

André Breton: l'amour-folie by Georges Sebbag, Editions Jean-Michel Place, Paris, 2004, 240 pp., 23 euros, ISBN 9-782858-937769 (paperback)

'La rencontre était pour André Breton une raison de vivre': the opening sentence of Georges Sebbag's *André Breton: l'amour-folie* sets the tone of his study, aiming to retell some of the most famous love stories which illuminated André Breton's life and whose magic/tragic twists of the 'mad love' plot sparked many versions of the history of surrealism. At the beginning of a new century, does Sebbag succeed in making us believe that there are more secrets to uncover about Breton's love for life and (remarkable) women? Yes, without a shadow of a doubt – or more precisely, with the help of previously unpublished material throwing new light in all directions on four familiar female figures (Simone, Nadja, Suzanne Muzard and Lise Deharme alias 'The lady with the pale blue gloves' who haunts the first chapters of *Nadja*), all leading actresses on the Bretonian love stage, but still half kept in the grey areas inhabited by fugitive muses or static ladies-in-waiting, and only retrieved from the wings of surrealism by feminist studies.¹ Yes again, with many sub-plots still to unfold, an acute sense of suspense, and a crafty art of the collage, relating hypotheses and facts to extracts of letters, criss-crossing references and dates, which creates a perfect mix and (mis)match of all characters involved (Simone Kahn-Breton with Max Morise, Léona Camille Ghislaine Decourt alias Nadja, Suzanne Muzard with Emmanuel Berl, or Lise Meyer, née Hirtz, soon to marry the radio pioneer, Paul Deharme).

If this new account of Breton's loves is partial (we cannot fail to notice the conspicuous absences, as Elisa Breton and Jacqueline Lamba only appear in the odd photograph, and later admired women like Nelly Kaplan only feature as 'la fée au chapeau de clarté'² at the end of a sentence to establish a parallel with later stages in Breton's life, while Valentine Hugo or Joyce Mansour are kept in the thick darkness of oblivion), this is because this study of *l'amour-folie* is focused on a particular period of Breton's life. It centres around 1926 to 1928 and around Suzanne Muzard and Nadja (and the other favourites at the time, previously mentioned) in order to recast the dice of fated attractions and reconsider the singular/triangular/quadrilateral mad love stories or the madness of passion around all the women involved in Breton's affections at the time: his first wife Simone, competing (or being quite accommodating) with Berl's companion, Suzanne Muzard, who succeeded to Nadja and Lise Deharme. The result is far from a portrait of Breton as a fickle and lucky Don Juan (or even worse), since it is a clever interweaving of stories and possibilities, and (unavoidable) coincidences, leading to most suitable inconclusive conclusions, weaving references and dates around an unfinished portrait of Breton's heart and mind in the late 1920s.

The titles of the chapters indicate the complex dynamism of the dual or triangular relationships, as well as give us a sense of restlessness as they follow the many travels



and peregrinations involved in these complicated love stories: after 'Les confidences inachevées de Suzanne Muzard' and 'Les lettres éperdues de Nadja,' we will face 'La fin d'un amour sublime' for Lise, replaced by 'Clara [Malraux], Simone et Suzanne,' or 'Simone, Denise et Lise,' and be transported (in Suzanne's charming company) from 'Du rat mort à Biarritz' to 'Avignon, palais des papes' (innuendoes intended), to the 'Manoir d'Ango et Château de Lourps' (a 'heavy' combination of words involving threatening wolves/*loups* indeed), only to flee further in 'La fugue à Toulon,' with a 'Détour à Ajaccio,' leading to 'Tourbillons du Loing' (Moret-sur Loing). All of these, after many dramatic episodes of various ghosts and rivals, as seen in 'Apparitions,' 'Les fantômes vinrent à sa rencontre,' 'Berl entre en scène' and 'Haro sur Berl,' result in unexpected *coups de théâtre*: 'Quand l'impossible donnera la main à l'imprévu,' and more 'Divorces et déchirements,' before reconciliation in 'Retrouvailles,' finally leading to a more recent testimony from Suzanne Muzard in Fay-sous-Bois, during 'Un Dimanche à la Muzardière' in July 1988. No wonder coincidences multiply as well as personalities, under the sign of ambiguity: Suzanne Muzard is therefore revealed (and hidden) through the portrait of her childhood friend and double 'Susana la perverse' only to confuse us with another double 'Une, deux, trois Suzanne.'

More importantly, Sebbag's book gives back a voice to the successive queens of hearts who tamed this deeply amorous and adventurous spirit – a voice at least to two of them, Suzanne and Nadja, since Lise Deharme³ is still restricted to the silent role of a coquette or a drama (ice)queen, only viewed as the ungrateful recipient of Breton's homage, while Simone Kahn-Breton's letters, in particular to her cousin and confidente, Denise Lévy, have not been published yet.⁴ The originality of Sebbag's study is undeniably his (adopted) female points of view, relying on extracts from Suzanne Muzard's journal or interviews with her, as well as extracts from Nadja's letters (previously unpublished and acquired by the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet in April 2003 at Calmels and Cohen's auction).⁵

The iconography of the volume is impressive and deeply moving: many previously unpublished pictures of Suzanne Muzard and Simone Breton, as well as a rare picture of Lise Deharme and drawings by Nadja, are scattered without real (recognisable) order among the chapters, therefore retaining a surprise effect to unsettle readers' expectations. One should add that the aura of these images seems to be (without getting into any discussion about the Barthesian legacy in photography) partly mystic and mystifying, or deeply mysterious: after all, the previously secretive and unseen from the family album and private collections is now shown (frequently) for the first time in public, but how do we respond to this revelation in the case of a legend, if not by an initial sense of awe and eerie recognition? However, the quite informal photomontages⁶ of Muzard, for instance, also convey her exuberance and add a (light) touch of modernity, as well as



evoke (with a gender twist) all the more famous photomontages of male surrealists that have been reproduced over the years and have contributed to a (familiar) surrealist iconography.

After addressing the question of the viewpoint (as we have seen, at times an exclusively female - shall we say feminist? - viewpoint fluctuating around Suzanne Muzard and Nadja's voices, and Simone's changing moods, or fixed and encumbered by old stereotypes regarding surrealist women as mere muses, as in Deharme's case), one question of format and content needs to be answered. Why does Sebbag's book become somewhat chaotic after chapter 2? We might say the absence of order is more vivid, bringing back and forth arguments and anecdotes in a new combination, and seems much more faithful to surrealist aesthetics and ethics. After all, Sebbag was (is, one starts to suspect) a practising surrealist, part of the last group surrounding André Breton in the two years before his death in 1966, which gathered in Les Halles in the café *La Promenade de Vénus*, rue du Louvre. We might also suggest a simpler answer: endless wandering, visions, revisions of free will and free spirits and 'objectively' rushed or deliberately chosen 'faits précipices' are notoriously the key processes to retrace the ghosts of Nadja or Breton himself in *Nadja*. In order to follow the fluctuating movements and *volte-faces* of 'l'errance de l'amour,' with the surrealist heart beat oscillating towards Simone, Suzanne, Lise or Nadja, and therefore to trace the main phantoms haunting the thirty-year old Breton (who are still haunting us today, as this book shows remarkably well), I would suggest that Sebbag had no choice but to adopt a resolutely anti (or multi) chronological approach to pay justice to the intermittences and synchronicities of Breton's volatile and *explosant-fixe* heart. It would appear that he was better off practising his own hand at collage techniques to give back a new dynamism to facts and legend, intermingling fiction and testimonies through a series of flashbacks and superimposed parallels. If these prove to be at times quite repetitive, they succeed nevertheless in mimicking and following the unpredictable detours taken by Eros and Cupid, governed by the twin supreme principles of *hasard objectif* and mad love, or even the madness of love, 'amour-folie.'

A coincidence in the French literary world will not have escaped many readers. The March 2004 issue of *Magazine littéraire* offered a whole dossier dedicated to Nadja and reopens the (all too famous) Nadja case – or Breton's (supposedly infamous) abandon or loss of interest? – with previously unpublished letters by Nadja. This whole reassessment, which attempts to see Breton in a new light (or actually cornered by contradictions and rather trapped in limbo between shadows of 'amour fou' and *apparitions* of 'amour-folie') owes a lot to Georges Sebbag's meticulous scrutiny of every aspect of *André Breton, l'amour-folie* in the 1920s. Sebbag's achievement in his latest book on surrealism is to give us a new portrait of Breton as a Mad Lover which also is (and remains rightly so) a



puzzle or a collage, a dually rigorous and ambiguous portrait based equally on facts and curious 'rapprochements soudains' or ('petrifying'?) coincidences, all the more convincing in that it retains its aura of biographical vulnerability and uncertainty.

These fragmentary pieces are ready to be scattered, distorted and reassembled again in exquisitely uncanny patterns or utterly unpredictable combinations. Since the wave of pessimism or the mixed feelings which surrounded the *Vente Breton* at Calmels and Cohen in Paris in April 2003, *André Breton: l'amour-folie* will surely reconcile readers to the utterly commonsensical (or genuinely surreal) idea that what seems lost is never truly lost, and pave the way for the forthcoming editions of lost and found correspondence by surrealist women (or men) around Breton, who, *hasard objectif oblige*, cannot remain silenced for much longer. Nadja herself predicted that 'l'âme errante' and 'l'âme des amants' would not be pinned down that easily: 'A André vers d'autres horizons et vers d'autres lumières.'⁷

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¹See, among others, Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1986, Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds), *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, London 1993, Renée Riese Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism and Partnership*, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1994, Georgiana C. Colville and Katharine Conley (eds), *La Femme s'entête*, Paris, 1998, Georgiana C. Colville, *Scandaleusement d'elles*, Paris, 1999, Marie-Claire Barnet, *La Femme cent sexes ou les genres communicants: Deharme, Mansour, Prassinis*, Bern, 1998.

²Sebbag, *André Breton: l'amour-folie*, 99.

³See Barnet, *La Femme cent sexes*, and 'To Lise Deharme's Lighthouse: Le Phare de Neuilly, a Forgotten Surrealist Review,' in *French Studies*, 57: 3, 323-334.

⁴Georgiana Colville (ed.), *Correspondance Simone Kahn-Denise Lévy*, forthcoming. Some of these letters have been published in German in Unda Hörner, *Die realen Frauen der Surrealisten*, Mannheim, 1996.

⁵Complex negotiations are apparently taking place to publish Nadja's 27 manuscript letters but her correspondence can be (partly) accessed and consulted at www.calmelscohen.com, on the section of the site entitled 'Breton, 42 rue Fontaine,' where it is described as the 'Correspondance exceptionnelle du plus romanesque et mythique personnage de la littérature surréaliste: Nadja.' See Bernard Fauconnier, 'Les Secrets de Nadja: enquête sur le chef-d'œuvre d'André Breton,' in *Magazine littéraire*, no. 429, March 2004, 96-103 for more extracts and note 6, 103. More details of the sale of Breton's collections at Drouot-Richelieu (how much and how many 'moules à hosties'?) are also available and manuscripts of all letters by Nadja are visible (if not always that easy to decipher).

⁶*Photomaton: The Small, Magical Room*, an exhibition of Surrealist photomatons, was held in Germany at the Michael Hoppen Gallery stand at the Basel art fair (15-20 June 2004). See the review by Jonathan Jones, 'André in Wonderland,' *The Guardian*, 16 June 2004. My thanks to David Roe for this reference.



⁷Nadja, 'La Fleur des Amants' (1926), and see the dedication of her poem to Breton written on the back of the famous eye-flower drawing at www.calmelscohen.com, 'Breton, 42 rue Fontaine.'

