vaines de ballerine?⁵³

No wonder, then, that Leiris's project follows in *Nadja*'s footsteps. In *Nadja*, as we saw previously, Breton builds a glasshouse, using documents, among which photographs, for their testimonial value. By doing so, he awakens his reader to surrealism, but he also runs the risk of being trapped in his own glasshouse, unveiled by the interpretative activity to which he invited his reader.

52 "De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie", *L'Âge d'homme* [1935], Paris, Gallimard (Folio), 1998, 5 / "The autobiographer as Torero", in *Manhoo: a journey from childhood into the fierce order of virility*, translated from the French by Richard Howard, foreword by Susan Sontag, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, 158: "in an almost raw state, a group of facts and images [...] in sum: the negation of a novel". All following citations are excerpts from the same page.

53 *Op.cit.* 10 / English translation, 154: "Is not what occurs in the domain of style valueless if it remains "aesthetic", anodyne, insignificant, if there is nothing in the fact of writing a work that is equivalent [...] to the bull's keen horn, which alone – by reason of the physical danger it represents – affords the torero's art a human reality, prevents it from being no more than the vain grace of a ballerina".

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