Nadja and the Blue Wind of Surrealism

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a review of

Nadja by André Breton, translated from the French and with an introduction by Mark Polizzotti. New York Review Books, 2025

"I love the disappeared, the dying, the forgotten… I love those who vanish into dreams."

—Renée Vivien

Mark Polizzotti's 2025 translation of André Breton's 1928 *Nadja*, the most iconic novel of the Surrealist canon, is a revelation.

Richard Howard's 1960 Grove version was poetic and formal, introducing *Nadja* to American readers largely unfamiliar with French Surrealism. Polizzotti corrects "a surprising number of mistranslations and misreadings," presenting a hybrid visual-literary structure as Breton intended—conversational, fragmented, and raw.

Opening with the identity question "Who am I?"—aimed at reader, subject, and author—*Nadja* is a genre-defying blend of memoir, psychological fiction, and dream-image. A book without structure—a collage of Breton's inner vision of Paris and his obsession with a mysterious "lost soul," that is both a liberation of the novel form and a crowning achievement of Surrealism. Breton's Surrealist Manifesto of 1924, defined this (at first) literary movement as "psychic automatism in its pure state." Breton believed in the "superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, the omnipotence of dreams, and the disinterested play of thought."

Breton's quest for identity mirrors his rejection of capitalism and embrace of chance, love, and metaphysics. In Nadja, he writes, "What I consider the objective and more or less deliberate manifestation of my existence in fact derive… from an activity whose true scope is utterly unknown to me." The novel is an index of Surrealist strategies: automatic writing, dream analysis, flanerie, reading, prophecy, and supernatural encounters.

The book begins with anecdotes by people who shaped Surrealism: Apollinaire, Lautréamont, Huysmans, Uccello, Flaubert, Rimbaud; and fellow artists and writers—Aragon, Éluard, Soupault, Duchamp, Man Ray, and Tristan Tzara. For Breton, Surrealism and Revolution lie in "the marvelous line of footsteps that a man can follow when unchained."

In *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, Breton describes Surrealism as a grand adventure: "Our taste for adventure in every sphere had never died… Works such as Paris Peasant or Nadja give a good idea of this mental climate… its purpose was to behold and disclose what lay hidden under appearances."

Mélusine and the Power of Enchantment

A rare photo frontispiece shows Nadja—Léona Camille Ghislaine Delcourt—as a young woman in Paris, before myth overtook biography. Born in Lille, France, in 1902, her identity remained hidden for decades, shrouded in surrealist mystique and family silence. An auction of Breton's estate in 2003 led to the discovery of her name along

with letters and poems passed down through her granddaughter. Drawing on these, Polizzotti uncovers the real story behind Surrealism's most enigmatic muse.

Léona arrived in Paris around 1920 living on society's margins—working as a psychic, drug courier, baker's assistant—while battling addiction and poverty. Her conservative Catholic family in Lille believed she was lodging in a convent, but her truth was far stranger and sadder.

Though *Nadja* condenses their affair into eight days, it lasted over four months. Her life and writing—first exposed in Hester Albach's 2009 *Léona, heroine du surrealisme*—complicate Breton's narrative as she is no longer defined as a muse and dream figure but an artist and poet in her own right. No English edition yet exists, but her voice continues to surface through research and recovered texts.

Breton's enchantment soured when Nadja began speaking of her hardships. After she expressed sympathy for workers crammed into second-class Metro cars, Breton snapped: "Those people can't be interesting as long as they can stand working for a living… How can this elevate them if their strongest impulse isn't revolt?" His disdain for labor and routine reveals a class ignorance or prejudice, even as he advocates spiritual unshackling: "Only if those shackles do not crush us."

Nadja celebrates both the irrational and marginal. Nadja herself is a marginalized, possibly mad figure, but in Breton's eyes, she represents a pure being. Her visions prophetic and her speech poetic. Invited to his studio, she speaks with surprising depth about his collection of art and indigenous artifacts. Afterwards she began drawing, frequently depicting herself as Mélusine—a mythical woman cursed to transform into a serpent from the waist down every Saturday. When her husband breaks the taboo and spies on her, she vanishes.

For Nadja, Mélusine was more than a symbol—it was a mirror. A woman who cannot be fully known or owned. Her claim to Mélusine suggests that Nadja saw herself as magical, cursed and powerful—a myth that echoed in later Surrealist work—in the poetry of Paul Éluard and in the mystical hybrid and fragmented women of Max Ernst, Hans Bellmer, Rene Magritte, and Salvador Dalí.

The Mélusine myth is reclaimed in the Surrealist-feminist art of Claude Cahun, Leonora Carrington, Dorthea Tanning and Unica Zurn, embracing the archetype as a symbol of untamed feminine mystery, transformation, and revolt. Breton returned to this myth in his 1934 lecture "La lumiere de la terre" and in his *Anthology of Black Humor* (1940), where he uses Mélusine as a symbol of the feminine-surreal and the subversion of rational norms. In his essay "La lumiere de la terre," he said, "Mélusine, the great sorceress, will always symbolize for me the impossibility of fully grasping what is most essential—she embodies a world that slips through the fingers of logic."

Polizzotti also reveals Breton's affair with Suzanne Muzard—that helped inspire the novel's famous final line: "Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or not at all," and his concept of *l'amour fou*—mad love—emerges here becoming central in his 1935 novel, *l'Amour Fou*, a photo-text hybrid shaped around his second wife Jacqueline Lamba.

A Legacy Unearthed

Léona's resurfacing signals a broader recovery of women's roles in Surrealism. Whitney Chadwick's 1985 *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* and Penelope Rosemont's 1998 *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* expose the depth and diversity of women long overshadowed.

Chadwick notes, "Breton's association with Nadja stops at the asylum doors. Once institutionalized, she ceased to exist for him except as a poetic principle." In 1928, he and Aragon marked the 50th anniversary of hysteria with photos of women in ecstatic states from Salpetriere hospital archives—reducing madness to spectacle."

Rosemont critiques this masculinist mythmaking: "From Mélusine to Musidora, these models provided radical alternatives to the bourgeois/Christian ideal of the good, selfless, husband-worshipping, submissive, ignorant, fearful, pious, hardworking, obedient wife and mother."

Nadja is a woman with mysterious forces surrounding her. At one dinner engagement, Nadja senses an underground tunnel below the café—she becomes frightened seeing a crowd where none exists—"And the dead, the dead!" she exclaims. Later during a walk, she sees the poetic "Blue Wind" in the trees—a wind of death signaling a change in their relationship. "Do you see what's happening in those trees?" she said. "There's a voice saying you're going to die."

This blue wind becomes a metaphor for her vanishing. What sustains *Nadja* is this uneasy mystery—her non-rational reactions to life are unpredictable—with desire constantly flowing to her from unknown children, strangers, and past loves—she's a vessel for desire, yet finds her own desires neglected. As Nadja is awakened to her artistic calling, Breton becomes withdrawn into a Freudian analysis beside the presence of her poetic Mélusine nature.

Nadja also critiques power structures: psychiatry, police, and the museum system. Breton condemns how the medical system confined her, and how art institutions commodify creativity. For him, Nadja is a symbol of life unmediated by control—Surrealism's anarchic muse.

Another legacy captured in *Nadja*, shows a photo from the Saint-Ouen flea market depicting Breton's chance meeting with Fanny Beznos. They quickly bond over poetry and a mutual love of Rimbaud. Beznos, a Russian-Jewish anarchist who fled post-1905 Revolution persecution, had organized among exiles, distributed militant tracts, and moved in Surrealist-leftist circles. Her poetry appeared in La Révolution Surréaliste No. 9–10 (1927). Arrested during the Nazi occupation, she died in Auschwitz for her political activities.

Erased from official histories, Beznos counters the passive muse trope in Surrealism, embodying a forgotten heroine of resistance.

"Everything Disappears…"

Nadja is a love letter to Paris—an enchanted fable amid urban ruins. Breton, echoing Baudelaire's flaneur, maps the city through its Surrealist sites: haunted theaters, arcades, fountains, obscure monuments. The novel ends where it began, as Breton retraces steps searching for Nadja through a vanishing Paris. He evokes seeing The Trial of the Octopus, a film serial of crime and disappearances, akin to Fantomas, another Surrealist crime-pulp favorite.

In an earlier chilling exchange, Nadja pleads, "André? André?… You'll write a novel about me. I promise. Don't say no. Beware: everything fades, everything disappears. Something of us must remain…"

After Nadja is committed and vanishes—dying in an asylum in 1940—Breton's Nadja does remain: a promised novel of love, loss, and revolution.

When Breton died in 1966, his home and contents were left untouched for decades, watched over by his third wife Elisa Bindhoff Enet until her death in 2000. In 2003, the auction of his archives became a marvelous revelation: eight volumes of lavish catalogs—essays, inventories, timelines—documented the dispersal of his life's work with thousands of books, artworks, and ritual objects. And in dispersal came resurrection. The auction revealing Nadja/Léona's identity. The vanished woman reappears—no longer just a symbol, but a human being.

As 19th century French Symbolist poet Stephane Mallarme wrote, "Everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book."

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