

Profane illumination (or the Soul in Limbo): André Breton's *Nadja* (Librairie Gallimard, Paris, 1928)George Ikkos 

French poet and surrealist luminary Breton (1896–1966) met Leona Delacourt (1902–1941) near Porte Saint-Denis, Paris, on 4 October 1926. As people were streaming out of offices, he noticed she ‘held her head high, unlike everyone else on the sidewalk. And she looked so delicate she scarcely seemed to touch the ground as she walked’. ‘I am the soul in limbo’ she told him in an early meeting. Having left her former lover and 3-year-old daughter in Lille and seeking a new beginning she had assumed the name Nadja, which spells the beginning of ‘hope’ (надеяться) in Russian. Sometimes she ‘fell’ (into prostitution) Breton demurs.

‘André, you’ll write a novel about me ... Everything vanishes. Something must remain of us’ implored Nadja. And he did, except not a novel. Breton was smitten, had phenomenal memory, and kept detailed notes. Nadja was shocked by their realism. In practically daily meetings until 12 October 1926, she became desperately dependent emotionally and financially, but he wavered. Pathetic and angry in turn, her language disintegrated: ‘Not to weigh one’s thoughts with the weight of one’s shoes’ she said, or ‘Why this ladder which wavered in the darkness of a hole full of coal pellets?’ she asked. Last contact was on 25 February 1927 when she wrote acknowledging return of some sketches. Breton reproduces these bizarre black and white drawings, lacking artistry and perspective, featuring hybrid beings and floating fragments, mixing words and images. She was admitted to Saint-Anne’s psychiatric hospital on 21 March 1927. Lifelong institutionalisation followed but Breton never visited. Instead, this former medical student and First World War psychiatric nurse concluded the second section with an invective against psychiatrists and asylums.

Far from romantic memoir, this slim but enthralling classic is a philosophical meditation explicitly aspiring to clinical objectivity. Our narrator begins the first section with the question ‘Who am I’ and immediately answers ‘perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I “haunt”’, then continues including with an almost unbelievable series of chance street encounters with the men he was destined to form the surrealist movement with. In the middle section, we are immersed in a haunting mindscape as the couple wander through locations where ghosts of past Parisian insurrections make their presence felt both subliminally and perceptibly. Premonition and coincidence unsettle us, and their effect is amplified by Nadja’s terrifying hallucinations. Illustrated by photographs in grey palette, *Nadja* sheds dark light on chance, urbanicity, the illusion of the self and its construction, fragility and disintegration, historicity, and a search for higher reality (surrealism).

Critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) observed that, like Beatrice in Dante Alighieri’s (1265–1321) *Divine Comedy*, Nadja’s femininity ‘bestows or withholds gifts that resemble an illumination more than sensual pleasure’. But whereas Dante found divine illumination, Breton, militantly anticlerical, sought ‘profane illumination’ of the self with madness as its limit experience. In the final section the narrator asks what distinguishes Nadja’s insanity from surrealist experiments. He responds: ‘I never supposed she could lose or might already have lost the gift of that instinct for self-preservation which permits my friends and myself, for instance to behave ourselves when a flag goes past, confining ourselves to not saluting to it; so we do not side with whatever we feel sympathetic to on every occasion, nor permit ourselves the unparalleled joy of committing some splendid sacrilege etc ...’ Has anyone demarcated better the threshold of madness than this often-grim modernist recount of the soul in limbo?

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