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# SINGING IN ANOTHER KEY: SURREALISM THROUGH A FEMINIST EYE

MARY ANN CAWS

*The nuclear-freeze movement has very little sex appeal.  
It's like being against typhoons.*

– Tom Wolfe, "Conversation"<sup>1</sup>

*To have become accustomed to anything is a terrible thing.*

– Zen master to Gregory Bateson<sup>2</sup>

How to deal, in words, with what is most serious, except with metaphors? What we write must, we persist in thinking, be related to what we are and mean and care about outside the lecture halls, and those relations are frequently metaphoric in nature. Beginning, then, with metaphors and popular description, with a particular movement, and with the form of dialogue called "metalogue," this presentation moves implicitly toward a broader conversation into which other figures are invited, from the worlds of legend, of literature, and of literary meetings.

Scholars, says George Kennan, in order to work constructively toward hopeful ends, need concepts as guides, these concepts having as their principal quality a modesty that is "devoid of utopian and universalist pretensions":

*If we, the scholars, with our patient and unsensational labors can help the statesmen to understand these basic truths – if we can help them to understand not only the dangers we face and the responsibility they bear for overcoming those dangers but also the constructive and hopeful possibilities that lie there to be opened up by sober, restrained and more realistic policies . . . we will then have the satisfaction of knowing that scholarship, the highest work of the mind, has served, as it should, the highest interests of civilization.<sup>3</sup>*

If concepts have their major importance, the terms that compose them have, like the texts that compose our daily being, a special function in a time of nuclear stress. Treating a few terms and a few texts, I will suggest at least implicitly the central notions which would seem to me to be pressing in such a time: those of *positive energy* and *open exchange*, in a dialogue of urgency and response, subject all the same to the needs of *non-proliferation*. Bearing firmly

<sup>1</sup>"Conversation with Tom Wolfe," in *Geo*, October, 1983.

<sup>2</sup>Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), 503. I am most grateful to Gabriela Schwab, with whom I discussed Bateson, when I was working on this paper.

<sup>3</sup>George Kennan, *Quest for Concept*, quoted in Freeman Dyson, *Weapons and Hope*, first published in *The New Yorker*, Feb. 4–27, 1984, part IV, 68.

in mind the "crisis instability" which is on all our minds, I will take, here at the beginning, the positive side of that incipient turmoil Alexander Blok so lyrically invoked:

*I perceive you now, beginning  
Of high turbulent days . . . .*<sup>4</sup>

## I. Coming to Terms

The sort of question we have to ask ourselves, as critics in the nuclear age, writers in a time of stress, or people creating anything anywhere at any time is how to be a *pintor sabio*, how to be the equivalent of the wise painter or creator we would take now for our own ideal model as readers? Recently in New York a hundred and fifty stalwart souls spent an entire day huddled around, yet again, *Critical Inquiry's* reading of Foucault's reading of our contemporary reading of the *pintor sabio's* own creation, Velasquez' *Las Meninas* in its history, art, and text: what emerged was the actual and pressing re-evaluation of the discipline of art history by itself. The present reading of what *Nuclear Criticism* is might be a test case or re-view of ourselves and our inbred reflexivity: the present mirror or painting of how we represent ourselves to ourselves and those others out there reading ourselves and themselves, being each other's tests and texts, collectively.

Let me pose here a few problems I see as calling for instant and necessary consideration in regard to such a topic as threat and to its form. Can anything so extreme include humor? trivia? modesty? givens and taboos? or urge the choice of certain texts and canons; as if it were not extreme in its very nature? But we are deciding about the boundaries of an unknown field, to the elaboration of which terminology from other fields might be of use in developing a new perception, for example, an anthropological passage from Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, a passage of popular science from *Entropy: A New World-View*, by Jeremy Rifkin, and Freeman Dyson's article on sociological politics, "Weapons and Peace."

Of course, what one reader, steeped in surrealism and in a certain poetry, chooses to cite from the popular press—the trinity of writers I am taking here: Bateson, Rifkin, and Dyson—may not appear to be aimed at a "correct picture," whatever that is. I don't actually believe in "correct pictures," only in interesting and energy-producing ones, enhanced, as I see it, by the mixing of terms from older and newer professional realms.

Some of the warnings, first of all, we might take to heart. Jeremy Rifkin's *Entropy* is full of myths, such as that of cheap nuclear energy, "exploding," of energy being "uncontrollable," of results being "unpredictable," of reactors "leaking" and elements "contaminating."<sup>5</sup> Even if the energy released in our proliferating textual universe is only to be mental, that very universe had its erstwhile apparent explosion of its myth by intertextuality, leading to the challenge of our own authorial control and critical vision as they are in fact uncontrollable and their results unpredictable, of our own safe tenets as they were felt to leak, our own ironic elements as they contaminate. Against the linear perspective Newtonian education seemed destined to continue, process is already privileged over measurement and the holistic flow of elements over isolated facts, and we are concerned with exchanges of living energy. We did not need, perhaps, such menace as is about us to consider changing terms, for our process was already started: but the consideration of how foolish the power plays about us are may reinstruct us about the foolishness of our own. Our own stewardship and conservation of the massively-threatened resources of minds and souls will militate against our professorial I-got-there-first-ism in honor of a new collective sense.

What, after all, is our present excitement about *conversation* about—to take a term both Bateson and Richard Rorty examine with enthusiasm—if not a willing exchange of mental energy? Rorty's description of the "informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic inter-

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<sup>4</sup>Alexander Blok, quoted in Dyson, part III.

<sup>5</sup>Jeremy Rifkin with Ted Howard, *Entropy: A New World-View* (New York: Bantam, 1981). (Parenthetically, the title of Martin Heidegger's "The Age of the World View" is quoted by Stanley Cavell, in his *The World Viewed* [Cambridge: Harvard, 1979], xxiii, since the words reminded him "that ours is an age in which our philosophical grasp of the world fails to reach beyond our taking and holding views of it . . . .")

mediary between various discourses," in whose salon hermetic thinkers are able to leave their enclosed fields, where "Disagreements between disciplines and discourses are compromised or transcended in the course of the conversation," is instructive about what we should be looking for in the space of our discourse and the discourse of our thinkers both in and out of the government and the university. His "great edifying philosophers," opposite to the great systematic philosophers who build for eternity, "destroy for the sake of their own generation," wanting to leave "space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause – wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is not an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described."<sup>6</sup>

Poetry, and philosophy of this sort, the positively deconstructive sort, are both based on exchanges of energy, uncertainty, and – in this sense – wonder. The energy exchange in the mind as in the universe is carefully nurtured by such devices as Bateson's "Metalogues" which relate structure to content. "DEFINITION: A *metalogue* is a conversation about some problematic subject. This conversation should be such that not only do the participants discuss the problems but the structure of the conversation as whole is also relevant to the same subject" [Bateson, 1]. Each conversation makes its own conservation, with its structure of *schismogenesis*, as Bateson would have it, with the differing patterns of symmetrical and complementary relay systems, as the partners expand on each other's themes and increase the momentum and their power, or then complementary, so that the increase of one means the decrease in power of the other, or in the argument as it works itself out. The partners work as relays, or triggers of energy, as they share the system [Bateson, 109]. Is this not in fact the kind of criticism we are currently engaged in, with warring factions constructing and deconstructing each other's theories, each working as the relay for the other? Is this not precisely what enables us not to be habituated to our own discourse only, and so able to respond to new codings and new contexts?

## II. Surrealism as a Model

About codings and collectivity, the surrealists knew: witness Breton's *Ode à Charles Fourier*, which is both laud and lament ("*Toi qui ne parlais que de lier vois tout s'est délié* / You who used to speak only about linking see how all is unlinked"), where a stream of blood leaps over the purest foam of crested wave, where the poem as self-avowed impractical ode issues from the "Petrified Forest of human culture / where nothing is left standing."<sup>7</sup> All the intricate system Fourier established left finally only its nostalgic trace in a time of crisis, where thought itself petrified like the nature surrounding it.

Now to speak of surrealism at all in relation to nuclear criticism is immediately to pose a host of questions about viewpoints implicit in the techniques and the strategies of surrealist modes. In the bounds of surrealist poetics itself and its recreations of the world, a host of questions arise in regard both to fusion and to profusion. The world, according to André Breton, is originally one and clear, full and interconnected: surrealism's great vision is that of a connecting crystal chain, of which, he says, not one link is missing. The metaphors and images of surrealism at its best are oxymoronic combinations of clashing elements from different realms in view of a violent and revolutionary separation out from the ordinary intellectual explosion – it is, for example, never the expected apple that will be placed alongside the oranges in the fruit basket, but rather a crab. Surrealism works its recreative techniques to bring back together what was lost, but in different combinations, toward a new full providence.

In the world as recreated surrealistically, that imaginative textuality works an emotional explosion, through the object freshly found or formed by language. Such surrealist vision might inscribe itself under Wallace Stevens' "Poem with Rhythms," where the mind:

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<sup>6</sup>Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979), 369–70.

<sup>7</sup>André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1961), 64, 73.

Turns to its own figurations and declares,  
"This image, this love, I compose myself  
Of these, In these, I come forth outwardly.  
In these, I wear a vital cleanliness,  
Not as in air, bright-blue resembling air,  
But as in the powerful mirror of my wish and will."<sup>8</sup>

This very vital cleanliness will reappear in a different garb at the conclusion of this paper. In the world re-viewed, these newly created oxymoronic objects furnish the mundane landscape with such oddly energetic percepts as tomatoes danced on by horses; not to be eaten, not to be ridden, only to be mediated upon, these tomatoes, and these horses can canter only in the world of poetics. Similarly, surrealism calls for produce-bearing trees to be made through faith that the language will correct the traditional sight. The simple addition of the thing to be produced to the source bearing it: an "*arbre à croissant*" would yield croissants, and an "*arbre à confiture*," jam to go with them. These examples demonstrate peaceful linguistic and visionary fusion at their most optimistic, a sort of Bonnard breakfastscape, in a world temporarily at peace.

If the great hope of surrealism is freedom both material and moral, its two gravest nightmares have, as I envisage them, nothing to do with what one might have expected, that is, its own images gone beserk in their oxymoronic capers. Rather, the first nightmare confronting us was that of banal custom, after a first glorious while, so that the repetitiousness of automatic writing proved not to be an energy self-renewing, and the generating material proved finally insufficient, the energy finally defective. The same images return, with the same vocabulary, visual and verbal, and the imaginations so powerfully freed are at last perceived to turn in a circle upon themselves. Objects, no matter how many are created, may eventually be used up in such an imaginative consumer society, where the things in stores – our cathedrals, as in Phyllis Rose's recent wry description in a recent *New York Times* – are paralleled by the things available only in minds, there too catalogues give out, and lists of desire fall finally short. Waste proliferates, and we have to turn away.

The second, and most haunting nightmare, with which I want to concern myself chiefly, is that of irrelevance. As the names of its journals indicate, the movement was first *The Surrealist Revolution*, then *Surrealism at the Service of the Revolution*, and then the witnesses to separation: *Breach* and to utter self-enclosure: *Surrealism Itself*. Sartre's criticism about surrealism as a collection of static objects instead of living functions, of its members as those who, in Bonnefoy's 1947 confession quoted by Sartre, "have not known how to live,"<sup>9</sup> is answerable only in terms other than those in which he poses the question. True enough, from wanting to persuade the universe of humans and objects toward its alteration (as surrealism telescoped Rimbaldian changing the Word and Marxian changing the world) to the abandonment of power over any reality but the one attainable by mystic means, surrealism moves as a movement, along with its leader. The text of Breton on which I want to concentrate, speaks even in its title, to the same divorce from the open and the relevant in worldly terms that the other titles show: *Arcane 17* it reads, and moves to the talismanic along a summit of lyricism unquestioned but all the more troubling, in that it moves on the slow.

Under the red and black alternating flags of communism and anarchy, Breton flies his own banner, from the Gaspé peninsula in Canada to the Southwest. The voice we hear in these pages is that of Melusine – that voice I too wish to call upon today. Fable-telling may seem to lack a certain zip, in time of crisis, and power may not seem weighty in the hands of some damsel who didn't even have a good pair of legs to stride with. At a run, Melusine probably wouldn't win many races, whether against tortoises, hares, or politicians.

The arcane, in all its obscure mystery, seems to have little to reveal in times of explosion, and what is so determinedly held hidden to hold badly in the threat of the most

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<sup>8</sup>Wallace Stevens, *The Poem at the End of the Mind* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 189.

<sup>9</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, "Le Surréalisme en 1947," from *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. *Idées*, 1948), 360.



extreme dispersal the world has ever yet to know; an arcane art is about the last thing we would think of calling on in times of extreme situations as politically fraught as these. From the beginning of time, art has had to hold its own against the world as its "real" background. André Breton recounts Georges Braque's concern that his art should hold its own against wheat fields, but Breton in his turn, believed it must hold also against famine. That in the long run it could not, is responsible—as I see it—for his turn from *Surrealism at the Service of the Revolution* to his final avatar in the mystic author of *Arcane 17*.

The surrealist nightmare of irrelevance is germane to our own, and that is surely what is at issue here: how are we to be relevant, not just to other movements of criticism and receptive to thrusts of different perceptions, but in a day which is not necessarily either the day before or the day after. We are not necessarily in the position of the pre-earthquake Lisbon dwellers, or the pre-sinking Titanic travelers, but we, like all critics at all times, can at our most optimistic only envisage in the long run a Leonard Woolfian "downhill all the way" slope, humans being, critics or not, only the mortals they are. Our own present relevance to potential catastrophe, sudden, as in the English comic book *When the Wind Blows*, or to a slower decrescendo, is what is on our minds, and should be at least consciously included in the structures and substance of our writing, if not as an answer, then as a question.

In the world of "as if," that is the world of poetry and poetics, the borrowed patterns of splitting apart or fission and those of coming together of fusion may instruct as they frighten. By violent separation and reshuffling mental and material, new substances are created as old elements split apart and join differently, about a new and nuclear center.

### III. Metalogue with Melusine, or Nurturing in a Nuclear Age

I take here as prime instances of the present urgency of awareness of the criticism we are calling nuclear, the two models of surrealism and of feminism, suggesting that the pressure and panic of an exterior menace, whether real or feared, should force an energetic reexamination of the models and what they can each offer. Breton can be read along with Bateson, Rifkin, and Freeman Dyson, and his version of the mermaid Melusine along with the missile crisis, as an invited guest at that bargaining table which serves as our stage. We might re-think surrealist explosion now along with the threat of a different one, pitifully relevant. Most important of all, contemporary texts about conversation, dialogue, and metalogue, suggest to what extent the very contrastive form of these two lines of thought might prove itself an example of serious conversational encounter. The principle of surrealist passage with its architectural and mental merge of inside and out works toward simultaneous oxymoronic expansion and explosive illumination, where fission meets and is met by fusion, and fear by the liberating qualities of gender-crossing as Melusine knew about it.

The figural link of the two currents of surrealism and feminism would be, as I continue to hear her, Melusine the mermaid-principle lauded by Breton at the deliberately fragmented center of *Arcane 17*, singing still, he claims, in the human heart. Being the so-called feminine irrational, she may save us yet. Not because she is both fish and woman, not for any simply binary combinational reason, but because whatever stance of moral conviction holds good, it holds most true in Melusine: the most real thing about her was never her magic, but rather the stubborn and hopeful way she has of singing, in times even of despair:

*Let art resolve to give dominion to the so-called female "irrational," let it hold savagely as its enemy everything that dares to present itself as certain and as solid, bearing in reality the mark of that masculine intransigence which has already shown, in international relations, what it is capable of. It is no longer the moment to say what one wishes were the case, to make a few more or less shameful concessions, but instead to declare oneself in art without equivocation against man and for woman, to remove man from a power which it is already clear he has misused, so as to replace this power in the hands of woman . . . taking her equitable part of that power, no longer just in art but in life.<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup>André Breton, *Arcane 17, enté d'ajours* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1971, repr. from 1947), 90.

Melusine then, if we will heed Breton, is to take up her own word and her own song against the warring impulse of masculine threat, against the effort at a successful fission of what was once materially unified into what is explosively split apart. Against this fission, she would aim at a fusion, being herself the possible perception of fusion. Breton called for the paralysis of all machines by water, the undoing of all reason and logic by the irrational of the feminine consciousness; we might now call for something else, but would do well, I think, to at least remember that call.

An anecdote about Roger Caillois, Levi-Strauss, and Breton gathered around a Mexican jumping-bean illustrates Breton's point of view here. The others, he says, were for cutting the bean open immediately, so as to see what it contained: he wanted – not to refuse even to open it – but to delay its opening until all the imaginative possibilities had been exhausted. The theme of *delay* is a good surrealist one after Dada: Marcel Duchamp's artful *Delay in Glass* and in space is also a delay in time and in art, a psychological and technically aware diplomatic game, which concerns itself with a study of distance as a dismantling technique for dismantling the boundaries of the present.

Melusine is the delay of putting-into-effect, its putting-off, for who can conceive of such a being? She thus escapes quite utterly the enclosure of the conceptual ("I think," says Jacques Derrida, "that *all concepts hitherto proposed in order to think the articulation of a discourse and of an historical totality are caught within the metaphysical closure that I question here*")<sup>11</sup> and, simultaneously, the great systems of the metaphysical theorizers. She could only be invited into any conversation such as the present one with a strong sense of fiction, a possible sense of wonder, and – on the side – a sure sense of irony, but with a dose of hope. Melusine, that odd fiction, comes to us with a voice interpreted by Breton, thus doubly a delay. But it seems as much his own voice as hers; at his best, he sounds like the words he assigns her, as if in her he were to have found his final ringing tones. He thinks of her, or appears to, as other to man, yet assumes her within surrealism, which is to say, within himself.

We remember his chaotic relationship with Nadja, whose madness he admired as long as it was kept in limits and was interesting. These two requirements are surely the contraries of what one would or could require of madness. Melusine, inhabiting the free energy flow of surrealism stretched between its highest points, surrealism without its nightmares of irrelevance and impotence, figures brightest oxymoron in its most alluring shape, the feminine assumable by the masculine and both fully themselves within her own borders so unconceivable as to permit the kind of song she sings. She is not possessed by either gender, and so can freely inspire both. It is time she sang then, at the beginning of these "high turbulent days," if she is to be – as I think she may be – part of the conversation.

Now her discourse is not "natural," in the sense Barbara Herrnstein Smith uses the term ("I mean all utterances that are performed as historical acts and taken as historical events");<sup>12</sup> it is plainly fictive. The *interpretation* of her discourse falls under her category of the "ethics of interpretation," which govern "not the behavior of interpreters toward authors but rather of interpreters toward their own audiences" [Smith 151]. It is precisely this interpretation of her song, and not of its subject, that holds me here.

#### IV. One or Two Things We Know about Melusine

*Yes, she is always the woman lost, the one singing in man's imagining, but after how many hardships for her, for him, she should be also the woman found. And first of all woman must find herself, learn to recognize herself through these endless hells to which man's view of her, has in general condemned her, without his ambivalent help. How many times, during this war and already the one before, have I waited for her cry, buried nine centuries ago under the ruined castle of Lusignan, to ring out! Woman is, after all, the great victim of military enterprises. . . . What influence,*

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<sup>11</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976), 99.

<sup>12</sup>Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 84.

what future there might have been in woman's great cry of refusal and alarm . . . . [Arcane 67]

Under the explosive strength of its two anarchic forces – Poetry and Freedom – the text of *Arcane 17* shatters at its center to reveal the double-natured singer, of whom we would ask questions appropriate for our own time as she has her place in it. Of Melusine that mermaid who resumed her fishy form one night a week we would never ask, for example, as her husband implicitly did by watching, where she goes on Saturday night, or how she would be dressed then. Nor would we ask what she is singing, what method she uses, or who taught her to sing like that. Melusine has surely no one methodology and probably no assigned or chosen text; Melusine may know no metrics, but she is born of literature. She sings some sort of truth whose idelect we cannot expect to fathom, which dispenses with technics and praxis, and never asks of itself, “will this work?” She builds no models, and reduces nothing. But she knows of slow rhythms, loving digressions and deflection, savoring deferral.

Melusine, intuitive, is open to dialogues and metalogues, has unshakeable moral convictions and knows of other laws than those of reason, whose source is the mind as well as the heart. Melusine deals with process as with fact, with the simultaneous as with the linear, with chance as with causality. What we can ask of her song is not what it says but “what does it sound like?” and “what difference does it make” and again, “who is listening?” and even “do we know how to listen?”

Melusine is what Victor Turner would call a “threshold person,” singing in those liminal moments he sees as in and out of time.<sup>13</sup> Possessing nothing, wearing no marks of rank or status, no insignia of role or pride, like those in-between passengers of the rite of passage, she is in fact a passage between the contrary parts of her being, in *conversation with herself*, and even in a metalogue resembling that conversation by her form.

She remains a liminal figure not only between a past and a future, but, with her narrating sister in Virginia Woolf's anti-war and anti-custom tract called *Three Guineas*, on a bridge between private life and public world, observing. What she observes, through Woolf's eyes, in a contemporary equivalent of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, is the procession of her suited, proudly-ranked, and singled-out educated brothers from “expensive schools and universities” as they practice their manly arts, mounting steps, “passing in and out of those doors, ascending those pulpits, preaching, teaching, administering justice, practising medicine, transacting business, making money.” That procession is a solemn sight: “Great-grandfathers, grandfathers, fathers, uncles – they all went that way, wearing their gowns, wearing their wigs, some with ribbons across their breasts, others without. . . . But most of them kept in step, walked according to rule . . . .” These same insignia are worn like so many advertisements and announcements stuck in the margarine and the beef in the grocer's or the butcher's – pride in the right stuff, after all, and in getting the beef. These marking rituals and separating devices train for the most glorious dress known to Englishmen in 1938, as Woolf sees them, that of the soldier, each of them inseparable from the others and from the rites of war. The suppression of the original pictures of the costumed and insigniaed men in their churchly, stately, army, and university ranks, is ironic, for these pictures were quite as *speaking* as the text.<sup>14</sup>

Of the possibility of these other rites of passage Melusine at her watching post is cognizant, beside Woolf's narrating sister, but they find them unacceptable. They will both of them belong to Woolf's *Outsiders' Society*, whose creed is text enough: “‘For,’ the outside will say, ‘in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world’” [Woolf 109]. And from that bridging position of liminality, they address in one voice their brothers, Arthur the educated among them, these makers of war?

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<sup>13</sup>Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell Paperbacks, 1966), 94–95.

<sup>14</sup>The suppression of the original photographs of males attired in insignia of church, state, university, and warring forces is ironically vivid, for the photographs were quite as speaking as the text. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harvest Books, rep. from 1938), 61.



*Even stranger, however, than the symbolic splendour of your clothes are the ceremonies that take place when you wear them. Here you kneel; there you bow; here you advance in procession behind a man carrying a silver poker; here you mount a carved chair; here you appear to do homage to a piece of painted wood; here you abase yourselves before tables covered with richly worked tapestry. And whatever these ceremonies may mean you perform them always together, always in step, always in the uniform proper to the man and the occasion. [Woolf 20]*

In Woolf's ideal "poor college," there would be no such in-step training for the march toward collective war, but just the study of humanities and the arts, aesthetic and healing, of mathematics and medicine. But, she says, we cannot simply stand on the bridge, hoping for poor new colleges, and humming old songs, and Melusine would surely agree by now. Breton calls on Melusine, and Woolf's posited three letter-writers call on English women to help them prevent war, finance women's colleges, and train women to enter the professions. On what terms, ask the sisters, will they join that procession of educated men? What promises can they hope for in terms of moral issues, they on whom men call to stop the waging of war.?

Separation nevertheless, is too easy, and does not respond to fact. The sisters on the bridge insist that from no human figure in a photograph, even that of a tyrant, can we dissociate ourselves, that we "are ourselves that figure," and that no one can stand forever liminal, humming, singing, reading, or writing. The ruined houses and bodies in the photographs of war prove the unity of insiders and outsiders, reversing into the other, public and private, real and dream worlds of night and day, like surrealism's own communicating vessels in which Melusine is at home. The outsider speaks to those who make laws, society, and war; "For such will be our ruin if you in the immensity of your public abstractions forget the private figure, or if we in the intensity of our private emotions forget the public world. Both houses will be ruined, the public and the private, the material and the spiritual, for they are inseparably connected" [Woolf 143].

Both outsiders are speaking, as I hear them, for the absolute unacceptability of even conceiving of nuclear war – with that moral conviction which is supposed to precede all the reflection on techniques and diplomacy – as they refuse, in their intimate assuredness, that other seduced by doom. In the final act of his new play *End of the World, With Symposium to Follow*, Arthur Kopit's mysterious old man passionate about nuclear proliferation describes, in a lyrical trance, his first sight of the effect, after Hiroshima, of a so-called "limited" weapon: "You know," he says reflectively, "there's a glitter to nuclear weapons . . . irresistible . . . And we all felt the thrill of that idea. Doom has its appeal."<sup>15</sup> Seduced by the same power of evil, the younger man in the play moves back from the window to distance it and the temptation to hurl out of it his baby son: the distance may be, with delay, our best double bet, as they are intertwined.

Between these two opposed sets of voices and values, the anti-war sisters and the two men, new and old, in love with nuclear power, each set representing a chorus of men and women, two other voices are negotiating for a place in this metalogue. One other voice is that of complacency: this should touch us all, as we take due note of Kierkegaard's *Note* in his "Sad Reflections" from the *Journals* of 1850–54, wherein he contemplates having left behind him his intellectual capital, his ideas like property which others will use, in endless formal and substanceless reflection:

*Note And even if the "Professor" should chance to read this, it will not give him pause, will not cause his conscience to smite him: no, this too will be made the subject of a lecture. And again this observation, if the Professor should chance to read it, will not give him pause; no, this too will be made the subject of a lecture. For longer even than the tapeworm which recently was extracted from a woman . . . even*

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<sup>15</sup>Arthur Kopit, *The End of the World, With Symposium to Follow*, first performed in Washington, then in New York.

longer is the Professor, and the man in whom the Professor is lodged cannot be rid of this by any human power, only God can do it, if the man himself is willing.<sup>16</sup>

On the other side of that discoursing professorial complacency which threatens all of us, discoursing on nuclear catastrophe as if discourse were in itself of value beyond that of delay, we might hear a far less learned voice. This last voice is brought to our attention by Carolyn Heilbrun citing Cleanth Brooks' "Perspective" on the history of the manly English institute, recounting the reaction, after a lecture of Lionel Trilling's on the contemporary cultural scene in America, in which he repeatedly used the pronoun "we." The voice is ascribed by Brooks to "a tenacious little lady in the audience," who protested Trilling was not speaking, in his "we," for her and her friends; Brooks continues describing the scene in these words: "The contrast was interesting: Trilling, as always, gracious, polite, and accomplished, trying to smooth her ruffled feathers, and the not fully coherent but manifestly sincere voice from the back row" [Institute xi]. "I suspect," continues Heilbrun, "that the voice from the back row would sound a little more coherent now."<sup>17</sup>

I have cited these other voices to make a final point about Melusine and her sisters singing, talking, writing, and their more than sincere protestation: as outsiders, they may well not be "not fully coherent," when the terms of coherence are those set by The Professor and the insignia-bearing procession. Not because they have not been educated, but because they are free to question the laws and logic established by the processors—often in accord with the methodologies of what will work, as, we are told, dialogues may not. Before she decides whether to join that procession or not, Melusine may make some converts to the bridge position, to the liminal non-insignia-bearing moment and place of the observer. Breton stood there, and learned to be other: at the end of my major text here, *Arcane 17*, he stands and listens, with another's ears, to the sounding of bells in the Marais: "*J'entendais, de l'oreille d'Apollinaire, sonner les cloches de Saint-Merry*" (*Arcane 164*). And at the end of this text, he sees his wandering about Paris as guided by the trace of his former passage with Nadja and with Nerval, with Melusine as with Isis and others: figures intersect, we are one and all of them, we are not separate.

The lesson he learns and teaches here is both arcane and open, both that of the creator and that of the outsider, as his voice mingles with other voices he calls on and assumes. He is, in the unreason of night, as paradoxically splendid as Melusine's own double being, the oxymoronic figure we all figure in, if we know how to read:

*Melusine has returned to the empty frame where her very image disappeared in feudal times. But gradually the wall inside the frame grew less solid and faded away. No other frame than the window opening on the night. This night is entire, one could call it the night of our own time. Now that we have found Melusine again in all her radiance, we tremble from fear that she might melt into it completely. Nothing but wolves howling. The frame is desperately empty. . . . [Arcane 99]*

At this point, it might well be up to each of us to permit our own voice, no matter how "incoherent" our argument, how raucous or uncertain our tone, to replace that we once heard within the frame of our own expectation. Tales are not endlessly narrated to us from others' pages just to be listened to, and, as Woolf says, "we must cease to hang over old bridges humming old songs" [Woolf 24]. In a generous space of discussion, Melusine can figure, even though she can scarcely sit at the bargaining table. Melusine cannot be measured, but is process, always becoming that fusion of elements which she is: of nature and culture, of woman and child, she perfectly exemplifies what Bateson refers to as *schismogenesis*, being born from both parts. All her possibilities are related to her doubleness, as if she were to combine human imagination and natural flexibilities, as if her two parts were in dialogue with each other and the universe, she depends on how she is

<sup>16</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals*, in Robert Bretall, ed., *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton, 1946), 142.

<sup>17</sup>Carolyn Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higonnet, eds., *The Representation of Women in Fiction* (*English Institute Papers, new series, No. 7*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1981), xi.

read. In answer to those fears of banality and mental exhaustion, as of irrelevance, she is the power of ultimate imagination itself and the strength of the non-collective, as she cannot march in step, in formation, or in rank.

She could, this figure, be called by many other names and appear in other guises, being a legend of a legend. *Legenda*: to be read. As for *agenda* or acting out, that need not take place. There may be enough sustenance in the life of *conversation* in the poor college to sustain us, so that what may have seemed a necessary finality not prove to be one. Melusine, as I conceive of her, is always re-conceived, always about to be reconceived. She is what needs to be called on, what we have always not yet quite heard. The ultimate fusional being, a reply to rational dismemberment and to what has scattered and been dispersed, she is a mode of envisioning and listening, a figure of *figura* itself.

She is desire and she is the delay of disaster in all its senses. Defined best by her own deferral from that empty frame, she is not hope but is everything hope can be. She reads no signs of war, but is indignant at signs of moral indigence. That is what her singing is, not a text, as it does not repeat and cannot be transcribed, a true metaphor of *transport* in the deepest literal intention of metaphor, complete non-coincidence. "Always for the first time": the bridge on which she places herself is marked only with those words,<sup>18</sup> the absolute opposite of the text of nuclear explosion as we picture it "Once for the last time." Melusine is both on the bridge and the bridge itself, between ancient past and possible future, always in possibility and never in actuality. Bridging that gap, she might well figure that mind that Stevens heard declaring that of its image and its love, of its figurations it was composed:

*Not as in air, bright-blue resembling air;  
But as in the powerful mirror of my wish and will.*

Far past the reflections of Narcissism, Melusine is un-marked, wears no insignia – at best a seashell or two – and only her naked vital cleanliness so scandalous in a nuclear age: she is in her pure delay the obstinate desire of lasting, of holding fast, "*le dur désir de durer*," in Eluard's terms.

## V. Picking Up on Poetry

About annihilation and also about a faith, Wallace Stevens' poem "*Lebensweisheitspielerei*," presented by its title as the spectacle of the only wisdom life has to offer us, concerns the "finally human." The poem is to be read, it would seem, in a time of testing, that is, in our time. It is about courage and slow catastrophe, about minimal survival and about waste, and wasting away. It is about what we will have to live with at the best as a menace, and about – all the same – the hope we must place in what is human:

*Weaker and weaker, the sunlight falls  
In the afternoon. The proud and the strong  
Have departed.*

*Those that are left are the unaccomplished,  
The finally human,  
Natives of a dwindled sphere.*

*Their indigence is an indigence  
That is an indigence of the light  
A stellar pallor that hangs on the threads*

*Little by little, the poverty  
Of autumn space becomes  
A look, a few words spoken*

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<sup>18</sup>Which could be the motto of Breton's *L'Amour fou* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), and all of surrealist love.

*Each person completely touches us  
With what he is and as he is,  
In the stale grandeur of annihilation*

[Stevens, 38]

Surely a picture by a wise painter, holding in a time of stress, even against the real. Joining the personal with the catastrophically conscious, knowledge with retained integrity, the threat of absolute nuclear dispersal with the cohering nuclear impulse to stay as we are, its tone is that of our own central conviction. Nadja did not, could not hold on or hold together, but showed us how we must. In these extreme times, no holding-together impulse is laughable, not even our desperate attempts at conversing and at singing as we can, in Melusine's voice or in our own, holding on that bridge.