Communicating the Unknown: Construction of Identity in André Breton’s *Nadja*

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Abstract

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*Nadja*, published in 1927 by André Breton, the founder and self-proclaimed head of the surrealist movement, part of what is considered the “autobiographical quartet” of books by this author, all inspired by his relationships with various women. It is considered of the canonical works of the movement; however, it is somewhat problematic in that it differs in several key ways from both the other books he wrote from similar subject matter, and from Surrealism on the whole as described by Breton himself in the *Manifestes du surréalisme* in both style and treatment of its subject matter. This disparity leads one to question why exactly Breton wrote *Nadja* in the way that he did, and if it is possible to reconcile *Nadja* with the surrealist project.

To answer this question, it was necessary to set out in the first part of the thesis the specific differences between *Nadja* and its counterparts, and to explore why these differences are significant, especially in their conformity with the overall philosophy of Surrealism. Then, from these differences, one can extract Breton’s overall goal in writing the work—the construction of his own identity, not merely the telling of a story-- and draw connections between this goal and the style in which Breton wrote. Finally, in showing that Surrealism existed not in a specific technique, but in a relationship of dual creativity of the author and the audience, and showing that this relationship is necessary for the accomplishment of Breton’s goal in this book, *Nadja* is able to be reconciled with the surrealist project as a whole.
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Communicating the Unknown: Construction of Identity in André Breton’s Nadja

Introduction:

“Je pleurais à l’idée que je ne devais plus revoir Nadja...ne le pourrais plus.” (N 135)

In the quotation above one finds distilled the main dilemma faced by André Breton in his book Nadja, a canonical work of the Surrealist movement. This book appears at first to be the story of a young woman—the manifestation of the surrealist ideal—and the evolution of the author’s complicated relationship with and eventual abandonment of her. However, it presents serious problems in both of these aspects: as a surrealist work (apparently differing in style and treatment of its object from the majority of Breton’s work) and in its purpose (revealed by the opening question of ‘Who am I?’ rather than ‘Who is she?’). Nadja becomes, rather, the quest for Breton’s identity after it is thrown into question by the voluntary end of his liaison with this girl. This rejection expressed in the quotation above, this decision to break with Nadja, is rendered especially problematic and troubling for him in that the rejection of her and of her eventual madness seems to be at odds with the ideology he claimed to espouse in the first Manifeste du Surréalisme. How then is writing this book an answer to the questioning of his identity? What does he hope to accomplish in communicating the story of his identity crisis to the reader, rather than simply relaying whatever his conclusion might be? Why is it
necessary to communicate his identity at all? These are the questions that I will attempt to address here, in examining the multiple relationships between a surrealist author, his work, and the reader, how they contribute to the construction of the author as an individual, and how (if) this can be reconciled with the surrealist project as a whole.
I. *Nadja* v. the Other “Autobiographical” Works:

Before even opening *Nadja*, one characteristic specific to this particular book is already evident—the book bears the name of its subject. *Nadja* thus already stands in sharp contrast to the rest of Breton’s women, the material for the remainder of the “autobiographical” quartet made up of *Nadja*, *Les vases communicants*, *L’amour fou*, and *Arcane 17*. In all the others, the object of the author’s attention is referred to only as “cette femme” or “la femme-enfant,” if she is not further reduced to a simple pronoun: “elle,” “tu” (end of *Nadja*) or even a letter: “X” (*Les Vases Communicants*). And not only does she have a name, but it is one that she has chosen for herself: “Elle me dit son nom, celui qu’elle s’est choisi: ‘Nadja, parce qu’en russe c’est le commencement du mot espérance, et parce que ce n’en est que le commencement’” (*N* 75). Breton has imposed neither generality nor anonymity, nor the combination of both that is “la femme”: woman in general or “the woman” incognito on *Nadja*. *She* has given herself a name. *She* explains what it means. It is not even left for Breton to assign his own meaning to her chosen name. *She* is not to be depicted metaphorically by the image of some mythological figure, imposed by Breton, with all of the associations that that presupposes (l’Ondine, la Chimère, Mélusine). While she may indeed appear as Mélusine, it is only when she chooses, and only to herself. Breton only shows her portraying herself as the fairy; he himself does not portray her as such. “Nadja s’est aussi maintes fois représentée sous les traits de Mélusine, qui…Je l’ai même vue chercher à transporter autant que possible cette ressemblance dans la vie réelle” (*N* 149-50).
Nadja shapes how she is seen physically and metaphorically by both Breton and the reader. After the first two days of their acquaintance, she physically eludes the surrealist’s pen. The only mention of her appearance after that time is when, “[Il a] vu ses yeux de fougère s’ouvrir sur le matin” (N 130). Even before, her body resisted the efforts of the poet’s metaphor: the extent to which he manages to transform her body into an image from the outside world is in her “yeux de fougère.” her “cheveux d’avoine” (N 83). This is in striking opposition to the description of, for instance, the woman of \textit{L’Amour fou} (Jacqueline Lamba): “Son sourire à cette seconde me laisse aujourd’hui le souvenir d’un écureuil tenant une noisette verte. Les cheveux de pluie claire sur des maronniers en fleurs...” (\textit{AF} 66). He cannot dissect Nadja into these metaphorical images of the parts of her body that he would be able to make into his own voice, part of his own narrative. She remains whole, and as such she remains thoroughly unavailable to Breton’s narrative voice, existing outside or alongside the text, but not in it.

A yet more striking example of the difference between Nadja and Breton’s other “heroines” is that she has a mind that is portrayed in the book. She speaks. She draws. Her dialogues with the author are given as direct quotations, and not in reported speech. One can compare her words with those of Jacqueline Lamba, for instance: “Elle me dit qu’elle m’avait écrit,” etc. (\textit{AF}, 66). Practically the only time that any woman other than Nadja speaks is actually \textit{in Nadja}, in the final section. (‘‘C’est encore l’amour,’ disais-tu, et plus injustement il t’est arrivé de dire: ‘Tout ou rien’’ [N 187]) and yet Nadja herself speaks, directly (although we do not know how accurately) quoted. Her speech remains outside the main narrative voice, inassimilable—she existed not merely as an
object of Breton’s writing, but again rather alongside it, two voices in the same book. She draws, her drawings also remaining alongside the text, even when Breton describes them. He says in the Avant-dire that “L’abondante illustration photographique a pour objet d’éliminer toute description.” (N 6) In contrast with the descriptions of the photographs, which serve more to situate them than to repeat their content; this doubling only describes, reflects what is in the drawings. They can only be repeated in the text, not integrated. Nadja is present in the text as a creative force that can be neither ignored nor assimilated as a homogenous part of it, needing to be somehow set apart. Not even Jacqueline Lamba, who was a painter in her own right, resisted the efforts of Breton in this respect. Her work never asserts itself against the background of Breton’s prose. And he admits this difficulty in integrating Nadja into himself and into us, referring to Nadja as an enigma, unlike the “toi” of the end of the same book:

Tu t’es substituée aux formes qui m’étaient les plus familières, ainsi qu’à plusieurs figures de mon présentiment. Nadja était de ces dernières, et il est parfait que tu me l’aies cachée…pour moi c’était de toute éternité devant toi que devait prendre fin cette succession d’énigmes. Tu n’es pas une énigme pour moi. Je dis que tu me détournes pour toujours de l’énigme. (N 186-87)

Nadja was an enigma, and one that he knew, in writing this book, was impossible to fix in one place, to present with the certainty of his own voice to describe her, in the words that he chooses. “J’ai pris, du premier au dernier jour, Nadja pour un génie libre, quelque chose comme un de ces esprits de l’air que certaines pratiques de magie permettent momentanément de s’attacher, mais qu’il ne saurait être question de se soumettre.” (N 130)

What’s more, Breton does not show in his writing any real physical attraction for Nadja. That she is attractive, fascinating even, on a physical level, is only apparent
through the observations of her random admirers: “Le garçon se signale par une maladresse extrême: on le dirait fasciné par Nadja” (N 114). Nadja too is conscious of the effect she has on men, “Elle se connaît ce pouvoir sur certains hommes” (N 115). The only one who does not participate in this dynamic is Breton, who, placed outside of the game of flirtation, observes it but is not immediately affected by it. More revealing even, in describing his own relationship with Nadja, he asks; “Se peut-il qu’ici cette poursuite éperdue prenne fin? Poursuite de quoi, je ne sais, mais poursuite, pour mettre ainsi en œuvre tous les artifices de la seduction mentale” (N 127-128, italics added).

Even when he speaks of seduction, a term that would ordinarily connote the most physical of intentions, it is linked rather with the word “mentale”—with Nadja’s mind and not her body--rather than the desire that he expresses for the other women an emotion that is for him the human being’s only true master (A17 116).

The other women of whom he writes may or may not have been simpler, more stable, more easily decodable, more a part of his own life, but with Nadja he recognizes the limitations of their relationship. He recognizes that she is beyond him, and that any connection that they might have can only be temporary. This is the final difference between Nadja and Breton’s other women. There is knowledge, acceptance, desire even, for the end of their relationship. While at the end of the book he may express regret for his inability to have helped her more, to have mitigated in some way her situation (poor and mad, in a state asylum), and perhaps even some guilt at the partial responsibility that he might bear for her final decline. But he has no regret for their relationship, nor any nostalgia for it. In all of the other three texts, Breton is (still) in love with the main
female character. Even in the already-ended relationships, portrayed in Les vases communicants and L’amour fou (Suzanne Musard and Jacqueline Lamba, respectively), he is mourning the relationship. L’amour fou reviews scenes of their life together with distinct regret, searching for the cause of its disintegration, and in Les vases communicants he longs for the return of “X,” spending nearly thirty pages analyzing a dream telling him just this. (Arcane 17 details the beginning of his relationship with Elisa Claro, and, obviously, he is still in love in this case as well). In Nadja, it is Breton who is doing the rejecting. He ceases to see Nadja, he is glad that she is replaced, he does not go to see her once she is institutionalized. He, despite the fascination that he feels towards her, is repulsed by her livlihood and her habits, and we are allowed to see this: “Une histoire de coup de poing en plein visage...faillit même, au début de l’après-midi du 13 octobre, comme elle me la contait sans raison, m’éloigner d’elle à jamais.” (N 134)

Not only are we privy to his rejection of her, but we can see that any acceptance whatsoever was limited both in depth and in length. Two days after their first acquaintance, she begins to worry him. When she correctly predicts that a window will light up red, any of the excitement and curiosity he would normally experience at this encounter with the paranormal is overtaken by fear. And later that night: “Tout ce qu’elle dit ne m’intéresse plus également...je commence à être las” (N 103). He is not entirely enthralled by this girl; he is able to see her as imperfect, and even his fascination with her somewhat gnomic utterances has limits. Nor has he any illusions about his feeling for
her. He knows that what he feels for her is not what he would call love, and he acknowledges it in his account of the very next day:

Je suis mécontent de moi. Il me semble que je l’observe trop, comment faire autrement? Comment me voit-elle, me juge-t-elle? Il est impardonnable que je continue à la voir si je ne l’aime pas…Il serait impardonnable aussi que je ne la rassure pas sur la sorte d’interêt que je lui porte, que je ne la persuade pas qu’elle ne saurait être pour moi un objet de curiosité, comment pourrait-elle croire, de caprice. (N 104)

He admits he doesn’t love her and expresses his shame about it, almost wanting to make it up to her, to assure her that his intentions are good when he himself doesn’t even know what they are. There remains some kind of irreducible barrier between the two of them, and when he says, “Je suis, tout en étant plus près d’elle, plus près des choses qui sont près d’elle” (N 104), although it is possible that he is saying that she brings the things that are closer to her (the unconscious, the marvelous) closer to him when he is near her, he could also be saying that when he is near her, he is closer to the things (material objects) that are close to her than he is to her. He is drawn to her, but not into her spell. And he recognizes this later, at the time of their final rupture:

J’avais, depuis assez longtemps, cessé de m’entendre avec Nadja. A vrai dire, peut-être ne sommes-nous jamais entendus. (N 157)

Elle me ménageait de moins en moins…Tout ce qui fait qu’on peut vivre de la vie d’un être, sans jamais désirer obtenir de lui plus que ce qu’il donne…de ma part n’existait pas non plus, n’avait jamais existé. (N 158-59)

Je n’ai peut-être pas été à la hauteur de ce qu’elle me proposait. Mais que me proposait-elle? N’importe. Seul l’amour au sens où je l’entends. (N 159)

Nadja is not, then, one of Breton’s love stories, related in the other three comparable texts: it is rather the story of a rejection, total, complete, by Breton rather than of him, that sets Nadja apart.
II. What Does Nadja Represent?

But of what exactly was this a rejection? Of a woman? Surely not that alone. It was a rejection of Nadja in particular. What is she then beyond the “jeune femme, très pauvrement vêtue” (N 72) first seen by Breton? In her own words, she is “L’âme errante” (N 81) “La pensée sur le bain dans la pièce sans glaces” (N 118); she is Mélusine; she is “La sirene” (N 130) And for Breton himself, as cited earlier, “Un genie libre” (N 130):

La creature toujours inspirée et inspirante qui n’aimait qu’être dans la rue…celle qui tombait. (N 134)

Elle était forte, enfin…de cette idée qui toujours avait été la sienne…que la liberté… demeure la seule cause qu’il soit digne de servir. (N 168)

The recurrent theme in all of these passages is that of freedom. Nadja is free, not just from Breton himself but from reality, from logic, that “plus haïssable des prisons.” (N 149) What, though, is freedom to him? And why specifically is it that Breton values it so much? He defines freedom as:

Un désenchaînement perpetuel…la plus ou moins longue mais la merveilleuse suite de pas qu’il est permis à l’homme de faire désenchaîné…Pour moi, je l’avoue, ces pas sont tout. Où vont-ils, voilà la veritable question. Ils finiront bien par dessiner une route et sur cette route, qui sait si n’apparaîtra pas le moyen de désenchaîner ou d’aider à se désenchanter ceux qui n’ont pu suivre. (N 79-80)

This “désenchaînement” is that from the bonds that keep us imprisoned not only in ‘logique,’ but also in this world--in conscious reality. The “pas” of which he speaks appear not only to be “steps”, but also negations. The steps toward freedom are negations or rejections of the conventions that bind us to society. It is “La résolution
future de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de surréalité, si l’on peut ainsi dire” (MS 24). There appears to be, for him, a certain moral element involved in the attainment of freedom, in that it may provide the means for others to accomplish the same. If Nadja is free, she represents the possibility of helping others toward freedom who perhaps would not have gained it otherwise. And Nadja’s liberty from logical and social constraints made her the embodiment of the surrealist ideal, expressed in this definition of surrealism given in the first “Manifeste du Surréalisme”:

Surréalisme, n.m. Automatisme psychique pur par lequel on se propose d’exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de tout autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée.

Dictée de la pensée, en l’absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale. (MS 36, italics added)

This is exemplified by her lifestyle, her ability to let herself wander the streets freely, physically and mentally attaching herself to disparate ideas and objects, as on the nocturnal outing with Breton: “C’est devant cette fenêtre… qu’il faut absolument attendre, elle le sait. C’est de là que tout peut venir. C’est là que tout commence. Elle tient des deux mains la grille pour que je ne l’entraîne pas” (N 97-98). There is practically no distinction between the unconscious and the conscious within her. Nadja’s clairvoyance, her drawings, the random manner in which Breton encounters her on more than one occasion, show that she is what the surrealists have aspired to be, but she lacks any instinct for self-preservation. Nadja is then the only one who is truly free, although this may come at the price of her physical freedom. “Je n’ai jamais supposé qu’elle pût perdre…la faveur de cet instinct de conservation” (N 169), but she can and does. She
takes this freedom to the extreme that is her downfall. In rejecting her, Breton is rejecting his ideal. He is rejecting the love offered by his ideal and also the possibility of loving it/her.

This creates a certain amount of difficulty for Breton in that the freedom that he seeks is inextricably bound up with the experience of love and desire. “Amour, seul amour qui soit, amour charnel…un jour viendra où l’homme te reconnaîtra pour son seul maître” (AF 110). Physical love is the only true master of the free man, and so it is proper to him or her who has gone beyond the limits of logic, of consciousness/unconscious, and is also linked to the idea of art for Breton.

J’avoue sans la moindre confusion mon insensibilité profonde en presence des spectacles naturelles et des oeuvres d’art qui, d’emblée, ne me procurent pas un trouble physique caractérisé par la sensation d’une aigrette de vent aux temps susceptible d’entrainer un véritable frison. Je n’ai jamais pu m’empêcher d’établir une relation entre cette sensation et celle du plaisir érotique et ne découvre entre elles que des différences de degré. (AF 12-13)

In this passage we can see all that Nadja and her relationship with him represent: art, freedom, psychic automatism, and the possibility of accomplishment of the surrealist ideals in love. Nadja was identified with his art, and thus his inability to desire her makes him uneasy about his dedication to the ideals he has always claimed. And in rejecting Nadja, he has rejected his ideals as well, without which he has been neither sincere in love, nor art, nor life in general. He shows to others and to himself that he does not have the courage of his convictions when she suffers for it, being sent alone to the asylum without any kind of support from Breton.

The next question that would seem logically to present itself is why Breton rejects her. If he finds her in some way inassimilable into his narrative and into his life, what
was it that caused this rupture? This question has already been amply addressed, with much of focus on Nadja’s role as a medium to the unconscious and on her adequacy to it (or lack thereof). It is possible that she was simply not a good enough medium:

Nadja, fascinating because mad, is then disappointing, because she is not interesting enough…When she has gone truly (and therefore for him, terrifyingly) mad, and been put away…….he can confess he was not up to loving her as he should have. But on the moment, boredom. (Caws 56)

Possibly she could only give him a mediate relationship with the unconscious, with the marvelous, which he would pass over in favor of an embodiment of the marvelous itself:

“Ambassadrice de la Merveille plus que son incarnation, Nadja s’est révélée un admirable médium (au sens d’intermédiaire), et rien de plus” (Née 48), in contrast with the other women in his life, who would be the marvelous. Alternatively, she could have been only too successful in her achievement of the surrealist ideal: she abandoned the instinct of self-preservation which for Breton marks the limit of his quest. “In eschewing any pursuit after Nadja has been institutionalized, Breton betrays the allegiance to madness that he espoused in the first Manifesto of Surrealism” (Levitt 62). While he himself doubts the legitimacy of the border normally drawn between sanity and insanity upheld by our society, he has no desire to cross this boundary himself, having either a lack of courage or an idea of the lack of benefit that being institutionalized himself would yield. Perhaps he does not reject the surrealist extreme of the asylum, where the mad, “Ne doivent leur internement qu’à un petit nombre d’actes légalement répréhensibles…le profond détachement dont ils témoignent à l’égard de la critique…permet de supposer qu’ils puissent un grand reconfort dans leur imagination” (MS 15). Rather, he pulls away from Nadja’s morbid subversion of this:
Melancholic about past loss, anxious about future trauma, Breton had turned to Nadja for erotic biding, only to discover through her a ‘more or less conscious principle of total subversion’ (N 152). This recognition comes after the fact, with Nadja ensconced in an asylum, in a note about a “nocturnal ride.” Once in a car Nadja, “desiring to extinguish us” (N 152), had blinded him with a kiss. This death wish tempted him; its sexuality aroused him…But with a grandiose act of will…Breton opts for the other principle, that of love and life…(Foster 35)
III. *Nadja* as a Surrealist Work

However, in light of the work cited above, among others, I will pass over any further discussion here of the specific reasons behind Breton’s rejection of Nadja. Suffice it to say that he *does* reject her—she who is apparently the embodiment of all he has described as his ideal. What consequences does this have for him, and what does he hope to accomplish in writing a book that is ultimately not about Nadja, but about his own rejection of her? The brief “journal” section in which Nadja actively figures is bracketed by two other distinct parts of the text, the first (in which she is never mentioned) recounting several encounters or experiences that figure for him as an irruption of the marvelous or the sublime into everyday life, and the final section, in which Nadja appears only as a memory contrasted (negatively) with “Toi”, the new woman who has substituted herself for Nadja. The constant, throughout the whole book, is not Nadja but *Breton*, not only as author/narrator, but also as character. As Annette Levitt notes of this section of the book, “This nine-day-long episode is only one part of a triptych, superceded in the final section by Breton’s new love and throughout by Breton himself, the true subject of all three parts of this work” (53). Not only is the majority of the book free of Nadja, and all shot through with Breton himself, but the book opens with the question “Qui suis-je?” (*N* 8) and closes (before a short coda regarding Beauty) with his own reflection on his relationship with passion and how it affects his existence: “Qu’elle [la passion] soit jamais capable ou non de m’ôter la parole, de me retirer la droite à l’existence” (*N* 188). This book is not then even the story of Nadja, but that of
Breton, told through his rejection of her. But if this is indeed the case, and the book is about himself, why go to the trouble of telling the story to the reader? Why not speak directly about himself and what he has discovered? Is it only that he feels the need to justify his actions that he repeats them to us so that he might explain them away.

In order to address these questions, it is necessary to explore a second, seemingly anomalous, aspect of Nadja: It is not unique in subject matter only, but also in the way in which it was told. In the first “Manifeste du Surréalisme,” Breton seems to reject categorically the novelistic style that presents us with statements like: “La marquise sortit à cinq heures” (MS 17). He launches into a polemic against authors who would confine themselves to being mere reporters: “L’attitude réaliste…fait échec à la science, à l’art, en s’appliquant à flatter l’opinion dans ses goûts les plus bas; la clarté confinant à la sottise” (MS 16). And yet he writes Nadja in a manner reminiscent of the exact style that he deplores with so much vitriol. The anecdotes of which the book is comprised coalesce to form a more-or-less coherent plot. One can follow the sequence of events with relative ease and few digressions. There is no lack of dates, of precise times, of detailed scenes in the city streets. Even the pictures that were meant to replace description are reinforced by precisely that device. But what is really the fault of realist authors is not so much even catering to the lowest common denominator in their attachment to meticulous description, but rather doing a disservice to the reader, in that they leave no room for his or her participation.

L’ambition des auteurs ne va pas très loin... On ne m’épargne aucune des hésitations du personnage: sera-t-il blond, comment s’appellera-t-il, ironisons-le prendre en été? Autant de questions résolues une fois pour toutes, au petit
bonheur; il ne m’est laissé d’autre pouvoir discrétionnaire que de fermer le livre. (MS 17)

How does Breton himself explain this phenomenon? How does he justify his own actions? Of the style of the book, he says in the Avant-dire (to the 1964 edition) that the documentary style he adopts here is not realism, but rather that “Le ton adopté pour le récit se calque sur celui de l’observation médicale, entre toutes neuropsychiatrique, qui tend à garder trace de tout ce qu’examen et interrogatoire peuvent livrer” (N 6). This is borne out in his documentation of Nadja’s words, of her drawings, of her temporary lacks of lucidity, as when (as mentioned before), she became suddenly and unreasonably terrified following her own correct prediction that a dark window would light up red, clinging senselessly to a gate and refusing to move. However, even if it does not indulge in senseless enumeration of details formed in the author’s imagination, denying the reader the exercise of that faculty, it still seems to deny him a measure of active participation--an integral part of the surrealist goal. The artistic work, according to Breton, should be

Les nouvelles associations d’images que c’est le propre du poète, de l’artiste, du savant, de susciter [qui] ont ceci de comparable qu’elles s’empruntent pour produire un écran d’une texture particulière, que cette texture soit celle du mur décrépi, du nuage ou de toute autre chose…Sur cet écran tout ce que l’homme veut savoir est écrit en lettres phosphorescents, en lettres de désir.” (AF 127)

The wall and the cloud of which he speaks here are the amorphous objects that rely on the subjectivity of the observer to give it shape, and thus room should be left for the reader to interpret. The surrealist work of art should be equally as devoid of significant form as the cloud of the crumbling wall that Leonardo da Vinci had his students paint. Surrealist art requires the interpretation of the audience. Surrealist thought is best
expressed by and through another human being. “C’est encore au dialogue que les formes du langage surréaliste s’adaptent le mieux. Les deux pensées s’affrontent; pendant que l’on se livre, l’autre s’occupe d’elle” (MS 46). He cannot claim that he was purposely taking temporary leave from surrealism in writing this book. For him, it was the most natural manner of writing, one that is and should be the default for the author: “Le langage a été donné à l’homme pour qu’il en fasse un usage surréaliste…Parler, écrire une lettre, n’offrent pour lui aucune difficulté réelle, pourvu…qu’il se borne à s’entretenir (pour le plaisir de s’entretenir) avec quelqu’un” (MS 44).

However, the realist nature of the information presented in the book precludes the perhaps more traditional work of interpretation demanded by a surrealist work in which the reader would be required to create the descriptions himself. If we are denied the interpretive task of the more typical surrealist work, we must look elsewhere for the place where our creativity will be required. What role is the reader assigned in the dialogue that is Nadja? The answer lies in Breton’s characterization of the book as an example of “medical observation.” The book is about him and the problem with which he is confronted in his interaction with Nadja. He’s offering it to the reader as a medical observation, an observation of himself by the reader. Although he may indeed be referring in some measure to his own observation of Nadja, he also presents himself to the reader as one to be analysed. Susan Suleiman, in Subversive Intent, highlights this aspect in her reading of Nadja parallel to Freud’s case study of “Dora” as the story of an analyst and patient, emphasizing their complex relationship. Nadja, like Dora, is a
problematic female who presents some irresolvable enigma to a male figure who is trying to “read” her. However,

Whatever criticism one might make of Breton as a “character” in the story, one must give him credit as an author for providing the very evidence on which any criticism must be based; in this, he does resemble Freud, whose account of the Dora case is the basis on which his critics have elaborated their most hostile interpretations. (Suleiman 109-110)

While he may have found it impossible to observe Nadja objectively, and had difficulty keeping his desires untangled from hers, he delivers his relationship up to the reader to be analyzed in turn. And this analysis is the work of the audience of *Nadja* as a surrealist work of art, the interpretation of the cloud, of the crumbling wall.

Breton is visually present in the book (*N* 174), whereas the only part of Nadja that we see is her eyes (*N* 129). Breton is under observation by the reader. Do Nadja’s eyes observe him as well? Possibly, further blurring the lines between the analyst and his patient. In Breton’s portrait (*N* 174) he is dressed in a jacket and tie, presenting the reader with a very orderly appearance. He looks away from the camera, almost as if the viewer were watching him without his knowledge. In this photo, as in the rest of the book, we are observing the author, who chooses to walk this side of the barrier between the real and the imaginary to retain an image of (at least relative) solidity and respectability. We watch him as he looks away from us. Nadja, by contrast (*N* 129), is not there for us to look at. We are not there to watch *her*. But she does not avoid our gaze either, meeting the camera’s eye directly, refusing that we watch her without her knowledge. Nadja, when she speaks, asks no one to discover the secret hidden behind
what she says because she is always directly speaking her mind, knowing her unconscious, being in touch with her imagination and voicing this connection.

Breton makes clear this desire to be “read” in multiple ways, by his public when he says “Je persiste à réclamer les noms, à ne m’intéresser qu’aux livres qu’on laisse battants comme des portes, et desquels on n’a pas à chercher la clef” (N 18) He does not want to distract us from the story with an intricate allegorical structure that we must unravel before we go any further. The glossing of some intricate roman à clef may require our investigative powers,, but not creative. To discover associations that were already consciously there doesn’t do much to help break down any barrier between consciousness and unconsciousness And full disclosure is also in Breton’s own interests; the more the reader sees of his own life, the more material he or she has to work with. “Je continuerai à habiter ma maison de verre où l’on peut voir à toute heure qui vient me rendre visite…où je repose la nuit sur un lit de verre aux draps de verre, où qui je suis m’apparaîtra tôt ou tard gravé au diamant” (N 18-19). This passage tells us three things: first, that who he is can be divined from his activity “à toute heure”---he must be available to observation at all times, favorable or not. No matter how he might try to manipulate Nadja’s character, no matter how he might try to excuse his abandonment of her to assuage his own guilt or doubt, he cannot succeed in whitewashing this particular fault. While some may accuse him of minimizing the extent of the damage he did to the woman, one has to consider that if that was his intention, Nadja must be one of the most ineffective attempts at self-apology ever made. It won few to his defense, drawing harsh criticism nearly as soon as it was published for his treatment of Nadja and what was seen
as his attempt to capitalize on her misfortune, including from “toi” for the,
“Responsabilité que X m’a souvent jetée à la tête, dans des moments de colère, en
m’accusant de vouloir la rendre folle à son tour” (VC 38). He presents the reader with this
apparently callous attitude as well.

Secondly, *those who visit him* in this house of glass that is his life and his writing
are another part of finding out who he is. And the person who has entered both is, of
course, Nadja. This leads us back to the very beginning of the book, where as an answer
to the question “Who am I?” he proposes an adage that would respond with “Qui je
hante.” This phrase proposes to Breton two interpretations, not mutually exclusive: it is,
“Tendant à établir entre certains êtres et moi des rapports plus singuliers, moins évitables,
plus troublants que je ne pensais,” or “Il fait allusion à ce qu’il a fallu que je cessasse
d’être, pour être qui je suis” (N 9). He rejects the latter, saying that it “Implique dans ce
même temps une idée de perte irréparable dont le manque de fondement morale ne
saurait…souffrir aucune discussion” (N 10). To Breton, a version of the self that implies
the rediscovery of former knowledge as the idea of his identity being linked to what he
must cease to be implies that he previously had all the knowledge of his conscious and
unconscious mind and lost it, a proposition which to him smacks of original sin and the
fall of man, and he does not believe that it is due to some moral fault that he does not
have this knowledge in the present. He cannot fathom living only as a re-learning
experience of what he has forgotten and making no progress. But what he does not reject
is that his identity might be closely tied to other beings—in this case to Nadja and to the
reader. And the action of the reader is important in another way—the third element in the
passage cited above: “Qui je suis m’apparaîtra…” Who he is will appear to him when he is in a situation such that the rest of the world can see him. It is absolutely necessary that other people exist as my observers so that I know that I exist and how. He also addresses himself to the critic, inviting him or her to do their work in reading the work, asking that “La critique, renonçant…à ses plus chères prérérogatives…se borne à de savantes incursions dans la domaine qu’elle se croit le plus interdit et qui est en dehors de l’œuvre, celui où la personne de l’auteur…s’exprime en toute indépendance” (N 11-12). Here he merely reinforces his already expressed need for the incursion of the reader into the domain of his own life, asking to be permitted to glean some explanation for his own “aberrant” behavior from the view that someone else has of his own life through this text and what “est en dehors de l’œuvre.”

Why does he choose this episode of his life in particular? What does Nadja have to do with who he is more than any other “certain être” with whom he has some kind of close tie? As already discussed, in her appearance in his life and in his rejection of her and their relationship, he exposed a massive contradiction in himself, in his actions. This situation reveals to Breton that he is not who he thought he was. And so he needs to somehow discover what he is. Catching himself at this moment of forced breakdown of his former convictions will hopefully reveal with what these new actions are actually compatible—who he really is. The break with Nadja that provokes his identity crisis is also one of the

Faits [qui]…par leur caractère absolument inattendu, violemment incident…présentent chaque fois toutes les appARENces d’un signal, sans qu’on puisse dire au juste de quel signal…[accompagnés] de la sensation, très nette que pour nous quelque chose de grave, d’essentiel en dépend, jusqu’à l’absence
complète de paix avec nous-mêmes que nous valent certains enchaînements, certains concours de circonstances qui passent de loin notre entendement. (N 21)

The unexpected, including the entry of Nadja into his life and her equally surprising departure, play an important role in the life of the surrealist, taking on a special significance for him as something that, while “essential,” he does not fully understand. He knows that it is important, but not how, and this is doubly true when the unexpected event contradicts everything that he thought before.
IV. A Marxist Conception of the Self

When Breton poses the question, “Who am I?”, what is he actually asking? What is the nature of the self for him; what kind of information is it that he hopes to receive from this “signal” of which he speaks? “L’important est que les aptitudes particulières que je me découvre lentement ici-bas ne me distraient en rien de la recherche d’une aptitude générale, qui me serait propre...en quoi consiste...ma différenciation” (N 11). Here he explains that what constitutes himself is not some bundle of objective qualities that he would retain in the absence of other human beings, nor is it merely the collectivity of his experiences (“Par delà toutes sortes de goûts que je me connais, d’affinités que je me sens, d’attirances que je subis, d’événements qui m’arrivent et n’arrivent qu’à moi, par-delà quantité de mouvements que je me vois faire, d’émotions que je suis seul à éprouver” [N 11]). He denies that his identity is a purely individualized, isolated phenomenon but places it rather in his relationship to others, in his “différenciation”--what separates him from a crowd--that must exist in order for him to assert himself as himself, as an individual. This relationship is not solely negative, however; it is not only a kind of repulsion of the mob by Breton. His differentiation consists in “ce qu’entre tous les autres je suis venu faire en ce monde et de quel message unique je suis porteur” (N 11). Individuality, then, is not a quality, nor the sum of multiple qualities, but rather a certain kind of productivity, a function of the work that the author is uniquely capable of doing. This attitude is consistent with the author’s evolving Marxist politics, since the detachment evident in the First Manifesto, the Surrealist group had begun to lean more
overtly towards the left, becoming involved with the *Clarté* group, “intellectuels révolutionnaires” who, “Considered man above all else a social animal” (Rose 41). Attractive for their rejection of bourgeois values, the Clarté-ists emphasized the existence of the individual *in society*, as Breton becomes himself in expressing his own individuality, as opposed to everyone else’s. This idea fits with Breton’s search for an “propre” aptitude, and idea expressed elsewhere in the work of Marx himself, as for Marx also the individual exists as such only in relation to others and to his or her own productivity, as he says in *Comments on James Mill, Éléments d’Économie Politique*:

> In my production I would have objectified my *individuality*, its *specific character*, and therefore enjoyed not only an individual *manifestation of my life* during the activity, but also when looking at the object I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be *objective, visible to the senses*, and hence a power beyond all doubt. (Marx 227-28)

Breton’s “product” may not be material, but it exists for him in the message that he believes he carries to the world, whatever that may be, although this would seem to contradict Breton’s aversion to work (“Qu’on ne me parle pas, après cela, du travail, je veux dire de la valeur morale du travail.” [*N* 68]). However, he is speaking of work in a very specific sense. What he objects to is work in the sense of labor, of “travail comme nécessité matérielle” (*N* 68). The “work” that he does here is work in the restricted sense of *accomplishment*. Work or activity or production was for Marx a form of expression, and for Breton expression took the place of that work. This text came soon after Aragon positioned the Surrealists as “The proletariat of the mind, and likened their lot to that of other workers based on the Marxist criteria of their relationship to the means of production.” (Rose 174). Breton had at this point long been an avowed follower of Marx,
whose politics he would explicitly claim for the surrealist movement in the “Second manifeste du surréalisme,” in which he claimed that Surrealism had to be politically and socially active: “nous ne pouvons pas éviter de nous poser la question du régime social sous lequel nous vivons, je veux dire de l’acceptation ou de la non-acceptation de ce régime” (MS 88), claiming that freedom of thought (that breakdown of the barrier between consciousness and unconsciousness), or control of ideas was linked to the social control exercised by the ruling class, and even went so far as to say that “Le surréalisme se considère comme lié indissolublement…à la démarche de la pensée Marxiste” (MS 99).

He identifies the part he believes surrealism is destined to play in the revolution, stating that “Le problème de l’action sociale n’est, je tiens à revenir et j’y insiste, qu’une des formes d’un problème plus général que le surréalisme s’est mis en devoir de soulever et qui est celui de l’expression humaine sous toutes ses formes.” (MS 101) He thus includes any problem identified by Marx as subject to social action, including that of labor, as a form of a problem of human expression. Labor is a kind of human expression, and so when Marx writes in “Estranged Labor” that [in a situation of estrangement/alienation from one’s work], “Labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself...” (Marx 274), he is referring to the externalization of a form of expression, the manifestation of individuality. Man should be expressing himself in a way that “[belongs] to his intrinsic nature,” and it is necessary to find that way in order to affirm oneself, to objectify one’s individuality. “The external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own but someone else’s…it belongs to another; it is the loss of his self” (Marx 274). When
people do labor (or express themselves) in a way that is not in their nature, not proper to them, they lose their self, and so Breton wants desperately to find, “Une aptitude générale, qui [lui] serait propre et ne [lui] serait pas donnée” (N 11), in order to affirm his individuality. And this “aptitude” for him, takes the form of a “message unique dont [il est] le porteur” (N 11).

In this individuality, there appears to be for Breton a certain element of moral duty in the accomplishment of his individual task, in the delivery of his message. This is apparent when he speaks of the responsibility that he has to diffuse his proper message, “Pour ne pouvoir répondre de son sort que sur ma tête” (N 11). As he is the only person given this particular message, he is the only one who can accomplish this task, and he has a responsibility for its fate. He must assert himself as an individual in the world through spreading his message, because only in doing so can he fulfill an obligation or duty, concepts that imply a certain morality. This moral element resurfaces later with “Ce qui, ne répondant à aucune démarche de ma part, m’est quelquefois advenu, de ce qui me donne, m’arrivant par des voies insoupçonnables, la mesure de la grâce ou de la disgrâce particulières dont je suis l’objet” (N 22). The word “grâce” implies, not only “favor”, but, by the Christian concept of “grace,” a possibility of redemption. In reporting events in this book, a book dedicated to the quest of self-identity, he attempts to find that redemption after the crisis that occurred due to his relationship with Nadja. The degree to which he develops his individuality, his differentiation, his unique aptitude or message through that which “[lui] est quelquefois advenu,” reveals the extent to which he has attained or been granted the possibility of this redemption. And this relationship between
artistic production, individuality, and responsibility/duty does not apply to him alone. “Chirico a reconnu alors qu’il ne pouvait peindre que surpris (surpris le premier) par certaines dispositions d’objets et que toute l’œuvre qui en résultait restait ‘liée d’un lien étroit avec ce qui avait provoqué sa naissance.’” (N 14-15) The work of art resulting from the surprise, the production or work that is also a transmission to or communication with the reader, are intimately linked to the artist’s raison d’être, both in the sense of being the motivation for and the goal of his existence.
V. The Surrealist Reader as Analyst

It is at this point, however, that one begins to have some difficulty in resolving his goal with the method that he has chosen. He is trying to accomplish this duty, the purpose for which he was born, in spreading the message of which he alone is the bearer. This message is what differentiates him from everyone else, and what creates his own individuality, his self as separate from the Others. But the problem becomes: how does he pass on a message that he doesn’t know? If the whole book is a search for who he is, the response to the throwing-into-question of what he previously thought of as his self (before his encounter with Nadja), then how can he hope to accomplish anything in telling the story? Why not tell us simply whatever the result was? The answer lies in his characterization of himself as a bearer (porteur) of the message. He is not the origin of the message. He is not its creator. He is simply its transport. There is not really any necessity that he ever know, himself, what he is telling other people. His identity becomes a matter of productivity, of the result of what he says. As long as his readers/audience are able to take away the necessary knowledge, whatever that may be, he has successfully differentiated himself. He may demand to know: “Je m’efforce...de savoir en quoi consiste...ma différenciation” (N 11), or that “qui je suis m’apparaîtra” (19). He may wish to know of what his identity consists, but it is unnecessary that he know in order for that identity to be established. And it appears that he never does discover what exactly he was looking for, trailing off at the end of the middle section of the book (that dealing directly with Nadja) into a series of questions still unanswered:
“’Qui vive?’ Qui vive? Est-ce vous, Nadja? Est-il vrai que l’au-delà, tout l’au-delà soit dans cette vie? Qui vive? Est-ce moi seul? Est-ce moi-même?” (N 172) He ends this section on a desperate note. He has failed to discover who he or who Nadja is, and thus does not know whether he himself exists as a self. And in order for him to publish the book at all, it must be necessary to have renounced his search. If he had found the answer, he need only have reported the conclusion, passed on the specific message that he believed to be his individuality. In not finding the response himself, he has to rely on the reader to do that work for him, to discover the content that is still unknown to him. He is, in a way, simply a conduit between his unconscious (the unconscious?) and the reader. He must allow himself to be satisfied in not knowing, be content to send his creation out into the world to do work that is still unknown to him. “Si je relisais cette histoire...je ne sais guère, pour être fidèle à mon sentiment présent de moi-même, ce que j’en laisserais subsister. Je ne tiens pas à le savoir” (N 175-76). He himself cannot explain where he is in the book, where he has expressed himself.

Perhaps he no longer even wants to find himself. He has found a new woman, who tends to reinforce rather than challenge his preconceptions of himself. His experience with Nadja has already begun to fade: “Nadja est si loin...repris déjà par la Merveille, la merveille en qui de la première à la dernière page de ce livre ma foi n’aura du moins pas changé, tinte à mon oreille un nom qui n’est plus le sien” (N 177). His idea is now represented by someone new, someone who he can accept as a manifestation of the marvelous. “Sans le faire exprès, tu t’es substituée aux formes qui m’étaient les plus familières, ainsi qu’à plusieurs figures de mon présentiment. Nadja était de ces dernières,
et il est parfait que tu me l’aies cachée” (N 186). He has found someone who reinstates for him a certain level of comfort, someone in whom he can accept “la Merveille” that he could not in Nadja. He is no longer forced to confront the contradiction of his reaction to Nadja: “Tu me détournes pour toujours de l’enigme” (N 187). And thus he is able to continue with his life. However, he cannot rid himself of the knowledge of the change that Nadja made in his image of himself. Despite saying that she is hidden by his new love, he is still conscious, even if only in an unhappy memory, of the brief aberration that she created in his view of the world. He knows that, quite possibly, the message that he thought he was here to pass on is not really the right one. It induced enough doubt that although “Puisque tu existes...il n’était peut-être pas très nécessaire que ce livre existât” (N 187), he still felt it necessary to publish it. For him personally, it wasn’t terribly necessary any more to find out what Nadja meant for him. But for his message, it might be. And therefore, it is for the reader to do what Breton could not and ultimately ceased to try to do. We need to read and analyze the book, but he never needs to know what he is transmitting—although we do, in order to affirm Breton as an individual self. For this reason a book (rather than personal interactions or the Révolution Surrealiste is an appropriate format in which to present this story—to fulfill its purpose (to establish his identity), it requires the participation, but not necessarily the direct response, of the readers.

The style that Breton chose as well—that of a “medical observation”—is particularly well-adapted to this end. In presenting his story as an object of the reader/critic’s analysis, in demanding the participation of the reader, he replicates a
relationship in which one would be in the position to pass on “unknown knowledge” to the analyst. In *Le fantasme: Le plaisir de lire Lacan*, J.-D. Nasio offers a particularly appropriate reading of the relationship between the patient, his knowledge, and the analyst by means of the fantasm, one that appears tailored to the situation presented in *Nadja*: “Le patient confie à son psychanalyste tout ce qu’il sait ainsi que tout ce qu’il ne sait pas...la specificité d’une analyse réside, rappelons-nous, dans l’événement d’un dit énoncé sans savoir ce qu’il dit” (Nasio 28-29). Breton tells the reader everything he knows of his relationship with Nadja as well as everything he does not know of what this relationship means for him and his identity. And it is for the reader to discover that which Breton doesn’t know; “L’analyste forge dans son esprit le fantasme de son patient. Il s’identifie alors avec l’un des personnages de la scène, jusqu’à ressentir ce qu’il ressent...à connaître ce que son patient ressent inconsciemment” (Nasio 23). This book is, in a manner of speaking, Breton’s fantasm, in that “Un fantasme inconscient est la figuration plastique d’un désir inconscient” (Nasio 13). Somewhere in the scenes that are played out in the book is his unconscious desire, that which is in conflict with his conscious desire for freedom, for the breakdown of the barrier between the real and the imaginary. The reader must place himself in this fantasy, to feel what Breton feels, in order to identify what he desires: “Sur cet écran tout ce que l’homme veut savoir est écrit en lettres phosphorescent, en lettres de désir” (*AF* 127). Desire, according to Nasio, “Consiste à maintenir vif, vivant, notre rapport à ce lieu dont nous ne sommes pas” (70). This ‘place where we are not’ is “Le réel, [qui,] tout en étant notre dehors lointain, est aussi un trou situé au centre même de notre expérience” (Nasio 69). It is the relationship
that Breton has with the real, with that hole in his experience, the place in his experience where he is not, with which he has no contact, that we are asked to interpret. The real is “La raison de ce que nous faisons” (Nasio 69). and thus this relationship to the place he is not, is, after all, what we would need to know, what he would need to communicate. The book takes on the role of:

Un unique lieu psychique qui inclut conjointement analyste et analysant; mieux encore le lieu de l’entre-deux qui renferme et unifie les deux parties analytiques. Aussi l’analyse est-elle une seule tête, une tête virtuelle qui condense et contient la vie psychique de l’analyste et de l’analysant. (Nasio 29-30)

_Nadja_ becomes this shared head of Breton and the reader, a place where both of their thoughts exist and both contribute to the creation of the work of art and of its message to the reader.

Thus, Breton attempts through the medium of this book to accomplish/perform an identity that he does not and perhaps cannot know in calling on the reader’s participation. Despite the narrative nature of this work, it still offers the reader the opportunity to exercise his or her creative faculty, still asks for the critical, associative task of surrealism. The task is in this appeal to the reader and his or her role in creating the work of art and accomplishing its purpose, in the breakdown of the barrier between the conscious and the unconscious, through the act of analysis: “L’interprétation relevait de l’inconscient...non pas de l’inconscient de l’analysant ou de l’analyste...mais un seul inconscient, un inconscient unique, celui que le transfert met en acte”(Nasio 72). _Nadja_ thus becomes a truly (and perhaps supremely) Surrealist work, relying on the reader to access the unconscious and at the same time aligning itself with two movements (Marxism and psychoanalysis) that were to be so important to surrealism as a whole.
Works Cited


