

Marie-Claire Barnet, Eric Robertson
and Nigel Saint (eds)

Robert Desnos

Surrealism in the Twenty-First
Century



Peter Lang

Robert Desnos

Modern **F**rench **I**dentities

Edited by Peter Collier

Volume 58



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.ddb.de>.

British Library and Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:
A catalogue record for this book is available from *The British Library*,
Great Britain, and from *The Library of Congress*, USA

ISSN 1422-9005

ISBN 978-3-03911-019-3 (paperback)

ISBN 978-3-0353-0255-4 (ebook)

US-ISBN 0-8204-9308-2

© Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, Bern 2006
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Printed in Germany

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Acknowledgements

We would like especially to thank Marie-Claire Dumas, who made the Desnos 'inédits' available to us for this book. Jacques Fraenkel of the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet kindly accorded us the copyright. The newspaper articles were typed by Heather Fenwick at Durham University. We are also very grateful to Janet Starkey for her work on the camera-ready copy, index and bibliography, and to Elizabeth Tuttle and the late Michel Roudier who provided the final image in the figure section at the end of this volume. We record our gratitude to Michael Sheringham and the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies, London, for hosting the conference in November 2000 on which this book is based, and to the French Department of Royal Holloway, University of London, for contributing to the costs of that event. We would like to thank the School of Modern Languages and Cultures, Durham University, for the generous financial support which has made the final version of this book possible. The School of Modern Languages, Royal Holloway, has kindly assisted with the costs of the illustrations. This volume has travelled and waited in different parts of the world, and we are happy to dedicate it to our patient contributors, who supported us faithfully during this journey, with a special thought for Renée Riese Hubert who sadly left us in 2005.

Introduction

Ce n'est pas la poésie qui doit être libre, c'est le poète.¹

A legendary figure within the Surrealist movement, Robert Desnos (1900–1945) has left a unique legacy as a poet of distinction, as a ‘dormeur éveillé’ revered by his fellow Surrealists, and as a free spirit *par excellence*. In celebrating Desnos’s unique creative voice, this book re-evaluates his status within and beyond the Surrealist movement, reappraises his status as a poet, and sheds new light on his contribution to the literary and cultural life of his age. The essays in the volume reflect the ongoing vitality and relevance of Desnos’s poetry and the sheer originality of his contribution to the various other forms of expression in which he excelled: journalism, script-writing and song-writing, to name but a few. The visual arts occupied a particularly important place in his work, as is borne out by his extensive writings on art and artists, his active involvement in avant-garde film and his close associations with a number of prominent painters.

The principal aim of the book is to illustrate the variety and enduring appeal of Desnos’s literary endeavours, but it also intends to reveal the lines of continuity that cut across the wide range of creative forms which he used. The various chapters explore Desnos from many angles, offering fresh approaches not only to his work as a poet, critic and journalist, but also to the literary, historical and socio-cultural contexts in which it was produced. In addition, the chapters suggest a range of theoretical perspectives from which modern-day readers may gain an insight into his work. By placing his faith in poetry, even under Nazi persecution, Robert Desnos offers an emblematic figure of

1 Robert Desnos, *État de veille*, in *Œuvres*, édition établie et présentée par Marie-Claire Dumas (Paris: Gallimard / ‘Quarto’, 1999), p.999. Henceforth, throughout this volume, Desnos, *Œuvres*, plus page number.

hope in the first decade of a new century, and today his message is as relevant as ever.

The fourteen critical essays that constitute the main part of this volume fall into four sections each of which represents an important dimension of Desnos's creative output; they are followed by a rare collection of previously unpublished, journalistic articles by Desnos from the late 1920s. Part I traces some of the most important aspects of Desnos's relationship to the Surrealist movement. The opening chapter, by Roger Cardinal, traces the fascination with paranormal phenomena and induced hallucination that led Desnos from his sleep sessions of 1922–1923 to the events of winter 1926–1927 that would be documented in his 'Journal d'une apparition'. Inspired by Desnos's ill-fated and unrequited love for the popular singer Yvonne George, the hallucinatory figure in this text is peculiarly ambivalent, at once ethereal and corporeal, and foreshadows various other surrealist dream women. The literary status of the 'Journal', too, is revealed to be far from straightforward: connected intertextually to medieval courtly love, Nervalian Romanticism and the Freudian uncanny, it resides in an interstitial space located somewhere between diary and fiction, tinged with elements of the fantastic. In its low-key ending and lack of resolution, Cardinal argues, the 'Journal' betrays its author's loss of faith in the surrealist *merveilleux* and ultimately signals the failure of the search for a reality beyond reason that had been a hallmark of the Surrealist project in the 1920s.

Michael G. Kelly also looks at Desnos's position beyond *le merveilleux*. He analyses Desnos's particular role in the development of Surrealism, and his departure from it, in terms of a dialectics of purity. From being the vacant embodiment of the surrealist virtues in the heroic phase of group formation, Desnos's artistic persona migrates to a heretical position through the development of a lyricism in which the subject re-appears problematically. Kelly develops a parallel between the trajectories of Desnos and of the leaders of the *Grand Jeu* group, Daumal and Gilbert-Lecomte, which attempts to suggest and distinguish Desnos's long-term practice of poetry as a resolutely impure accommodation of the subject-position.

Another close literary affinity is the subject of Philippe Met's contribution, namely, the acquaintance and mutual admiration of Des-

nos and Michel Leiris. As Met notes, the two were drawn together by a shared fascination with language, and this can be seen most clearly in the aphorisms and lexical and semantic wordplay of works such as *Corps et biens* and *Langage tangage*. Underpinning much of the experimentation of both writers is a preoccupation with the voice: this is evident, firstly, in their shared practice of fusing oral and written forms of discourse, but also in the sheer range of expressive forms they appropriated – not only lyrical, but also commercial, journalistic and musical – and which they forged into linguistic creations of startling originality. In concluding his analysis, Met unites Desnos and Leiris with Rose Sélavy, the *alter ego* of another famous exponent of ludic language, Marcel Duchamp.

In the closing essay of this section, Andrew Rothwell examines Desnos's relationship with the 'Pope' of Surrealism, and considers the extraordinary circumstances that transformed Desnos from the prophet of Surrealism to its pariah in the space of a few years. As Rothwell observes, Breton's ideological agenda and his fondness for automatic writing have shaped subsequent critical responses to Desnos's poems of the 1920s, and yet the poet's own assessment of these was very different. In analysing Breton's attempts to harness Desnos to his own vision of Surrealism, Rothwell reveals a striking parallel with Breton's earlier reception of Pierre Reverdy. A particular problem for Breton lay in reconciling his own vision of Surrealism with Desnos's use of pastiche and parody; contrary to prevailing opinion amongst Desnos scholars, Rothwell presents these practices as constituting a significant part of Desnos's poetic strategy and, in so doing, reveals their affinity with Dada practices such as the textual ready-made. By relieving him of his surrealist straitjacket, and removing the constraint of a perceived 'sincerity' of intent from readings of his work, Rothwell restores Desnos to his deserved place as a 'post-modern manipulator of discourses' at the very heart of the inter-war *avant-garde*.

The second section of this volume considers two matters close to Desnos's heart, namely poetics and politics. While they both played an important part in his life, the reasons for his involvement in them could not have been more different: the writer's craft was unquestionably his chosen vocation, whereas his involvement in political events was the result of historical circumstances. On occasions these

topics are connected in important ways in Desnos's work, with the political colouring the sexual, the literary and the personal.

Georgiana Colvile's chapter discusses Desnos's longest poem, 'The Night of Loveless Nights'. Colvile notes the poem's negative reconfiguration of the surrealist themes of sleep, dreams and love. She proposes to address the poem's distinctive voice through the perspectives suggested by Georges Malkine's three illustrations of 1927. Malkine focuses our attention on the sinister figure of the ship, assailed by madness, ghosts and fantasies, and which underscores the dark inflection given to desire and love by the poet. With the help of Malkine's illustrations, Colvile illuminates the dual dynamic of Eros and Thanatos in Desnos's poem, comparing it with *La liberté ou l'amour !* and other key works.

The voice of the poet is a central subject of the next two chapters. In the first of these chapters, entitled 'The Destiny of Robert Desnos', Mary Ann Caws argues that it is, above all, in the lyrical voice of Desnos, that the visual appeal of his poetry resides. In this respect, she argues, his poems recall the baroque poetry of Maurice Scève. Drawing on the frequent repetition of the verb 'appeler' in the poem 'La Voix de Robert Desnos', with its implications of calling or appealing, Caws explains the particular fascination that this verb held for her when translating it. For all their insistence on an appeal to the reader or listener, poems such as 'en Sursaut' posit the sheer difficulty of speaking, and thus Caws ultimately ascribes to Desnos a poetics of doubt and indeterminacy, of not-knowing and not-speaking.

The poet's voice is again the focus of the following chapter, albeit in a very different historical context. In her essay, Katharine Conley examines Desnos's collection of poems entitled *Contrée*, which was published against the background of occupied France under the Vichy government. Reading between the lines, as one must often do when dealing with clandestine poetry, Conley considers how these ostensibly innocuous poems in fact expressed the poet's deep concern with the ongoing war. Thus the traditional poetic motif of the landscape becomes the terrain of armed resistance, while the figure of the hunter is no longer a metaphor for the pursuit of love, but instead represents the Resistance fighter seeking out the occupying enemy.

The close interweaving of poetry and life permeates Desnos's work in other ways too. In 'Belle Angleterre de légendes', the concluding essay of this section, Marie-Claire Dumas investigates the importance of England, the English language and British culture in Desnos's poetry and his life. His experience and evocation of England is traced from his stay in Kent in 1914 to improve his English to his resistance group's links with British Intelligence in 1942. In terms of literature, Dumas explains Desnos's use of the methods of British satire in his reworking of Swift and James Beresford. Looking at Desnos's feeling for the English language, Dumas makes some suggestive remarks on the origins of the title of the poem 'The Night of Loveless Nights', also discussed by Georgiana Colville in the present volume. Finally Dumas treats us to some intricate unravelling of the nature of Desnos's interest in the figures of Jack the Ripper and Lord Byron, highlighting the combination of self-mythologisation and the celebration of universal desire as an absolute value.

Desnos's fondness for popular forms of literature is well known, and the third section of the book, 'Writing the Everyday', further underlines the extent to which his creative talents extended beyond poetry to embrace other forms of writing. Focusing on Desnos as a journalist writing for the periodical *Les Feuilles libres*, Adelaide Russo devotes her chapter to the feats of verbal and visual dexterity with which he satirised a host of his contemporaries. Linking this work to Desnos's poetry, Russo contends that both forms of writing share a fundamentally ludic quality that makes it indeed possible to define Desnos as a verbal gymnast.

Desnos's activities as a journalist, writing this time for the newspaper *Paris Matinal* in 1928, reappear as the central focus of Jonathan Eburne's contribution to this volume. In particular, Eburne sets his sights on an article in which Desnos links a series of violent murders in Paris to the infamous British murderer known as Jack the Ripper. Eburne reveals that Desnos's interest in this legendary figure provides a link between his journalistic writing and his surrealist poetry, drawing comparisons with Thomas De Quincey's essays 'On Murder'. Citing Jack the Ripper as a forerunner of Surrealism, Desnos's article can tell us much about the underlying motivation of its author's

interest, which, as Eburne concludes, lies in the domains of both ethics and aesthetics.

In a further reassessment of the links between *le merveilleux* and *le quotidien*, Marie-Claire Barnet analyzes the memoirs of Youki Desnos in 'Les Voix de la sirène: bavardage, tatouage, et décalcomanie', highlighting the creative role of this legendary muse. Through her reading of *Les Confidences de Youki*, amateur film, photographs, correspondence and other archive material, Barnet brings back to life tattoos and transfers ('décalcomanies') of all sorts to reveal the magic components in the exchanges between Desnos and his wife. Barnet underlines the need to re-examine intertextual links between established literary texts and autobiography. By giving back her voice(s) to the surrealist siren, Barnet not only stresses the influence of Desnos's companion but also uncovers forgotten secrets and questions again the status of women in Surrealism.

The fourth and final section of essays is devoted to Desnos's long and deeply held involvement in the visual arts. In the first of these, Renée Riese Hubert examines six collections of poetry by Desnos, four of which were produced in collaboration with prominent visual artists, including some major figures of the contemporaneous avant-garde scene. Through a series of close textual readings and visual analyses in which each work is discussed in turn, Hubert sets out to ascertain whether these two expressive forms function as autonomous and independent units, or whether on the contrary they complement one another or even infiltrate each another's signifying field.

In her chapter entitled 'Desnos's Writings on Art. Beyond the Exotic?', Elza Adamowicz examines a different aspect of Desnos's involvement with the visual arts, namely his art criticism. Situating his early writings on art firmly within the orthodox surrealist *topoi* of the Oriental Other, she charts their evolution away from the surrealist *merveilleux* towards an increasing engagement with the 'real' as Desnos's allegiances shifted from Breton to Georges Bataille's dissident group. As Adamowicz concludes, Desnos's art criticism remains truly Surrealist in its peculiarly tangential relationship to the work of art, whereby the painting serves less as a point of focus than as a point of refraction from which the writer can digress creatively.

In the concluding essay, Ramona Fotiade examines another manifestation of Desnos's fascination with the visual image, namely his highly productive collaboration with Man Ray on the film *L'Étoile de mer*. We have now turned full circle, in that this essay returns to a question posed in a different context by Andrew Rothwell in the first section of this volume: how can one reconcile the reader / viewer's desire for authenticity of intent with the putative spontaneity of automatic creation? This question becomes even more problematic when discussing the medium of film, since the time-consuming nature of its production process makes full automatism difficult to achieve. Through detailed analyses of film sequences, Fotiade considers the respective roles of the film image and the poetic text, and assesses their interaction as a means of generating the sense of *dépaysement* so important to the surrealist visual imaginary.

It is only fitting that Desnos should have the last word. The volume closes with a rare collection of 'inédits', journalistic writings by Desnos which appeared in *Le Soir* in the late 1920s and have never appeared in print since their original publication. Marie-Claire Barnet's preface to the articles examines Desnos's preoccupations in these pieces and makes connections across his work.

We hope this volume on the lasting influence of Desnos will generate new discussions and open up debates on Surrealism in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, in many original and unpredictable directions.

Part One

Desnos and the Surrealist Movement

ROGER CARDINAL

The Diary of an Apparition

En me retraçant ces détails, j'en suis à me demander s'ils sont réels, ou bien si je les ai rêvés.¹

...car le rêve est aussi matériel que les actions tangibles, ou aussi peu.²

Documenting a series of episodes which had enthralled him throughout the winter of 1926–1927, Robert Desnos's 'Journal d'une apparition' first saw print the following autumn in *La Révolution surréaliste*, where it rubbed shoulders with the reproduction of one of André Masson's automatic paintings.³ Given that this same issue contains the tract 'Hands Off Love!' (there were thirty-two signatories, including Desnos), Max Ernst's 'Visions du demi-sommeil' and texts by Louis Aragon and Pierre Naville labelled 'Rêves', it is not difficult to see that 'Journal' cannot be dissociated from a nexus of shared preoccupations characteristic of 1920s Surrealism, embracing amorous and erotic experience and various states of dreaming, hypnagogic vision and automatic trance. Such topics had dominated the group's agenda since the landmark events of the *époque des sommeils* of September 1922 to February 1923.

During those extraordinary weeks of collective experimentation, it was Desnos who had gained most acclaim. Automatist supreme, he had

1 Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie*, in *Les Filles du feu* suivi de *Aurélia*, texte présenté et annoté par Béatrice Didier (Paris: Gallimard / Folio, 1972), p.147.

2 Desnos, 'Confession d'un enfant du siècle', *Œuvres*, p.302.

3 'Journal d'une apparition', in *La Révolution surréaliste*, n° 9–10 (1 October 1927), pp.9–11. The piece has been reprinted three times, in the following works by Desnos: *Domaine public* (1953), pp.346–52 (with a facsimile of the last sheet of Desnos's manuscript on p.353); *Nouvelles Hébrides et autres textes 1922–1930*, Marie-Claire Dumas (éd.) (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), pp.247–53 (hereafter *Nouvelles Hébrides*); and Desnos, *Œuvres*, pp.395–400.

produced sheet upon sheet of writing and drawing and shown an uncanny propensity – even while seated at a café table – to drift into a trance and deliver lengthy oracular speeches. When, in October 1924, André Breton enshrined the doctrine of psychic automatism in the *Manifeste du surréalisme*, he paid homage to his younger associate by declaring that ‘Desnos parle surréaliste à volonté’. He also praised him as one of those rare adventurers who had ‘fait acte de SURREALISME ABSOLU’.⁴ A few years later, the inclusion in Breton’s *Nadja* of two snapshots by Man Ray which showed Desnos reluctantly surfacing from one of his trances would serve to corroborate the myth of the *voyant* poet in the lineage of Hugo or Rimbaud.⁵ For his part, Louis Aragon, dashing off the excited report, *Une Vague de rêves* (1924), identified Desnos as a shaman and averred that his electrifying performances brought about a disquieting confluence of thought and matter, converting mental properties into perceptual realities.⁶

With hindsight, the Sleeps could be seen as the fumbling preliminaries to a grand metaphysical crusade to transcend the mundanity of existence. My understanding is that, in the first instance, the pursuit of automatic expressions facilitated by trance states was not conceived as a scientific probe into the Unconscious nor yet a shortcut to artistic inspiration: rather, it was a daredevil engagement with paranormal phenomena acknowledged to be alluring and unfathomable – and probably downright dangerous. This agitated moment in the early history of the movement was decisive in so far as – atheists all – the young Surrealists urged each other to declare an allegiance to psychic automatism, cherishing it as a ritual method for escaping the constraints of logicity and social decorum. The absolutism of this irrational belief was such that it would have seemed cowardly for any individual to have opted out from its headlong momentum. For a while, Desnos, the peerless exponent of entranced expression, and Breton, his awestruck witness, gambled on the prospect of drawing sustenance from obscure yet complicitous

4 André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, Marguerite Bonnet (éd.) (Paris: Gallimard / La Pléiade, 1988), I, p.331 and p.328. Hereafter Breton, *Œuvres*.

5 Ibid., I, p.662.

6 See Aragon, *Une Vague de rêves* (Paris: Hors commerce, no date [Autumn 1924]), pp.17–22.

forces active in a realm beyond the perimeter of commonsense. A contemporary letter by Breton's wife Simone offers an insight into the obsessional nature of their adventure:

Après chaque séance, on est tellement égaré et brisé qu'on se promet de ne pas recommencer, et le lendemain, on n'a plus que le désir de se trouver dans cette atmosphère catastrophique où tous se donnent la main avec la même angoisse.⁷

Arising in the aftermath of those desperate sessions, and still coloured by a yearning for a certainty beyond reason, 'Journal d'une apparition' is at pains to offer an unadorned record of events which clash violently with our normal assumptions about the world we inhabit. Desnos's text records an amazing visitation, or rather a cycle of visitations, when, night after night, a phantasmal woman slips into his room to maintain a silent vigil at his bedside.

As a document, the 'Journal' is marked by a glaring lacuna: the real-life identity of the phantom is withheld, the diarist referring to her simply as * * *.⁸ However, this anonymity is no more than a token gesture of discretion, given that it was public knowledge for Desnos's contemporaries – and has become so for subsequent readers – that the woman in question is none other than Yvonne George.

Born in Belgium in 1896, Yvonne George had begun her stage-career in Brussels as an actress before moving to Paris in about 1923 to reinvent herself as a *chansonnière*. She specialised in wistful sailors' songs and love-songs with a tragic tinge, such as her hit 'Pars... sans te retourner'. According to Youki Desnos (Robert's later partner), the literary tinge of her repertoire was controversial and some audiences even whistled at her. Youki comments on Yvonne's beauty and particularly her violet eyes, as well as her perfect diction and slight yet charming Belgian accent.⁹

7 Simone Breton, letter of 9 October 1922 to her cousin Denise Naville, quoted by Marguerite Bonnet in Breton, *Œuvres*, I, p.1303.

8 'Trois étoiles' is, of course, the title of a contemporary poem in the sequence *Les Ténèbres* (see Desnos, *Œuvres*, pp.549–50). The formula condenses two facets conducive to mystery: anonymity (asterisks supplanting a proper name) and remoteness (a constellation in the night sky).

9 Youki Desnos, *Les Confidences de Youki* (Paris: Opera Mundi, 1957; rééd. Arthème Fayard, 1999), p.92. Hereafter *Confidences*.

As is well known, the twenty-four-year-old Desnos fell ardently in love with Yvonne at a concert she gave on 21 October 1924. However, his courtship was restricted to bringing her gifts (including supplies of drugs), feeding her pet cats when she went on tour, and attending her parties in Neuilly in the role of *chevalier servant*.¹⁰ Never reciprocated, the poet's erotic and emotional drives were diverted into a private love-myth, shaped by wishful thinking and ethereal imaginings. As Youki puts it, 'Pour lui, elle n'était pas une femme, mais une créature immatérielle.'¹¹

Desnos's main expressive outlet was, of course, writing. In his capacity as music critic, he composed no less than three articles about the singer, abandoning any pretence of critical objectivity and parading the most incandescent feelings:

Ce n'est pas une femme, c'est une flamme; elle est mieux qu'intelligente: sensible, plus que belle: émouvante.

La femme moderne [...] trouve en elle sa plus haute expression.¹²

The selfsame rhetoric colours his more literary writings, as when impetuous allusions to a lovely songstress find their way into the novel *La Liberté ou l'amour !*, composed in 1925 in the first flush of passion:

Elle tourna vers moi les yeux à cet instant, mais je n'ose y croire, ce regard fut-il un aveu. Ne me dites pas qu'elle est belle, elle est émouvante. Sa vue imprime à mon cœur un mouvement plus rapide, son absence emplît mon esprit.¹³

A little later in the novel, this same irresistible beauty – identified simply as 'la femme que j'aime' – steps blithely inside the narrative to

10 Youki Desnos's phrase, *ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 Desnos, *Nouvelles Hébrides*, p.278. The three articles in question are: 'Yvonne George à l'Olympia', *Le Journal littéraire* (2 May 1925); repr. in *Nouvelles Hébrides*, pp.219–20; 'Yvonne George ou « La Main de gloire »', unpublished text (c.1925), first published in *Nouvelles Hébrides*, pp.276–8; and 'Yvonne George et ses chansons', *Le Soir* (7 October 1928); repr. in Robert Desnos, *Les Voix intérieures*, L. Cantaloube-Ferrieu (éd.) (Nantes: Éditions du Petit Véhicule, 1987), pp.157–8.

13 Desnos, *Œuvres*, p.342.

join the poet. The elision of the boundary between fact and fiction is not without its humour, nor its air of contrivance, especially when Desnos imagines her in extravagant silk petticoats, complete with pink corsage, wild boots, and orange-tinted make-up.¹⁴ (To be sure, we cannot exclude the possibility that these eye-catching details derive from one of Yvonne's stage costumes.)

In his poems Desnos harps incessantly on the theme of unrequited love, fashioning the image of a woman so achingly desirable as to modulate into an irreducible fact of perception. 'O Douleurs de l'amour!' lends weight to this incredible creature by dint of fetishistic projection, attributing to her such accessories as lipstick and face-powder, stockings and underwear, jewels and fur coat.¹⁵ In 'Si tu savais', she is accused of wilful cruelty:

Loin de moi parce que tu ignores sciemment mes désirs passionnés.
Loin de moi parce que tu es cruelle.
Si tu savais.¹⁶

Elsewhere, she is greeted as 'ô belle et discrète espionne' or reproached for being 'insaisissable dans la réalité et dans le rêve'.¹⁷ Distant yet radiant, the addressee of *À la Mystérieuse* is an insubstantial figment which somehow veers towards materialisation. The paradox is encapsulated in a telling phrase from 'Si tu savais' which interpolates her as a 'volontaire et matériel mirage'.¹⁸

It is generally assumed that the real-life Yvonne never did drop in on her admirer at 45 rue Blomet, where in April 1926 Desnos took over a large studio vacated by André Masson. Desnos crammed the place with flea-market curios, including a waxwork mermaid, a crystal sword, some folk-art ceramics and piles of gramophone records of French *chansons*; publicity photos of the singer were pinned to the walls.¹⁹

14 Ibid., p.343.

15 Ibid., p.538.

16 Ibid., p.541.

17 Ibid., p.540.

18 Ibid., p.541.

19 See Rosa Buchole, *L'Évolution poétique de Robert Desnos* (1956), p.96. *La Liberté ou l'amour !* mentions the photos on the walls (Desnos, *Œuvres*, p.345).

Such a Bohemian décor might be understood as an attempt to set up a kind of magical trap: as it turned out, the poet succeeded only in ensnaring a phantom. The brute reality was that Yvonne's priorities lay elsewhere. Long addicted to alcohol and nicotine, she had progressed to opium and morphine. When Desnos first knew her, she already had a telltale cough; and within the space of a few years she was obliged to give up her career and seek treatment in various sanatoria. She was to die of tuberculosis, in far-off Genoa, on 22 April 1930.

Among dozens of pertinent intertexts, two deserve special mention. The first is the love-poetry of the twelfth-century Provençal troubadour Jaufré Rudel, which foregrounds the theme of unflinching devotion to a beloved who by definition remains forever distant.²⁰ Rudel is said to have fallen hopelessly in love with the Countess of Tripoli after hearing of her grace and beauty from pilgrims returning from the Holy Land. His commitment to a remote idol nourishes a peculiarly artificial *amor de lonh* that makes a virtue of non-consummation and remains almost entirely virtual – and hence without blemish. Legend has it that Rudel eventually crossed the Mediterranean to meet the Countess on the shore of Tripoli, only to die in her arms: whereupon she entered a convent to spend the rest of her life grieving for him.²¹ It has been suggested that Rudel's chaste expressions of yearning transmit mystical undertones reminiscent of Catharistic devotion. The subject of a major cultural study by Denis de Rougemont,²² the self-abnegating cult of *amour courtois* continues to resonate down to the modern era, so that it is not entirely implausible to see Desnos as a latter-day troubadour. Certainly the intertwining of the primordial themes of desire, distance and death has not escaped the critics of Desnos's work.²³

20 The analogy with Rudel is suggested in passing by Rosa Buchole (p.92).

21 See Joseph Anglade, *Les Troubadours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1922), p.37; and *Il Canzoniere di Jaufré Rudel*, Giorgio Chiarini (ed.) (Rome: L'Aquila, 1985).

22 See Denis de Rougemont, *L'Amour et l'Occident* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1962).

23 See, for example, Michael Sheringham, 'La Mort et les lois du désir dans l'écriture surréaliste de Robert Desnos' in '*Moi qui suis Robert Desnos*'. *Permanence d'une voix*, Marie-Claire Dumas (éd.) (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1987), pp.69–84. Desnos's poem 'Trois étoiles' contains some fairly explicit references to

Although the insights offered by comparative biography can never be conclusive, it is tempting to consider a second and even more telling analogy, that with Gérard de Nerval. It is given some support by Yvonne George herself in so far as, in a letter to Desnos, she once formulated the (entirely spurious) claim that she was Nerval's daughter!²⁴ As is well known, the Romantic poet had, fully a century earlier, been infatuated by his own inaccessible *étoile*, the operetta singer Jenny Colon, who spurned his amorous overtures and, so legend has it, never did visit his apartment on the Rue du Doyenné, where he had installed an expensive four-poster bed in fond hopes of consummation. Jenny was to die at thirty-three, at the same age as Yvonne, and equally at a great distance from her admirer. Long before her actual demise, but especially after it, her idealised image haunted Nerval's dream-saturated writings and fuelled his spiritual yearnings. In *Aurélia*, the writer's last and most confessional text, Jenny is imaged as a goddess and idol and who appears to him in a lucid dream. Wrestling to preserve a handhold upon reason while succumbing to delusions and hallucinations, Nerval was convinced he had several times encountered his long-lost beloved in his dreams.²⁵

Such striking antecedents enhance rather than diminish the value of Desnos's account of his nocturnal visitations. 'Journal' appears genuinely to demonstrate that, occasionally, extravagant dreams do come true; or, to put it more modestly, that spontaneous mirages or lucid dreams can achieve a startling plausibility. Naturally, the interest of 'Journal' must rest upon our sense that its findings were not artificially programmed. We know that the annals of science are full of instances of self-induced hallucination, and 'Journal' would seem comparatively humdrum if it emerged, for instance, that its dramatic encounters were

courtly love, while 'Si tu savais' uses the motto-phrase 'loin de moi' twenty times, as though punning on Rudel's signature-phrase 'amour de loin'.

- 24 Yvonne writes: 'J'ai découvert d'irréfutables preuves que je te donnerai, si tu me les demandes, que je suis sa *fille*.' Undated letter of around March 1929, quoted by Marie-Claire Dumas in her *Robert Desnos ou l'exploration des limites* (Paris: Librairie Klincksieck, 1980), p.77. Youki Desnos notes the parallel with Nerval in her memoir, *Confidences*, p.91.
- 25 See *Œuvres choisies de Gérard de Nerval* (Lausanne: Henri Kaeser, 1948), p.280 and p.282.

no more than a product of drug taking.²⁶ Similarly, if understood as the report of a spontaneous psychotic episode, 'Journal' would offer familiar material to specialists of psychopathology: their diagnosis might well acknowledge the propensity of an affective trauma to trigger perceptual distortions.²⁷ While conceding that such considerations are not without some bearing on Desnos's case, I believe that there is more to be gained by taking 'Journal' at face value. I also believe that the circumstances of its first publication, cited above, are crucial and that its ultimate import is indissociable from the primary context of Surrealism and its attitude towards amorous fantasy.

Propelled by irrational impulse, 1920s Surrealism had found its project taking shape in terms of a commitment to the unfettered imagination, later articulated in Breton's watchword 'L'imaginaire est ce qui tend à devenir réel'.²⁸ Moreover, even though an explicit theory pertaining to desire, love and the *rencontre capitale* would not be fully codified until the 1930s (notably in Breton's *L'Amour fou*), it was already obvious by the mid-1920s that Surrealism was prepared to underwrite the validity of almost any irregular escapade hastened by the demands of desire. In so far as sexual love was its touchstone, the surrealist ethos dictated that its practitioners should abjure the distinctions of rationality and embrace the loved object as a palpitating fusion of idea and phenomenon – the impalpable made tangible, the conjectured figment imposing itself as sensory fact. In Freudian terms, the fantasy of access to a dream-woman meant the reconciliation of the pleasure principle with the reality principle – the construction of a 'mirage matériel' by way of the annihilation of that vexed boundary which separates the mind from the objective world.

Once defined as a characteristically *surrealist* manifestation, the dream-woman of 'Journal' takes her place within a retinue of similar

26 We should however bear in mind that, along with Yvonne and his friend Georges Malkine, Desnos was an opium user at this time. See Dumas, *Robert Desnos ou l'exploration des limites*, p.75.

27 There is some evidence that the German Romantic poet Novalis succumbed to a similar irrational state as Desnos during the weeks following the death of his teenage bride, when extreme grief provoked intimations of her palpable and indeed sensual presence. See Novalis, 'Journal' (1797), pp.605–27.

28 Breton, *Œuvres*, II, p.50.

figures, including the oneiric maidens of Éluard's wistful early poems; the enigmatic females conjured in Breton's love-litanies; and a host of anonymous sensual beauties celebrated in texts from Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (1928) to Gherasim Luca's *Le Vampire passif* (1945). In his notebook *Le Meneur de lune* (1946), that inveterate dreamer and subjectivist Joë Bousquet was to record a whole series of incorporeal female visits to his bedroom.²⁹

Literary Surrealism also secretes a text which explicitly hovers on the same boundary between reality and dream as does 'Journal'. It is Jean Palou's 'Présence à Ravenne', an account of an episode which occurred on holiday in Ravenna in August 1951.³⁰ One night, Palou awakes to find a woman in his hotel bedroom, whom he spontaneously identifies as the long-dead Francesca de Rimini. A warm and physical presence, she embraces him fervently and lies down by his side. When he tells his tale over breakfast, the innkeeper observes that this sort of thing has happened in the establishment several times before.³¹

Within the same surrealist ambit, two final instances of uncanny materialisation should also be noted. The first is associated with the Surrealists' interest in the mediumistic trance, as practised by contemporary adepts of Spiritualism. This trance takes the form of the medium being 'possessed' by a spirit-guide (an event not without its erotic connotations) and leads to the production of trance speech, trance-writing or trance-drawing, all variant forms of automatism. In certain instances, mediums claim palpable contact with beings from the world beyond; some even seek to prove such contact by producing material evidence, such as ectoplasm and marks on the body.

29 See my article, 'Joë Bousquet ou le réel imaginable', *La Chouette*, n° 30 (1999), pp.21–30.

30 Jean Palou, 'Présence à Ravenne', *Le Surréalisme, même*, n° 3 (Autumn 1957), pp.49–52.

31 Indeed, one has to admit that, for all its seeming spontaneity, Palou's account is culturally determined, alluding as it does to Dante's account of the murder of Paolo and Francesca in the *Inferno*, while being equally reminiscent of such fantastical ghost-yarns as Théophile Gautier's *Arria Marcella* (1852), in which a nineteenth-century French tourist enjoys a brief liaison with a beautiful girl who had expired in the Vesuvian eruption of AD 79. (It is possible that Gautier based his gullible hero on Nerval himself.)

Within Spiritualism proper, the authentic *séance* is motivated by the desire to contact deceased persons who have passed over into the spirit-realm. Of course, the Christian doctrine of an afterlife was antithetical to the entrenched atheism of the Surrealists, which is why they performed the difficult trick of holding Spiritualism at arm's length while pick pocketing its valued techniques. No doubt they were also seduced by the feminine and indeed erotic colouring of the trance state, arguably prompted by an instinctive association of the divinatory faculty with women.³²

My second instance is purely whimsical. During the 1920s, surrealist discourse briefly espoused a medieval superstition when, with typical mordancy, Aragon picked up on Breton's title 'Entrée des médiums' (the first report of the Period of Sleeps) and wrote 'Entrée des succubes'.³³ Aragon's text is a tongue-in-cheek warning about the persistent presence in the modern city of *succubi*, that is: of phantom women intent upon sexual congress with sleeping males. Desnos surely alludes to this fantasy in a declaration of faith in *La Liberté*:

Je crois encore au merveilleux en amour, je crois à la réalité des rêves, je crois aux héroïnes de la nuit, aux belles de nuit pénétrant dans les cœurs et dans les lits.³⁴

All in all, Surrealism encompassed such a gamut of variants in its multiple visualisations of the female phantom that she cannot but emerge as a symbolic embodiment of their entire project. She is indeed

32 Breton's 'Lettre aux voyantes' of 1925 makes the symptomatic assumption that the typical clairvoyant is a woman. In that same year, he published a trance-drawing by a medium called Madame Fondrillon, and used it anew in 'Le Message automatique' of 1934. His enthusiasm and hesitancy concerning the creative trance are explored in my article 'André Breton and the Automatic Message', in Ramona Fotiade (ed.), André Breton, *The Power of Language* (Exeter: Elm Bank Publications, 2000), pp.23–36. A curiosity of surrealist history is that it appears entirely to overlook the public demonstrations of automatic painting given by the male medium Augustin Lesage at the Institut Métapsychique International in Paris in April–May 1927 (though I have heard that Joan Miró did attend).

33 See Aragon, 'Entrée des succubes', in *La Défense de l'infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), pp.235–45.

34 Desnos, *Œuvres*, p.342.

a kaleidoscopic creature: an emblem of Modernity and of the Marvellous, a dazzling idol, an unreachable star, a chimerical dream configuration, a projection of erotic desire, an incarnated hallucination or material mirage. She represents a cross between a medium and a medium's spirit-guide; she acts as a clairvoyant, a revenant, a sorceress, a ravishing succubus – and always a disquieting muse. Desnos's imaginative elaborations of Yvonne's image embrace several of these fluctuating functions.

'Journal d'une apparition' is a twofold text, comprising a preamble and the diary proper. The preamble begins by evoking an unearthly realm to which access is vouchsafed through the mediation of the Marvellous:

Le merveilleux consent encore à poser sur notre front fatigué sa main gantée et à nous conduire dans des labyrinthes surprenants. Nous errons à sa suite parmi des parterres de fleurs sanglantes, nous constatons de surnaturelles présences dans des paysages incroyables.³⁵

We may note that the allegorised figure of the Marvellous wears gloves, which undoubtedly classifies her as an attractive female.³⁶ She may be understood as a loyal Ariadne eager to be a guide through the labyrinth, or as a spirit-guide in touch with immortal presences.

The writer goes on to refer explicitly to the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, sketching a negative outcome whereby the Marvellous, having first lent wings to her protégés, returns them to earth with a bump. Visionary euphoria followed by a rude awakening represents a lapse into *déchéance*, the sour realisation that the Golden Age has expired. Whereupon, scarcely having mentioned this fall from grace, the writer reverses the mood. Shifting moreover from a generalised *nous* to a specific *je*, he proclaims himself an exception to the rule, insisting that he will always be capable of reinstating his lost paradise. 'J'échapperai à cette déchéance. Le labyrinthe que j'ai perdu, j'y pourrai rentrer à nouveau, j'y rentrerai un jour proche ou lointain.'³⁷ The preamble concludes by considering the status of the nocturnal apparitions which are

35 Ibid., p.395.

36 I shall say more about gloves in note 47 below.

37 Ibid., p.395.

about to be detailed. Desnos absolutely refuses to categorise them as hallucinatory (that is, as the vacuous product of defective perceptions), hinting darkly that whereas vulgar sensibilities will opt for this pragmatic explanation, it has no bearing upon the truth. He is quite adamant that his visitor is no delusion:

* * * est réellement venue chez moi. Je l'ai vue. Je l'ai entendue. J'ai senti son parfum et parfois même elle m'a touché. Et puisque la vue, l'ouïe, l'odorat et le tact se trouvent d'accord pour reconnaître sa présence, pourquoi douterais-je de sa réalité sans suspecter d'être de faux-semblants les autres réalités communément reconnues et qui ne sont en définitive contrôlées que par les mêmes sens?³⁸

Couched in these trenchant terms, Desnos's argument might seem to rest upon a materialist assumption of the primacy of sensation as the measure of the real. Without wanting to delve into philosophical niceties, I would suggest that it is equally indebted to a current of idealist thought which sees the world of perception as co-extensive with mental life. As Fichte and Schelling would have said, subjectivity embraces the outer world to establish parity between inner and outer reality. To adopt a surrealist terminology, the intrinsic potency of erotic desire is sufficient to conjure up its palpable object.

Somewhat echoing Nerval's celebrated formula of 'l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle',³⁹ Desnos brings his preamble to a close in a manner calculated to quell all further debate on what is in fact the nub of the matter:

Il s'agit d'ailleurs moins pour moi de faire admettre comme réels des faits normalement tenus pour illusoires que de mettre sur le même plan le rêve et la réalité, me souciant peu, au demeurant, que tout soit faux ou que tout soit vrai.⁴⁰

This 'take-it-or-leave-it' parting shot is sealed by the initials 'R.D.', a formal acknowledgment of authorial identity. The ambition is clear:

38 Ibid., pp.395–6.

39 *Œuvres choisies de Gérard de Nerval*, p.264.

40 Ibid., p.396.

what we are being offered is the equivalent of a signed affidavit attesting to the veracity of the events described.⁴¹

In what now ensues, Desnos deliberately opts for a format traditionally associated with the unvarnished truth, namely the personal diary or *journal intime*. This means that the implied reader is being asked to accept 'Journal d'une apparition' as an undoctored transmission of authentic facts.⁴² For her part, Marie-Claire Dumas judges that the text comes across as an 'analyse attentive et circonstanciée'. Further, she considers its sobriety to be intensified by contrast with 'Les Ténèbres', that ecstatic and image-laden cycle of poems which Desnos had started composing at least by December 1926, a month or so after the visitations began.⁴³

What I would argue, however, is that a closer look at Desnos's text shows it to be somewhat less than a true diary, if we take a diary to be a sequence of individual entries accumulated across a longish period. Even if we grant that its author made authentic jottings during the weeks in question, 'Journal' itself bears all the hallmarks of a literary reconstruction. The clues are meagre but decisive:

- 1 Several separate entries are subsumed under generalised headings such as 'Du 16 au 25 novembre 1926' or 'Nuits du 20 décembre 1926 au 5 janvier 1927'.

41 In the facsimile of the last handwritten page of 'Journal' which appears in *Domaine public*, the text is rounded off with the full signature, 'Robert Desnos'. See Desnos, *Domaine public* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p.353.

42 One may recall that Breton counted on the 'dénouement volontaire' of his prose style to lend conviction to the astounding events related in *Nadja* (Breton, *Œuvres*, I, p.646). Breton devotes roughly a third of his book to diary extracts. Strictly speaking, actual readers are usually perfectly aware that even genuine diaries never tell the naked truth; while literary diaries form a genre with conventions and expectations of its own. My point is that the diary format asks the implied reader to 'play the game' and to entertain at least a *presupposition* of veracity.

43 Dumas points out that the single dated poem in that cycle, 'La Voix de Robert Desnos', is dated 14 December 1926. This happens to be the night when the apparition is twice heard to cough. See Marie-Claire Dumas, *Étude de « Corps et biens » de Robert Desnos* (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, « Collection Unichamp », 1984), pp.95–7. Hereafter *Études*.

- 2 The entries are of implausibly uneven length. The one for the single night of 16 November 1926 takes up as many as thirty lines, while the entire month of February 1927 is dismissed in a mere four. The fact that the text crams four months into half a dozen pages makes it resemble a conscious *retrospective summary* rather than a day-by-day record.
- 3 The handwriting in the facsimile of the last page of the manuscript (reproduced in *Domaine public*, p.353) is too neat to suggest the irregularities typical of a genuine diary.
- 4 There is a paucity of *relevant* detail. We are told nothing about the fabulous visitor's make-up, for example, or her jewellery, or the colour of her eyes; only once do we learn the colour of her dress. Desnos has pared down his information to a bare minimum, a departure from normal diaristic practice.
- 5 There is an implausible lack of *irrelevant* detail. This 'diary of an apparition' is strictly confined to the nocturnal visitations (and their eventual lapse). Even if we grant that it constitutes a genuine diary edited down to a fraction of its original length, it would seem odd that all trace of other preoccupations has been excised: for we learn nothing of Desnos's daytime activities during these crucial weeks. Despite its insistent dating, 'Journal' remains unmarked by external history.

All of which makes me suspect that 'Journal' has less to do with honest fact-gathering and more with subtle pleading: for all its trenchant claims to truth-telling, its very *pointedness* undermines its documentary credibility, as well as instilling a certain tonality of wistfulness and doubt.

Admittedly, given the dramatic content of the narrative, it is no surprise to find disparity in the length of its entries: something like eighty percent of the diary is devoted to the period of ecstatic certainty. These are the passages over which Desnos took most trouble, detailing each small circumstance in order to make his tale utterly compelling. Thus the entry of 16 November 1926 pedantically logs the apparition's very first visit, building up expectation by enumerating the sounds made by the door-hinges and the broken bolt. The visitor enters and occupies an armchair near the poet's bed, where he has flung his clothes. She stares fixedly at him. He recognises her dress, her face, her smile. Her

right foot taps audibly on the floor. The only suspect detail is an unexplained luminosity within the studio. Is this a sign of something supernatural? After a certain time has elapsed, the woman slips away. On waking next morning, the writer finds his clothes where he had left them. There is nothing which might shake his faith in the reality of his visitor.

Night after night, the same scenario ensues. 'Les apparitions se reproduisent chaque nuit avec exactitude', the diarist insists. With ritual regularity, the woman known as * * * arrives and sits on the chair, which henceforth he keeps clear for her. At least once she sits on the bed itself. By the time she leaves, Desnos has usually fallen asleep; but often he is aware of her leaving, the door closing, her footsteps fading away across the courtyard. One entry records a bluish aura about her figure, another the reddish light cast upon her features by the stove: she seems to be at once an otherworldly spirit and a robustly corporeal person.

Despite the succubus analogy which I have mentioned, and Desnos's habitual relish of wild eroticism, it is noticeable that no direct sexual allusion crops up in the text. After all, there had been no reticence about his sexual obsession in *La Liberté*, where the narrator addresses Yvonne thus: 'Tes lèvres font monter les larmes à mes yeux; tu couches toute nue dans mon cerveau et je n'ose plus dormir.'⁴⁴ Against expectation, 'Journal' tells an entirely chaste story. The single physical advance occurs one night when the diarist touches his visitor's hand. The indications are that Desnos remains almost totally passive, as if overwhelmed, indeed paralysed, by the miracle of a visitation which requires no incantation or sorcery, but simply reverent complicity. We are not so far away from the abstinent *courtois* adoration of a Jaufré Rudel.

Though too sparse to make a convincing case, a few peripheral details quicken our impulse to believe in this *fata morgana*. There are occasional subtle touches showing that the woman does have a material existence elsewhere than in Desnos's fantasies. One rainy night there is fresh mud on her shoes; on another visit, she is heard to cough – on authenticating touch for those conversant with Yvonne George's real-

44 Desnos, *Œuvres*, p.346.

life frailties. On another occasion, there is a hint about the kind of life she leads in the outside world. 'Dans la nuit du 15 décembre, accroché à son épaule, il y avait un morceau du serpent de papier, comme on en jette dans les fêtes et les bars de nuit.'⁴⁵ The little streamer is like a detective's clue. Plucked from the realm of authentic urban existence, its function is to impart credibility to the paranormal. For the credulous poet, it is irrefutable evidence. On the other hand, the sceptical reader may decide that the spiral of paper is too flimsy to carry any weight.

At which point, we may recall Tzvetan Todorov's classic model of the literary Fantastic, whereby a tale is seen to hover *in between* two genres or spheres of plausibility, being as it were half realist narrative and half fantasia of the Marvellous.⁴⁶ 'Journal' borrows at least one classic trick from the fantastic repertoire, retailing a physical impossibility with the impeccable authority of the witness-on-the-spot:⁴⁷ 'Très distinctement, j'entends qu'on ouvre ma porte bien que celle-ci soit fermée à clef (je le constaterai au matin).'⁴⁸

The vacillation between contraries – is this woman a wraith or a creature of flesh and blood? – is one which begins to vex the diarist himself. However pleasurable the spell in which he is basking is, the urge to test it becomes irresistible. (There is perhaps a touch of Poe's 'Imp of the Perverse' about this.) On 16 December he infringes the tacit taboo on touching by placing his hand squarely over hers. Yet the very next day finds him doubting this very attempt to dispel doubt: 'Au réveil

45 Ibid., p.398.

46 Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), pp.28–45.

47 Another instance of the blatant intrusion of the Marvellous into ordinary life occurs in an anecdote I heard from Youki Desnos when I interviewed her in November 1964. It had to do with the poet's discovery of Yvonne's glove in his room following one of her nocturnal visits. Since this fetishistic detail went unrecorded in 'Journal', I suspect it is a case of a later elaboration prompted by the cultural cliché of the glove vouchsafed to the lover as a token of affection. If we are to believe the poem 'Les Espaces du sommeil', Yvonne did once relinquish her glove when Desnos put his lips to her hand: Desnos, *Œuvres*, p.540.

48 Desnos, *Œuvres*, p.396.

j'ai douté de l'avoir fait et je me suis trouvé en présence d'un moi-même sceptique et chicaneur.'⁴⁹

Once the seed of mistrust has been sown, the way suddenly opens up to the violent release of pent-up feelings. Now the poet takes a Malay dagger to bed with him, with the confused intention of stabbing his visitor in order to establish her reality: the reader may well shudder at the notion of a corpse providing definitive proof! Two nights later, the crazy plan has been abandoned; twice the poet has failed to act, awaking to find the knife lying harmlessly by his pillow or on the armchair. 'Comment ai-je pu imaginer un acte aussi stupide?'⁵⁰ is his comment.⁵¹

Ignoring this botched assault, the phantom woman obligingly returns the following night, to her admirer's great relief. Even so, the equanimity of their relationship has started to falter – henceforth a fissure will mar the perfect mirror of desire. The tenor of the visits becomes less incisive and the poet now wakes up with progressively duller memories. As the year (1926) winds down, the text appears to stumble and the entries to dry up. Finally we read:

49 Ibid., p.398.

50 Ibid., p.399.

51 Sadism is a frequent component of Desnos's amorous imaginings, as witness several scenes from *La Liberté ou l'amour !* Regarding the weapon, we may note that 'Journal' calls it 'un poignard malais à longue lame' (Desnos, *Œuvres*, p.398); we may infer that Desnos really did own an exotic *kris* with a snaky Malay blade. In such a context, the insistence on the word *lame* can hardly be accidental, reminiscent as it is of the name Louise Lane, the redoubtable heroine of *La Liberté*, composed a year or two before. There is a further association to an earlier episode in surrealist history. The Period of Sleeps climaxed with an evening at Eluard's house in Eaubonne when Desnos – in a state of trance – came after his host with a knife and had to be restrained by several of the group, including Breton. Soon after, Breton called a halt to the experiments, largely out of fear for Desnos's sanity. See André Breton, *Entretiens 1913–1952* (1952; Paris: Gallimard / Idées, 1969; 1973), pp.90–1. Hereafter, Breton, *Entretiens*.

Nuit du 6 janvier 1927

Pour la première fois depuis le début de ses visites, je ne puis affirmer que * * * est venue cette nuit. Il me semble bien qu'elle est arrivée, mais je ne puis faire la différence entre la perception de cette visite et l'habitude que j'en ai prise.⁵²

We may recall that, at the end of the preamble, Desnos had been truculently categorical in his disdain for such distinctions – 'que tout soit faux ou que tout soit vrai' represented an irrelevance in the face of his unimpeachable certainty.⁵³ But now the senses are losing their authority, and the reiterated miracle begins to look more like a routine conjuring trick of the desiring subject. Delusion is now a tacit fact; imaginative confidence unravels and entropy sets in. By 25 January, the nightly vigil is judged to be pointless, and henceforth there is nothing but the fastidious logging of the stages of a decline. For a while, the writer wakes up at the time of the accustomed visit and has a vague intimation of the woman's presence; then even this lapses and he reverts to a normal sleeping pattern, implicitly dreamless. The bleak final entry may be dated to around March 1927, though in the diary it is headed simply 'Maintenant', as though to register a permanent state of affairs: 'Elle ne reviendra plus.'⁵⁴

Desnos's weary disenchantment echoes that of Nerval's *alter ego* who, at the end of the tale *Sylvie*, confesses the following:

Telles sont les chimères qui charment et égarent au matin de la vie. (...) Les illusions tombent l'une après l'autre, comme les écorces d'un fruit, et le fruit, c'est l'expérience.⁵⁵

It might surprise some readers to find such a doom-laden Romantic note in the normally buoyant context of Surrealism. However we should remember that even the earliest automatic texts of *Les Champs magnétiques* (1920) were shot through with expressions of disillusionment and despair, as though the Surrealists were just as capable as the Romantics of wallowing in despondency as they were of soaring into euphoria. All

52 Desnos, *Œuvres*, p.399.

53 Ibid., p.396.

54 Ibid., p.400.

55 Nerval, *Sylvie*, p.163.

the same, there is something shocking about this torpid ending to Desnos's fervent adventure. Certainly the preamble had led us to expect an altogether different outcome. It is as if our faces were being rubbed in a muddy truth which, all along, we had been instructed to repress. Chimeras cannot last forever. A bright star has fizzled out like a damp squib. We now recognise that this most ecstatic of visionary flights was doomed from the outset.

It might well be said therefore that Desnos's text 'seizes up' by dint of self-contradiction. Ultimately, the diary falls short of the promise of the preamble. The seer and lover is forced to acknowledge his delusions. When we turn back to his earlier assurance, it now seems truculent and empty. 'J'échapperai à cette déchéance. Le labyrinthe que j'ai perdu, j'y pourrai rentrer à nouveau, j'y rentrerai un jour proche ou lointain.'⁵⁶ That pretentious boast having been exposed, we hardly need to underline the point by reminding ourselves of the text's telltale allusion to Icarus.

For all that the reader is shocked by this *volte-face*, the evidence is that Desnos was perfectly aware of his own amorous psychopathology, in which frustration and masochism seem inseparable from aspiration and joy. One of the most impressive poems of *À la Mystérieuse*, 'J'ai tant rêvé de toi', was written before the events of 'Journal'. It makes the very pertinent point that obsessive daydreaming about an absent beloved only hastens the depletion of her reality. When all is said and done, a 'volontaire et matériel mirage' is still immaterial, however much one wills it to be otherwise. The lesson is that amorous fixation in the distancing mode of Rudel or Nerval inevitably modulates into a ritual (*scilicet* purely literary) celebration of absence, whereby a real human being is gradually impoverished, leaving only a vacuous spectre. Moreover this reduction affects the poet in turn, as Desnos's last stanza ruefully acknowledges:

J'ai tant rêvé de toi, tant marché, parlé, couché avec ton fantôme qu'il ne me reste plus peut-être, et pourtant, qu'à être fantôme parmi les fantômes et plus ombre cent fois que l'ombre qui se promène et se promènera allègrement sur le cadran solaire de ta vie.⁵⁷

56 Desnos, *Œuvres*, p.395.

57 Ibid., p.539.