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Source: *Yale French Studies*, No. 75, The Politics of Tradition: Placing Women in French Literature (1988), pp. 148-172

Published by: [Yale University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930312>

Accessed: 05/03/2014 11:38

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A Double Margin: Reflections on Women Writers and the Avant-garde in France

I

To say the word “avant-garde” today is to risk falling into a conceptual and terminological quagmire. Is “avant-garde” synonymous with, or to be subtly distinguished from, the experimental, the bohemian, the modern, the modernist, the postmodern? Is it a historical category or a transhistorical one? A purely aesthetic category or a philosophical/political/existential one? Is it still to be taken seriously, or does it “conjure up comical associations of aging youth?”¹ In short, does the word have specific content or has it become so vague and general as to be virtually useless?

With that bow to confusion, I shall proceed as if I knew what I meant

1. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 36.

Among the works I have found helpful in thinking about these questions are: Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987); Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983); Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961); Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985); Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (Salem, N.H.: Ayer, 1959); Charles Russell, *Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-Garde from Rimbaud through Postmodernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). See also my essay, “Naming and Difference: Reflections on ‘Modernism versus Postmodernism’ in Literature,” in *Approaching Postmodernism*, ed. Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986), 255–70.

when I say “avant-garde.” And I shall take as a starting point a set of propositions that appear sufficiently obvious to warrant no detailed demonstration. There have existed avant-garde movements in French art and thought. Although they can be traced at least as far back as Romanticism, they came fully into their own in the early years of this century and found what was perhaps their fullest elaboration in the Surrealist movement between 1924 and 1939. The *Tel Quel* group and its allies of the 1960s and early 1970s, as well as various feminist groups after 1968, associated with specific journals and theoretical positions regarding women and “the feminine,” also constituted genuine artistic and cultural avant-gardes (*pace* Peter Burger).² The hallmark of these movements was a *collective project* (more or less explicitly defined and often shifting over time) that linked artistic experimentation and a critique of outmoded artistic practices with an ideological critique of bourgeois thought and a desire for social change, so that the activity of writing could also be seen as a genuine intervention in the social, cultural, and possibly even the political arena. Finally, although most of the participants in the later movements are still alive and writing in France today, the movements themselves are now dispersed and have not been replaced.

To be sure, qualifications and additions are possible (should the *nouveaux romanciers* be considered an avant-garde movement, and if not, why not? Same question for existentialism). The point I wish to make is that there has existed, at least since Surrealism, a strong and almost continuous current in French literary and artistic practice and thought, based on the double exigency to “be absolutely modern” (Rimbaud) and to change, if not the world (Marx), at least—as a first step—the way we think about the world. Furthermore, this recurrent tendency has expressed itself with remarkable consistency, privileging certain concepts (heterogeneity, play, marginality, transgression, the unconscious, eroticism, excess) and mounting heavy attacks on others (representation, the unitary subject, unitary meaning, linear narrative, the realist novel, paternal authority, Truth with a capital T). Alice Jardine has argued that perhaps the most important thread of continuity, subtending all of the above oppositions, has been the “putting into dis-

2. In his influential/controversial *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Burger argues that the term “avant-garde” must refer only to what he calls the historical avant-gardes, embodied for him chiefly in Dada and Surrealism. According to Burger, the European and American avant-garde movements of the 1960s are merely a “neoavant-garde, which stages for a second time the avant-gardiste break with tradition” and thereby “becomes a manifestation that is void of sense” (61). The notion that the avant-garde project could only happen once, making all other manifestations of it inauthentic “replays,” sets Burger against other theorists (notably Huyssen and Russell) who wish to see more of a continuity in the project of modernity.

course of 'woman': "We might say that what is generally referred to as modernity is precisely . . . the perhaps historically unprecedented exploration of the female, differently maternal body."³ One has but to think of the Surrealists' celebration of *amour fou* (or, in the case of Bataille, *amour obscène*) in poetry and narrative, and their obsessive preoccupation with the female body in painting and photography; of Alain Robbe-Grillet's and other *nouveaux romanciers*' combination of a thematics of erotic violence with a poetics of antirealist transgression; of Phillippe Sollers's attempts to wed Joycean wordplay to erotic exhibitionism (especially in *Paradis*, his last work of the *Tel Quel* period); of Julia Kristeva's theory of the maternal/semiotic and Jacques Derrida's concept of "invagination"; and of contemporary women writers' exploration/inscription of the female body, whether as maternal *jouissance* or as the *jouissance* of female lovers, to assent to Jardine's daring generalization.

One question, of course, is whether the "putting into discourse of 'woman'" by a woman writer is comparable, in its meaning and effects, to its putting into discourse by a male writer. Another important question, which has preoccupied many feminist theorists and which Jardine rightly emphasizes at the outset of her book, concerns the problematic relationship between "woman" as discursive entity, or metaphor, and *women* as biologically and culturally gendered human beings. "It is always a bit of a shock to the feminist critic," writes Jardine, "when she recognizes that the repeated and infinitely expanded 'feminine' . . . often has very little, if anything, to do with women" (35). And putting the dilemma even more sharply: "To refuse 'woman' or the 'feminine' as cultural and libidinal constructions (as in "men's femininity"), is, ironically, to return to metaphysical—anatomical—definitions of sexual identity. To accept a metaphorization, a semiosis of woman, on the other hand, means risking once again the absence of women as subjects in the struggle of modernity" (37). As Jardine points out, the dilemma is especially acute for those American feminist critics who are torn between the heady attractions of (largely French) theory and the no less significant appeal of (largely American) empirical and historical study, where the material situation and the gender of an author are never a matter of indifference. Nancy Miller, who has often and forcefully argued for the materialistic view even while admitting the elegant attractions of French theory, summed up the dilemma in another way a few years ago when she asked, half jokingly: "Can we imagine, or should we, a position that speaks in tropes and walks in sensible shoes?"⁴

3. Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 33–34; hereafter cited in parentheses in the text.

4. Nancy K. Miller, "The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions," *Diacritics*, 12:2 (1982), 53.

I would like to take up Miller's challenge by reflecting on a particularly powerful trope associated both with women and with avant-gardes: that of the margin. If, as this trope suggests, culture is "like" a space to be mapped or a printed page, then the place of women, and of avant-garde movements, has traditionally been situated away from the center, "on the fringe," in the margins. One difference is that avant-garde movements have willfully chosen their marginal position—the better to launch attacks at the center—whereas women have more often than not been relegated to that position: far from the altar as from the marketplace, those centers where cultural subjects invent and enact their symbolic and material rites.

It has become increasingly clear that the relegating of *women* to the margins of culture is not unrelated to the place accorded to "Woman" by the cultural imaginary: "Woman, in the political vocabulary, will be the name for whatever undoes the whole."⁵ In other vocabularies, "woman" has been the name of the hole that threatens the fullness of the subject, the wild zone that threatens the constructions of reason, the dark continent that threatens the regions of light. What strikes me as new, however, is that the "putting into discourse of 'woman'" in modern French thought has gone hand in hand with a revaluation and revalorization of the marginal spaces with which "she" has been traditionally identified. It is because of that reversal that the complicated relations, at the margins of culture, between women writers and the avant-garde in France must particularly occupy our attention.

In *Les Parleuses*, the series of conversations between Marguerite Duras and Xavière Gauthier published in 1974, the talk turns at one point to why Duras is not really known by the reading public. Gauthier remarks that people know her name, but few seem to have read her texts—perhaps because they are afraid? Duras replies that very probably things will change after her death, but that indeed "I attract misogyny in a particular way." Gauthier (who often speaks more volubly than Duras in these conversations) then observes:

That doesn't surprise me. Precisely because I think that they are totally revolutionary books, totally avant-garde, both from a usual revolutionary point of view and from a woman's point of view, and most people aren't there yet.

To which Duras responds: "Yes, it's something doubly intolerable" [une double insupportabilité].⁶

Doubly intolerable because "totally revolutionary, totally avant-

5. Denis Hollier, "Collages," *Introduction, College de Sociologie*, trans. Betty Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

6. Marguerite Duras and Xavière Gauthier, *Les Parleuses* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974), 61; my translation, here and throughout from the French unless otherwise stated. *Les Parleuses* has been published in English as *Woman to Woman*, trans. Katherine A. Jensen (University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

garde," Duras's work (by 1974 she had published among other works the trilogy comprising *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, *Le Vice-Consul* and *L'Amour*, and directed *India Song*) is here seen as the quintessence of the marginal. The fact that ten years later, with the publication of *L'Amant*, she would become an international bestselling author does not alter the logic of that characterization (although it did of course alter Duras's own situation⁷): the avant-garde woman writer is doubly intolerable, seen from the center, because her writing escapes not one but two sets of expectations/categorizations; it corresponds neither to the "usual revolutionary point of view" nor to the "woman's point of view." Gauthier does not explain what she means here by the "woman's point of view"—I would guess that she alludes to a certain view of women's writing which does not include experimentation with language. As for the "usual revolutionary" point of view, it seems to refer to an overtly political kind of writing which adopts an oppositional stance to society. Duras tells Gauthier that in her works there is no "refusal" or "putting into question" of society, because "to put society into question is still to acknowledge it. . . . I mean the people who do that, who write about the refusal of society, harbor within them a kind of nostalgia. They are, I am certain, much less separated from it than I am" (62). Her own position is one of total separation, total estrangement. So far out that it escapes the social order altogether? In any case, so far out as to be elsewhere. *L'existence est ailleurs*.

The sudden appearance of the last sentence in the above paragraph, produced as my free association to the word "elsewhere," itself a gloss on Duras's words, suggests to me a curious filiation; for the sentence is the famous concluding sentence of the first Surrealist Manifesto. Breton, declaring the foundation of a radically new movement, states that [his/its] existence is elsewhere; Duras, who accepts to call her works "totally revolutionary, totally avant-garde," declares that she is elsewhere. In one reading of the trope of marginality, "woman," "woman's writing" and "avant-garde" become metaphors for each other. That is one reason why Rosalind Krauss, for example, can write about Surrealist photography that in its practice "woman and photograph become figures for each other's condition: ambivalent, blurred, indistinct, and lacking in, to use Edward Weston's word, 'authority'."⁸

The opposition Krauss establishes between "Straight Photography,"

7. Interestingly, Duras continues to see herself as the object of misogyny and even, somehow, as in danger of not being recognized in *France*, despite her worldwide fame. See her interview with Alice Jardine in this volume.

8. Rosalind Krauss, "Corpus Delicti," in R. Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 95; hereafter cited in parentheses in the text.

metonymically represented by Edward Weston and implicitly coded as male (“grounded in the sharply focused image, its resolution a figure of the unity of what the spectator sees, a wholeness that in turn founds the spectator himself as a unified subject”) and Surrealist photography, which she explicitly codes as female (blurring all boundaries and threatening the spectator of Straight Photography to the point that he finds it “unbearable”—which translates exactly into *insupportable*, as used by Duras) is a move that signals Krauss’s allegiance to contemporary French thought. It allows her to valorize Surrealist photography as the (metaphorically) “feminine” Other of “straight photography”; but it is also a move that leads to a significant (symptomatic?) slippage in terminology and conceptualization. Woman, Krauss states, is “the obsessional subject” of Surrealist photography—but in fact, as the illustrations to her essay amply document, woman, or rather the female body, is the obsessional *object* of Surrealist photographic experimentation.⁹ Krauss’s brilliant discussion of Surrealist “optical assaults on the body” (70) elides the difference between the subject who is agent of the assault (and who is invariably a male photographer) and the object that is the target of the “active, aggressive assault on reality” (65), this object being also invariably the female body.

To call woman the obsessional *subject* of Surrealist photography is, then, misleading in a particularly interesting way, for it suggests, or rather confirms, that the figural substitution of “woman” or “the feminine” for avant-garde practice (the two being united by their common marginality in relation to “straight” or “mainstream” culture) may end up by eliding precisely the question of the female subject; and eliding, as well, the question of history. For if Surrealism, to stick to that example, is studied historically, then the absence of female subjects of Surrealist practice becomes a problem one *cannot* avoid. And I would claim that it is only by working through the problem historically that one can make progress on theoretical ground as well.

Before turning my discourse down the historical path, however, I want to emphasize a more positive and empowering aspect of the “woman”/avant-garde/marginality trope for female subjects. As the remarks by Duras I quoted earlier suggested, there is a way in which the sense of being “doubly marginal” and therefore “totally avant-garde” provides the female subject with a kind of centrality, *in her own eyes*. In a system in which the marginal, the avant-garde, the subversive, all that disturbs and “undoes the whole” is endowed with positive value, a

9. It is true that the English language is partly responsible for this slippage, since “subject” can mean “subject-matter,” a synonym for object of representation. But a critic as theoretically sophisticated as Krauss obviously knows the other, more “Gallic” meaning of subject as agent of action.

woman artist who can identify those concepts with her own practice and metaphorically with her own femininity can find in them a source of strength and self-legitimation. Perhaps no one has done this more successfully than H el ene Cixous. Her famous essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), is the closest thing to an avant-garde manifesto written from an explicitly feminist perspective. True to the genre of the manifesto, it is written by an "I" who represents a group ("we," in this case women); it alternates in tone between the aggressive (when addressing the hostile "straight" reader) and the hortatory (when addressing the other members of the group), and it suggests a program that implies both a revolutionary practice of writing and the disruption of existing cultural and social institutions and ideologies. What distinguishes Cixous's manifesto from its forerunners (Marinetti's Futurist manifestoes, Tzara's Dada manifestoes, Breton's Surrealist manifestoes) is that Cixous explicitly equates the radically new, subversive text with the "feminine text": "A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments . . . in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter."¹⁰ Although the "feminine text" that is here projected (not *defined*, but projected into the future as an " criture   venir"—this too being the hallmark of the manifesto as genre)¹¹ is not to be restricted to writers who are women, women are nevertheless in a privileged position to practice it: "thanks to their history, women today know (how to do and want) what men will be able to conceive of only much later" (258).

Cixous's metaphorical equation of "the feminine" with the hyperbolically marginal allows her to envisage *women* as the primary subjects of avant-garde practice. In this she differs not only from Krauss (for whom "the feminine" remains a metaphor, applied to work by male artists), but also from Kristeva; for although Kristeva leaves ample space for the maternal/semiotic in her theory of the avant-garde subject, that subject remains of necessity male. Not only are all of her exemplary avant-garde writers male, from Lautr eamont and Mallarm  through Joyce, Artaud, Bataille, and Sollers, but she has even discussed, at various times, why in terms of her theory it is virtually impossible for a

10. H el ene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 258; hereafter cited in parentheses in the text.

11. The phrase " criture   venir," "writing to come," is Maurice Blanchot's; its application to avant-garde writing (specifically, to Surrealist writing) was pointed out in a lecture by Denis Hollier at the 1987 Harvard Summer Institute on the Study of Avant-Gardes, which I codirected with Alice Jardine. I wish to thank Denis Hollier for this insight.

woman to achieve a similar status. In order to be truly innovative, one has to be able to risk giving up "la légitimation paternelle"; but if women take that risk, what awaits them more often than not is madness or suicide.¹² For the male subject, the negativity involved in giving up paternal legitimation is compensated for by a positive maternal support, and the two coexist in a dynamic balance. For the woman writer, there seems to be no viable alternative to either total paternal identification (which involves the absence of negativity, the conformism of the dutiful daughter) or else a regression to the "archaic mother," which involves yet another conformism equally incapable of producing true artistic innovation—the conformism of those who claim that "it's good because it was done by women."¹³

Even as I am writing these remarks, however, I realize that they are in some profound sense not pertinent. It is misleading to use the present tense in discussing either Kristeva's or Cixous's theoretical reflections on "écriture féminine" and its possible or impossible intersections with innovation and avant-garde practice. Those reflections are historically situated in the 1970s, at a time when there existed a strong if already splintered women's movement in France, together with an equally strong current of philosophical and literary theorizing about modernity. Today, as we are nearing the end of the 1980s, my sense is that the collective dynamism is gone and there remain only individual efforts, among women as in the French literary and intellectual arena generally. The music has stopped and the dancing is over, at least for a while. This may be the time, therefore, to put on our sensible shoes and take a walk around some real margins in the imaginary garden of the French avant-garde.

II

From the point of view of one who walks in sensible shoes, it is clear that there is no such thing as *the* avant-garde; there are only specific avant-garde movements, situated in a particular time and place. If we want to talk about the real marginalization of women in relation to "the avant-garde" (by real marginalization, I mean the exclusion of women from the centers of male avant-garde activity and/or their exclusion

12. Julia Kristeva, *Des Chinoises* (Paris: Editions des Femmes, 1974), 47; and "Unes Femmes," *Cahiers du GRIF* 12 (1975), 26. Kristeva's theory of the (male) avant-garde subject is most systematically laid out in *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974); see also "Le Sujet en procès" (on Artaud), "L'Expérience et la pratique" (on Bataille), and "Polylogue" (on Sollers) in Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).

13. Kristeva, "Unes Femmes," 24.

from the historical and critical accounts of that activity), we must look at individual cases in their historical and national specificity.

I propose to look at a case that has been much examined by feminist critics of late, in France and in the United States: that of Surrealism. The feminist exploration of Surrealism has proceeded along two tracks, which we might designate, following Elaine Showalter's well-known categorizations, as feminist critique (the rereading of male authors from a feminist perspective) and as gynocriticism (the rediscovery of hitherto "invisible" or undervalued women writers and their work). The pioneering work of feminist critique of Surrealism was Xavière Gauthier's *Surréalisme et sexualité* (1971). Polemical in its effect even though analytical in tone, Gauthier's detailed study of Surrealist poetry and painting sought to show, and to explain in chiefly psychoanalytic terms, "the misogyny of the compact group of male Surrealists."¹⁴ Whether they idealized the female body and their love of it, as they did in their poetry, or whether they attacked it and dismembered it, as they did in their paintings, the male Surrealists, according to Gauthier's analysis, were essentially using the woman to work out their rebellion against the Father.

Gauthier's book appeared a year after Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*; like Millet's work, it was important because it *posed as a problem* the subject position of male artists in relation to the objects of their representations, women. In recent years, we have seen more nuanced attempts to explore this problem, especially in the field of Surrealist visual art;¹⁵ but there is certainly room for further reflection on the subject position of Surrealism.

As for the gynocritical work, it began with the necessary task of gathering information: who were the women writers and artists associated with Surrealism, and what did they accomplish? The 1977 volume of the review *Obliques*, devoted to *La Femme Surréaliste*, was the first attempt to present a catalogue of "Surrealist women," in alphabetical order, complete with photographs, bibliographies, and brief excerpts or reproductions of their work as well as some interviews and interpretive essays. In 1980, Lea Vergine's *L'Autre Moitié de l'avant-garde*, which sought to document the lives and work of women artists associated with all the major European avant-garde movements between 1910 and

14. Xavière Gauthier, prefatory remarks to "Le Surréalisme et la sexualité" (an excerpt from her book), in *La Femme Surréaliste*, special issue of *Obliques* 14–15 (1977), 42. See Gauthier's *Surréalisme et sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, collection "Idées," 1971).

15. See, for example, Mary Ann Caws, "Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art," in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 262–87; and Susan Gubar, "Representing Pornography: Feminism, Criticism, and Depictions of Female Violation," *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 4 (1987), 712–41.

1940, included eighteen women under the heading "Surréalisme;" some of them had also figured among the thirty-six women listed in *La Femme Surréaliste*, while others had not. These two books are precious reference works, but clearly they were only a first step: neither one made any claim to exhaustiveness, nor did they attempt to draw any general conclusions about the participation of women in the Surrealist movement and their contribution to it. In the last few years, important work in that direction has been accomplished by (among others) Whitney Chadwick, Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, and Gloria Feman Orenstein.¹⁶ As a result, it is now becoming possible to engage in a more systematic reflection on the place (and placing) of women in Surrealism.

In what follows, I want to develop the two lines of thought suggested above. If indeed the subject position of Surrealism was male, what difficulties did that imply for the artistic practice of "Surrealist women," especially of women writers? And what exactly was the historical position of women artists and writers in the development of the Surrealist movement?

The Surrealist Subject

Since nothing is more instructive than a good example, I shall begin by offering two. The first is a paragraph from an essay by Louis Aragon, one of the founding members of the Surrealist group, published in 1924. He is writing here about the newly established *Centre des recherches surréalistes* (also known as *La Centrale Surréaliste*), which functioned in its first months as a rallying point for all those wishing to participate in the Surrealist project:

We hung a woman on the ceiling of an empty room, and every day receive visits from anxious men bearing heavy secrets. That is how we came to know Georges Bessière, like a blow of the fist. We are working at a task enigmatic to ourselves, in front of a volume of Fantomas, fastened to the wall by forks. The visitors, born under remote stars or next door, are helping to elaborate this formidable machine for killing what is in order to accomplish what is not. At number 15, Rue

16. See Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), the first comprehensive study of Surrealist women artists, lavishly illustrated; Jacqueline Chénieux, *Le Surréalisme et le roman* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1983), which includes serious discussion of work by Surrealist women writers; Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Reclaiming the Great Mother: A Feminist Journey to Madness and Back in Search of a Goddess Heritage," *Symposium* 36, no. 1 (1982), 45–69, which discusses work by both women writers and artists. Chénieux and Orenstein contributed to the *Obliques* issue on *La Femme Surréaliste*. Despite all this valuable work, no one has attempted until now a systematic reflection on the historical relation of women to the Surrealist movement and on its implications for French literary and cultural history, as well as for a possible theory of the avant-garde.

de Grenelle, we have opened a romantic Inn for unclassifiable ideas and continuing revolts. All that still remains of hope in this despairing universe will turn its last, raving glances toward our pathetic stall. *It is a question of formulating a new declaration of the rights of man.*¹⁷

The second example is from an essay by a historian of Surrealism, Robert Short, published in 1976 in an influential volume:

The criterion that the Surrealists apply to a work of art is its susceptibility to provoke a real change in those who encounter it, to call forth an affective response similar in quality to that evoked by the sight of the woman one loves.¹⁸

Although these texts are very different, one thing they have in common is that the author does not seem to be aware of all that he is saying. Aragon begins by talking about a woman hung on a ceiling and ends by proclaiming the Surrealist project as a desire for “a new declaration of the rights of man”—apparently unaware that the word “man” in his last sentence asks to be interpreted in its gender-specific sense, especially after all the talk about blows of the fist and machines for killing what is. Robert Short begins by talking about the Surrealists’ conception of art and ends by evoking “the woman one loves”—apparently unaware that not all spectators of art are heterosexual males. In a word, both the founding Surrealist and the later historian are writing from an exclusively male subject position, and are unproblematically assigning that position to the Surrealist subject in general. They do this, I would guess, in all innocence, with no malevolent intent: theirs is not the provocation of the self-conscious misogynist, but the ordinary sexism of the man who will reply, when you point it out to him, that he hadn’t noticed there were no women in the room.

But in fact, as Aragon tells us, there was a woman in the Surrealist room—her only peculiarity being that she was not made of flesh and blood. The woman in question was a life-size reclining nude figure, armless and headless (was she the inspiration for Max Ernst’s first collage novel, *La Femme Cent Têtes?*), suspended from the ceiling of the *Centrale*. Her function was evidently to inspire the “anxious men” who came there to unburden themselves of their secrets. Did any anxious women come to unburden themselves of theirs? How might the floating lady have functioned for them?

Aragon does not mention any living women in the room; but a

17. Quoted in Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 92; my emphasis. I have modified the translation somewhat—notably, I have put verbs in the present tense as they were in the original, published in 1924 and explicitly referring to the “here and now.”

18. Robert Short, “Dada and Surrealism,” in *Modernism, 1890–1930*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1976), 303.

famous photograph by Man Ray, "La Centrale Surréaliste en 1924," documents the presence of two living women: Simone Breton and Mick Soupault, wives of the Surrealists André and Philippe. In the standard version of the photograph, the image has been cut off at the top, leaving only the feet of the headless lady visible in the upper left hand corner (fig. 1). There exists another version, however, which shows the entire figure, occupying the upper third of the photograph (fig. 2); below her, standing and seated in two uneven rows, are twelve men and the two women. The men, dressed in dark suits, white shirts, and ties, are writers and artists: Charles Baron, Raymond Queneau, Pierre Naville, André Breton (sporting a monocle), Jacques-André Boiffard, Giorgio de Chirico, Roger Vitrac, Paul Eluard, Philippe Soupault, Robert Desnos, Louis Aragon, and Max Morise. They look for the most part formal, solemn, almost grim, as befits an official group portrait. The two women look different, both from them and from each other: Mick Soupault, demurely dressed, is smiling slightly, like a good and tolerant wife; Simone Breton (whom Breton was to divorce a few years later, when he met his next "amour fou") is resting her head sideways on her arm—one eye is covered by her dark hair, while the other looks at the camera with a burning stare. She is the only one who looks openly provocative, almost shocking: in one version, her legs are crossed, exposing a bit of bare flesh above her knee-high stocking (fig. 1).

Why do I dwell on this image? Because I think that it points up, as clearly and more graphically than Aragon's text, the degree to which the subject position of Surrealism, as it was elaborated at the very inception of the movement, was male. The photograph also makes explicit what is only implied in Aragon's text: the problematic position of actual women who might wish to integrate themselves, as subjects, into the male script. I read Simone Breton and Mick Soupault in the photograph as female subjects—but as alienated subjects who have adapted themselves to the male vision of "woman," in what Luce Irigaray calls the masquerade.¹⁹ Together, they figure the two poles of femininity between which male desire hovers: the chaste asexual wife/mother and the burning-eyed whore. Needless to say, I know nothing about the real personalities of Simone Breton and Mick Soupault—my remarks refer to their image in the photograph, which can itself be considered as the construction of a male subject. The photograph fascinates me because it lends itself so beautifully to be read as an emblem: above, the imaginary faceless woman on whom the Surrealist male artist can project his fantasies—fantasies which then become externalized, transformed, elaborated into works, poems, stories, paintings, photographs; below,

19. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).



Figure 1. Man Ray. The Surrealist "Centrale," 1924



Figure 2. Man Ray. The Surrealist "Centrale," 1924.

two flesh and blood women who produced no works, but who *embody* aspects of the imaginary woman hanging from the ceiling.

How much meaning can one extract from a single image or a single text? More examples are needed—for instance, another “official” group portrait, a photomontage published in 1929 in *La Révolution Surrealiste* and often reproduced since then (fig. 3). The montage consists of the photograph of a painting by Magritte, framed by the portraits of sixteen Surrealists with their eyes closed; the painting represents a female nude, standing in a pose reminiscent of Botticelli’s *Venus*, frontally exposed; above and below her, as part of the painting, is the inscription: “Je ne vois pas la _____ cachée dans la forêt,” [I do not see the _____ hidden in the forest], the image of the woman filling in the hole left between the words.²⁰ The Surrealists, all male, who frame her, adopt the position of the “Je,” not seeing; at the same time, she is given *to be seen* by the spectator, who sees both the woman and the Surrealists (including Magritte who painted her) with their eyes kept resolutely shut. This too seems to me to be an emblem of the Surrealist subject, who does not need to see the woman in order to imagine her, placing her at the center but only as an image, while any actual woman is now out of the picture altogether.

Now here is the crucial question: given the overwhelmingly male subject position of Surrealism, how did a number of women artists, who *did* produce works, manage to elaborate an imagery and a script that involved neither a masquerade of femininity nor male impersonation—which in aesthetic terms would result in purely formal imitation, the adopting of formal solutions without discovering them as a personal necessity. Luce Irigaray has touched on this problem in an essay dedicated to one of the Surrealist women whose writing has recently become known, Unica Zurn. “If woman is to put into form the *ulē* [Greek: *matter*] that she is, she must not cut herself off from it nor leave it to maternity, but succeed in creating with that primary material that she is by discovering and exposing her own morphology. Otherwise, she risks using or reusing what man has already put into forms, especially about her; risks remaking what has already been made, and losing her-

20. This painting should be compared with Magritte’s famous 1926 painting, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe,” which shows a pipe accompanied by the inscription (“This is not a pipe”) that gives the work its title. Although both paintings are playing with representation, they do so in diametrically opposed ways: the “reality” of the painted pipe is negated by the inscription, which highlights the difference between image and word, image and thing; the painted woman, on the contrary, is so “real” that she can *replace* the word that would be used to designate her. In the first instance, the differences between visual representation, language, and reality are emphasized; in the second, these differences are blurred—as if, where woman was concerned, the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic were interchangeable (for a male subject?).

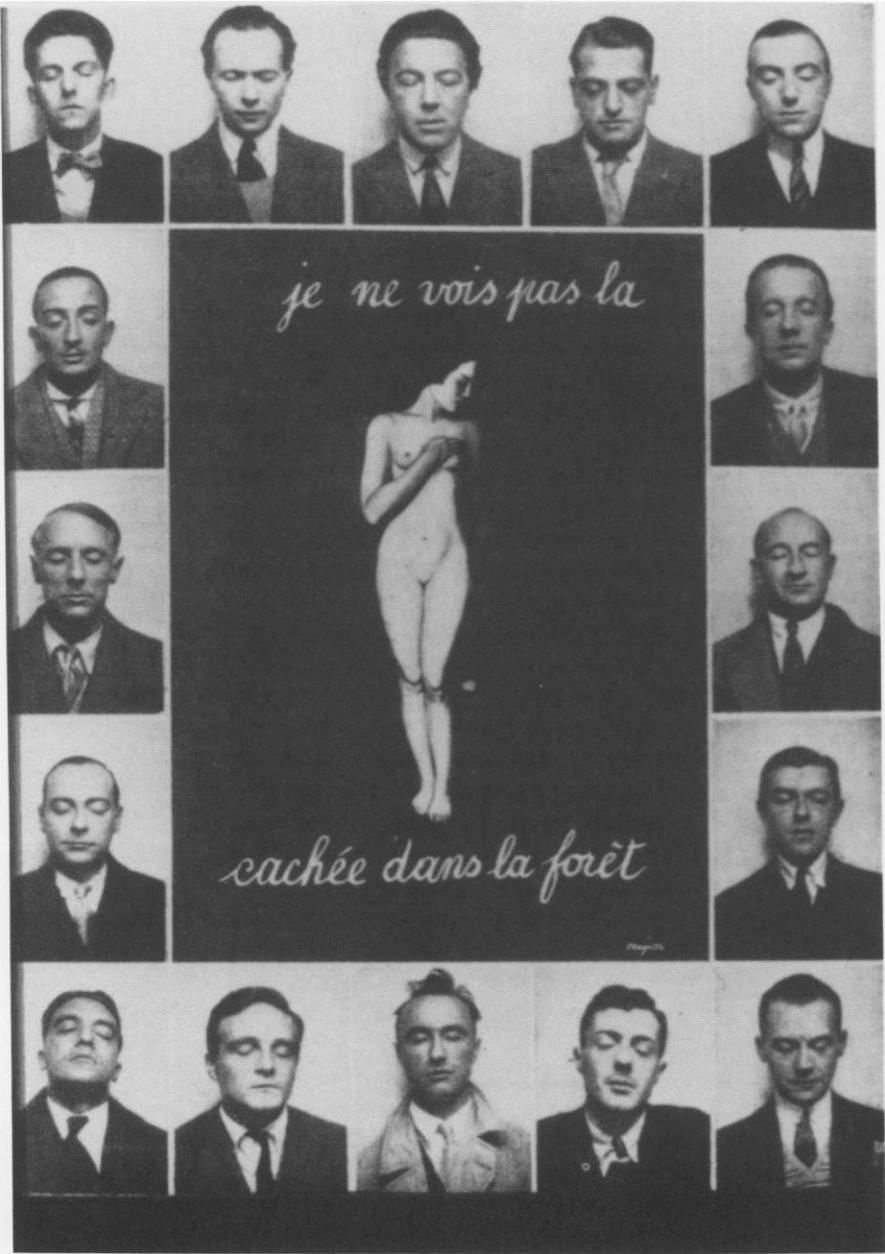


Figure 3. Photomontage of Surrealists around a painting by Magritte, 1929.

self in that labyrinth."²¹ A woman Surrealist, in other words, cannot simply assume a subject position and take over a stock of images elaborated by the male imaginary; in order to innovate, she has to invent her own position as subject and elaborate her own set of images—different from, yet as empowering as the image of the exposed female body, with its endless potential for manipulation, disarticulation and rearticulation, fantasizing and projection, is for her male colleagues.

As we are coming to realize, a significant number of women artists and writers did succeed in creating their own version and vision of Surrealist practice, without merely imitating male models. Over the past ten years, there have emerged significant bodies of work produced by women who previously were either never mentioned or mentioned only in the most cursory manner in general histories of Surrealist art or of the Surrealist movement: Leonora Carrington, Dorothea Tanning, Kay Sage, Eileen Agar, Ithell Colquhoun, Toyen, Unica Zurn, Leonor Fini, Valentine Hugo—the list can be prolonged. These women were (are) primarily visual artists, but some have also produced wonderful written work—notably Leonora Carrington, who is a painter but whose short stories from the 1930s and 1940s, as well as her novel, *The Hearing Trumpet* (written in 1950) are finally finding an audience; and Unica Zurn, a graphic artist whose autobiographical texts, *Sombre Printemps* and *L'Homme Jasmin*, written (originally in German) not long before her suicide in 1970, have acquired almost a cult status in Paris.²² Among the women who are primarily writers, two whose names have found their way into some general studies without receiving sustained attention are Joyce Mansour (1928–1986) and Gisèle Prassinos (born in 1920).²³ One of my own favorites, better known as a filmmaker (*La*

21. Luce Irigaray, "Une lacune natale (pour Unica Zurn)," *Le Nouveau Commerce* 62/63 (1985): 42. Irigaray's cryptic remark about "not leaving her *ulê* to maternity" would need to be commented and qualified, given that for so many contemporary women writers—including Irigaray herself—the maternal body has provided a fertile source of imagery and inspiration; one of the major texts by a woman Surrealist, Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet*, is based on a complicated playing with and valorization of the mother's body and the mother's voice).

22. Carrington was the only woman included in the original version of Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1939). Her works currently in print include *En bas* (Paris: Losfeld, 1973—in English as *Down Below* [Chicago: Black Swan Press, 1983]); *The Hearing Trumpet* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1985); *Pigeon volé: contes retrouvés* (Paris: Le Temps Qu'il Fait, 1986). For a detailed bibliography of her works, see J. Chénieux, *Le Surréalisme et le roman*, op. cit. Carrington is particularly interesting in that she wrote both in French and English; two volumes of her stories in English are scheduled for publication by E. P. Dutton in fall 1988. By Unica Zurn, see *L'Homme-Jasmin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), and *Sombre Printemps* (Paris: Belfond, 1985), with a biographical postface by Ruth Henry.

23. Neither Mansour nor Prassinos is included in Michael Benedikt's supposedly comprehensive anthology in English, *The Poetry of Surrealism: An Anthology* (Boston:

Fiancée du pirate, Née, Papa les p'tits bateaux) but also the author of several books of stories and a novel, whose name appeared in *La Femme Surrealiste* but is rarely mentioned today even by critics interested in Surrealist writing by women is Nelly Kaplan (born 1936), writing under the pen name Belen.²⁴

Only a careful study of individual works and artists will allow us to answer the question of the female subject in Surrealism. In the meantime, however, one can speculate about the strategies employed by women artists and writers, both in the way they managed their lives (when and under what circumstances did a given artist become associated with the Surrealist movement? Was her work included in major exhibitions or anthologies organized by male Surrealists? Did she break with the movement, and if so under what circumstances? What was the subsequent evolution of her artistic career?) and in the ways they situated their work within Surrealism. Since the women were generally younger and started producing later than the men who were associated with the movement, it is not unlikely that their version of Surrealist practice included a component of response to, as well as adaptation of, male Surrealist iconographies and mythologies—this being especially the case in the realm of sexuality. Here, Irigaray's notion of "mimicry," the playful or ironic counterpart of the masquerade, might provide a useful analytical category in approaching individual works. In mimicry, a woman "repeats" the male—in this case, the male Surrealist—version of "woman," but she does so in a self-conscious way that points up the citational, often ironic status of the repetition.²⁵

Another, specifically stylistic concept that would be useful in looking at the work of women artists is Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "internal dialogism." The "internally dialogized" word (but this is also true of

Little, Brown and Co., 1974); nor do they appear in Paul Auster's more recent bilingual anthology, *The Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984). Benedikt's anthology, covering two generations of Surrealists, includes no work by women; Auster's, covering the whole century, includes one woman: Anne-Marie Albiach. In France, Gisèle Prassinos' *Les Mots endormis*, containing selections from her poetry of the 1930s as well as later work, is in print (Flammarion, 1967); all of Mansour's books are out of print. They include: *Cris* (Paris: Seghers, 1953); *Rapaces* (Paris: Seghers, 1960), and *Carré Blanc* (Paris: Le Soleil Noir, 1965). *Rapaces* is available in a shortened bilingual edition in the U.S.: *Birds of Prey*, trans. Albert Herzing (Perivale Press, 1979).

24. Belen's comic, erotic novel, *Mémoires d'une liseuse de draps* (Paris: Pauvert, 1974) is currently available; her books of stories are *Et délivrez-nous du mâle* (Paris: Losfeld, 1960), and *Le Réservoir des sens* (Paris: La Jeune Parque, 1966).

25. See Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 76. As Irigaray suggests, mimicry may be only an "initial phase," a first strategy adopted traditionally by the oppressed. This raises the question of how one might go beyond mimicry, to other possible strategies not based on an ironic relation to a preexisting situation.

the image), Bakhtin shows, is often polemically related to another, previous word that is absent but that can be inferred from the present response to it.²⁶ Gloria Orenstein has suggested, replying not on Bakhtin's concept but on the anthropological concept of "muted" versus "dominant" groups, that the work of women who were personally linked—through love or marriage—to well-known male Surrealists like Max Ernst (Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning), Yves Tanguy (Kay Sage), or Hans Bellmer (Unica Zurn) can be read as "a double-voiced discourse, containing both a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story."²⁷ In Bakhtinian terms, we can speak of the women's work as dialogically related to the men's, often with an element of internal polemic. I would suggest that such internal dialogue is to be found not only in the work of women directly involved with male Surrealists to whose work they were specifically responding, but was a general strategy adopted, in individual ways, by women wishing to insert themselves as subjects into Surrealism.

Women in the History of Surrealism

Henceforth, it will be difficult for any responsible teacher or student of Surrealism not to devote some serious attention to the work of women. And if it is true that the work of women Surrealists is in internal dialogue with that of the "mainstream" male Surrealists, then our understanding of the former will necessarily influence, or even alter, our understanding of the latter. Read in the light of women artists' and writers' responses to it, the aesthetic (and political, in the broad sense) achievement of Surrealism will not necessarily be diminished, but it will look somewhat different.

At the same time, the question arises: will the discovery of a significant body of work by women oblige us to rewrite the history of the Surrealist movement? In one obvious sense, it will: the hitherto invisible women will have to be recognized.²⁸ In another sense, however, it

26. See M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 282ff.

27. Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Towards a Bifocal Vision in Surrealist Aesthetics," *Trivia* 3 (Fall 1983), 72. The quoted phrase is actually from Elaine Showalter's essay, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

28. Just how invisible the Surrealist women were is demonstrated by William Rubin's otherwise excellent 1968 book (the catalogue of a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art), *Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art). Among the dozens of artists mentioned by Rubin, the only woman is Méret Oppenheim, whose fur-covered teacup (1936) is perhaps the best-known Surrealist object. It has also been, almost invariably, the *only* work by Oppenheim mentioned or displayed in books or exhibits on Surrealism.

won't—and to understand why, we can look at a contrasting case, that of Anglo-American modernism. The recent work of feminist scholars has shown that both the nature and the history of Anglo-American modernism begin to look completely different if one takes into serious account and gives its full historical weight to the work of early women modernists like H. D., Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Richardson, and Djuna Barnes, among others. The presence of major women writers at the beginning of the modernist movement, in a literary culture which could already boast a long tradition of major writing by women, has allowed contemporary feminist critics to argue that the elimination and/or belittling of the work of women modernists (including even Virginia Woolf, who fared better than most but whose late novels were often undervalued) was very like a conspiracy perpetrated by both the male modernists and the traditional (male) historians of modernism. In the Anglo-American case, in other words, one can speak of a concerted exclusion of women's work from the modernist canon, an exclusion which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar interpret as "a misogynistic reaction-formation against the rise of literary women" on the part of the male modernists whose work came to define that canon.²⁹

In the case of Surrealism, one cannot make quite the same argument, especially as far as writing is concerned, because the women's work was not present in the early years of the movement, when its most significant work was produced and its "project" was elaborated. Here is an instance where the importance of historical and national specificity becomes obvious.

Let us consider some dates. The founding of the Surrealist movement in 1924 was signaled by two publications: Breton's *Manifeste du Surréalisme*, and the first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, the "official" organ of the movement which continued publication through 1929; in 1930, as a result of several years of discussion and internal debate regarding the Surrealists' position vis à vis the Communist Party, *La Révolution Surréaliste* was replaced by *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*, which continued publication (although less frequently) through 1933. In the meantime, a number of defections, exclusions and new arrivals occurred—these can be traced through the signatories of the numerous collective declarations published in the two journals. In 1932, the movement was shaken by the departure of one of its most visible and outspoken founding members, Louis Aragon, who joined the Communist Party and began attacking his old comrades.

29. See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Tradition and the Female Talent," in *The Poetics of Gender*, op. cit., 183–207. For an informative historical study, devoted chiefly to English and American women modernists in exile, see Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1986).

After 1933, when *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution* folded (together with any further hope for active collaboration between the Surrealists as a group and the Communists), the movement no longer had an official journal. (The journal *Minotaure*, published from 1933 to 1938, was largely open to Surrealist work, but it did not have the status of official organ, as the two earlier journals did). The movement was further weakened in 1935 by the suicide of another of its founding members, René Crevel, and by continuing attacks from the Communists. Although the Surrealists continued to publish collective statements and to proclaim an antifascist revolutionary politics, their heroic period as an avant-garde movement was coming to an end. According to Maurice Nadeau, the historian of the movement, Surrealism as a genuine avant-garde movement died around 1935. This was, of course, not a view shared by Breton and his friends. Surrealism continued to maintain itself as a movement and to organize collective manifestations in the late 1930s and throughout the war, when many of its members were in New York. After the war, it gained new adherents and staged a major international exhibition (1947), started several new journals with Breton as *Directeur*, and was not officially dispersed until 1969, three years after Breton's death. But for a long time by then, it had been no more than a surviving remnant.³⁰

Historically, this is the significant fact: between 1924 and 1933, during the most dynamic and "ascendant" period of the movement, not a single woman was included as an official member. In the twelve issues of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, whose index reads like an honor roll of Surrealism (ranging from Aragon, Arp and Artaud through Desnos, Eluard and Ernst, to Tzara, Vaché and Vitrac), there is *one* untitled poem by a woman, Fanny Beznos—whose biggest claim to Surrealist status is that she is mentioned in Breton's *Nadja*. A certain Madame Savitsky has a reply to the *Enquête* on suicide ("Le suicide est-il une solution?") in the first issue; a woman artist, Valentine Penrose, has a brief reply to the *Enquête sur l'amour* published in the last issue. And that's all. In the six issues of *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*, there are one-time appearances by three women writers (one of them being Nadejda Kroupskaia, writing about her husband Lenin—the other two are unknown) and visual work by three women artists, Gala Eluard, Marie-Berthe Ernst, and Valentine Hugo. Of the twenty or so major group declarations published during this period and reproduced in Nadeau's

30. It is almost touching to note that there exists, in 1987, a Surrealist Group in Chicago that publishes collective declarations. A leader of the group, Franklin Rosemont, has edited a selection of Breton's writings in English, with a book-length introduction which, although adulatory toward Breton and truculent toward almost everyone else, provides a good indication of a certain American strain of Surrealism. See André Breton, *What Is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, edited and introduced by Franklin Rosemont (Chicago: Monad Press, 1978).

Histoire du Surréalisme, not a single one carries the signature of a woman. The first major document containing the signatures of women (Dora Maar, Marie-Louise Mayoux, and Méret Oppenheim) dates from 1935 ("Du Temps que les Surréalistes avaient raison").³¹ After 1935, women are fairly regularly included in exhibits and group publications: in the 1930s, in addition to Hugo, Maar and Oppenheim, we find the names of Fini, Carrington, Agar, Toyen; in the 1940s and 1950s, those of Mansour, Remedios Varo, Tanning, Kaplan, Zurn; in the 1960s, Annie Le Brun.

What conclusions can we draw from all this? First, that it is not only because of sexist bias that historians of Surrealism have tended to exclude women's work from their accounts (although sexism has played a role, since many historians mention the work of younger male Surrealists but not that of the younger women); the fact is that no women were present as active participants in the early years of the movement. Their absence can, of course, be explained as the result of an active exclusion on the part of the male Surrealists, who wanted to maintain their "men's club." But this already suggests a difference from the Anglo-American case, where women were present as active agents at the founding moment of various avant-garde projects, either as writers (H. D. and Imagism, Stein and *transition*) or as publishers and editors who promoted the work of women as well as of men.³² It was only later that the contribution of these women was either erased from the record or else diminished. In the case of Surrealism, by contrast, women were excluded before they even got started—and this was *especially* true of writers, who even in later years remained a very small minority among women Surrealists.

The relative absence of women writers can be explained in specifically French terms, both sociological and literary. Whereas the nineteenth century in England established a significant tradition of writing

31. Reproduced in Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du Surréalisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964), 422–32. A 1934 declaration, opposing the Fascist demonstrations of 6 February and calling for a united front of workers and intellectuals against Fascism, contained three women's signatures (Nadeau, 381–86). However, this was not a specifically Surrealist declaration, like "Du Temps que les Surréalistes avaient raison." Prior to 1934, I did not find women's signatures on any document reproduced in Nadeau's book. The English translation of *Histoire du Surréalisme* includes many fewer documents than the original French edition.

32. On the role of women editors, see Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, chapter 10. Interestingly, there *were* women artists and performers participating in the early days of various Dada movements (even though they were generally ignored by later historians): Sophie Tauber and Emmy Hennings in Zurich, Hanna Höch in Berlin, among others. Could we then see French Surrealism as already a defensive reaction to the rise of "avant-garde women"? Or is it that, given the heavily literary orientation of the French movement in its early years, the relevant category here is that of *writing* and "literary women" in France, which I discuss below.

by women and integrated several women writers into the major canon (Austen, the Brontës, Eliot), while the same century in the United States produced the phenomenon of bestsellerdom by women writers (who, even if they were belittled by their male colleagues, could still not be ignored), the nineteenth century in France had a quite different literary effect: there were *fewer* major women, and fewer best-sellers by women, than in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Germaine de Staël and George Sand, recognized as major by their contemporaries, were eclipsed and belittled by the end of the century, remembered more for their scandalous lives than for their literary achievement. As for the blockbuster best-sellers, no woman even came close to Eugène Sue (whose popularity resembled Harriet Beecher Stowe's in the United States). If one adds to these literary considerations the social fact that France, unlike England and America, did not have a vigorous suffragette movement (French women did not get the vote until 1946), one begins to understand why early twentieth-century French women writers had less to build on, and fewer reasons for self-confidence, than their English and American counterparts. The sad fact is that with the single major exception of Colette (and perhaps Anna de Noailles, who never achieved the same degree of recognition), there were no outstanding women writers in France in the first half of this century, and certainly none who had the tenacity to construct an *oeuvre* (much less the kind of innovative, rule-breaking *oeuvre* that can be qualified as "avant-garde" and that requires the self-confidence of, say, a Gertrude Stein) until Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir's own achievement looms all the larger when one considers this fact; but one can also understand why, in *The Second Sex*, she lamented the absence of true audacity in women's writing (including her own).

The second conclusion one can draw from the history of Surrealism's relation to women artists and writers is that as the movement grew weaker and more embattled, it became more welcoming to women, especially young women from other countries. It is striking to note how many of the "Surrealist women" are *not* French: Carrington, Colquhoun, and Agar are English, Oppenheim Swiss, Mansour Egyptian, Fini Argentine and Italian, Kaplan Argentine, Varo Spanish, Toyen Czech, Zurn German. There were also a great many non-French male Surrealists (Ernst, Dali, Bellmer, Man Ray among them), but the *writers* of Surrealism remained overwhelmingly French. In the case of the women, the only native French writer in the 1930s was Gisèle Prassinos—and she was less a member of the group than a "child prodigy" they discovered and promoted.³³

33. Prassinos's first volume of poetry and prose texts, *La Sauterelle arthritique*, was published in 1935, when she was fifteen years old, with a preface by Paul Eluard. J. H.

One might speculate that competition from foreign women was less threatening to the Surrealists' male egos than competition from their own. Eileen Agar suggests as much in a recent interview: "André Breton's wife [Jacqueline Lamba, Breton's second wife] was a very talented painter, he wouldn't even look at her work. But they were very nice to me, I think they were so pleased, there were so few surrealists at the time who were giving their heart and soul to it that I think they were pleased to welcome me."³⁴ Although no dates are mentioned, Agar seems to be referring to the mid-1930s. By then, Surrealism as a movement was on the wane (as her remarks suggest) and needed new blood. Furthermore, most of the women whom it welcomed in the 1930s were ten to fifteen years younger than the founders of the movement.³⁵ They therefore brought youth as well as renewal—not a small consideration for a movement that prided itself on its youthfulness. This was even more obviously the case after the war, by which time Breton and his friends were elderly gentlemen, more than eager to welcome young women like Joyce Mansour, Nelly Kaplan or Annie Le Brun—especially since the young men who might have been their heirs were not about to join a moribund "avant-garde" movement. They were busy founding the new avant-gardes of the period: the rise of the *nouveau roman* and of *Tel Quel* overlaps with the last years of Surrealism.

If it is clear, historically and sociologically, what women brought to Surrealism, it remains to be asked what Surrealism brought to women. In a negative perspective, one could argue that it brought them nothing, since by the time they came to it the movement's truly dynamic moment was over. Christine Brooke-Rose, writing about avant-garde literary movements in general, has ruefully noted that "women are rarely considered seriously as part of a movement when it is 'in vogue'; and they are damned with the label when it no longer is, when they can safely be considered as minor elements in it."³⁶ Although the history of

Matthews, in his long and interesting study on *The Imagery of Surrealism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1977), quotes Eluard's preface but has nothing to say about Prassinis. (He does devote half a page to Mansour, however, and he subsequently published a short monograph on her work: *Joyce Mansour* [Amsterdam: Rudopi, 1985]).

34. Mary Blume, "Portrait of a Surrealist," *The International Herald Tribune*, August 17 1987, 14.

35. Most of the first generation male Surrealists were born around the turn of the century: Breton in 1896, Aragon in 1897, Eluard in 1895, Desnos in 1900, Ernst in 1891, Man Ray in 1890, Bellmer in 1902. Of the women, only Valentine Hugo was older (born in 1887); Toyen (1902) and Agar (1904) were around the same age. The other women who came to Surrealism before 1945 were at least a decade younger: Maar was born in 1909, Tanning in 1912, Oppenheim in 1913, Carrington in 1917, Fini in 1918, Prassinis in 1920.

36. Christine Brooke-Rose, "Illiterations," unpublished MS., 19. Quoted by permission of the author.

Surrealism seems to bear out this assertion, some qualifications are necessary. It seems obvious that for the women who came to it during the late 1930s and 1940s, and even after the war, Surrealism was able to provide both a nourishing environment in the form of group exhibitions and publications, and a genuine source of inspiration. That may explain why some of these women, like Dorothea Tanning or Annie Le Brun, are strongly hostile to any feminist critique of Surrealism, and why Tanning has refused so far to be included in shows or publications devoted exclusively to women's work.³⁷ It is also true, however, that since they were not present during the founding years of the movement, it is easier to relegate them to the status of "minor elements."

The final conclusion we can draw is that if women are to be part of an avant-garde movement, they will do well to found it themselves.

37. Annie Le Brun expresses outrage and anger at the feminist critique in her collection of essays, *A Distance* (Paris: Pauvert/Carrère, 1984). Dorothea Tanning is represented only by a letter of refusal in Vergine's *L'Autre Moitié de l'avant-garde*, and is absent altogether from the issue of *Obliques* on "La Femme Surréaliste."